THE GLORIOUS RASCAL

ROMANTIC TALE OF FRANCOIS VILLON, POET, LOVER AND ADVENTURER.

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STYNOPSIS OF PRECEDING CHAPTERS.

As a child Francois Villon pushes open the door of the house in which he, with his mother, occupies wretched lodgings and sees upon the white stretch of snow black spots that he takes to be rats. They are wolves. Hunger has driven them within the walls of Paris. A drunken Burgundian soldier finds in the snow a girl baby lying beside its dead mother, and he brings the infant to Madame Villon. Though poor, she takes upon herself the care of the little one. On one of the waif's garments is embroidered the name "Huguette." The girl and boy grow up together as playmates. Later the Burgundian claims a guardian's authority and disappears with Huguette. When Francois hears of a well to do uncle, the Canon of St. Benoit, living in Paris, he makes his way to the house and appeals to the good man's generosity. With the consent of the mother, the Canon proceeds to give Francois a comfortable home and an education that will prepare him for either the church or the law. At the age of fifteen Francois is taken to Saumur, where a tournament is being held. Here he acts temporarily as the page of Robert d'Estouteville, a knight who loves Ambroise de Lore. In her Francois sees a striking resemblance to Huguette. Messire Robert engages Francois to write verses to the lady. The lad is eager to do this, since his beauty of Ambroise has already won his heart. Later, at the home of his uncle, Francois makes the acquaintance of an evil looking man, named Philippe Sermois. A day or two afterward Francois watches a girl dancing in a tent. Both she and the rough looking showman with her seem strangely familiar to him. He suddenly recognizes them as the Burgundian and Huguette. Just as he is about to go to them Philippe comes along, sneers at him, and then knocks him down. Messire Robert, who had witnessed the assault, is pleased when Francois declares he will demand satisfaction and goes with the lad to seek the clerk. Francois finds its description, but is no match for Philippe. During the battle Philippe steals a pendant which Ambroise had given Francois. The lady has promised to marry Messire Robert, the winner in the tournament, when Philippe offers to take the defeated Messire de Beaujeu to Ambroise, assuring him it is he whom she loves. During a fantastic ceremony in a garret one of the notables of the town the knight is led to believe that the woman who accepts is Ambroise. He is after wards told by Francois, who witnessed the deception, that the girl who took part in it was Huguette. At the university Francois falls in with Rene de Montigny and Guy Tabarie, unscrupulous youths with underworld connections. Meanwhile Ambroise has become the bride of Messire Robert. Francois goes to Montfaucon to witness the hanging of three men, one of whom he recognizes as the Burgundian. Among the spectators is Huguette, and she laughs at the villainous fellow jeered by the gallows. Afterward she tells Francois that she thinks the Burgundian for the life he had compelled her to lead. Huguette takes Francois with her to the House of the Sunflower, where she lodges.

CHAPTER XX.

(Continued.)

A Meeting at Montfaucon.

"LITTLE FRANCOIS," she said with a half-laugh, "it is many a long year since you and I have came face to face."

"It is long enough," answered Francois, "but not so long as you think."

The girl wrinkled her pretty forehead in surprise.

"What do you mean?" she asked. "I have never set eyes on you since we were children together."

"You may not have set eyes on me," replied Francois, "but indeed I have set eyes on you, and that, by token, not only once but twice."

He paused in enjoyment of her puzzled face.

"How so?" and the sound of her voice as she questioned showed no less than the expression of her face that she was indeed puzzled.

"Do you remember the festival which King Rene gave at Saumur, now a good many years ago?" Francois questioned.

Huguette nodded.

"I remember it," she said. "I have good reason to remember it."

"And so have I," said Francois, "for I was there in the thick of it all, and I saw you dance one day in a meadow by the river near the tilt-yard."

"I have danced half over the world since those days," Huguette said, with a queer sadness in her voice; "but I remember that dancing-day in Saumur, for it was the only day that I did dance there."

"I was in the throng that watched you dancing," said Francois, "and when all was over I wished to make friends with you again; but my purpose was interrupted at the time, and thereafter, though I sought for you, I could not find you again."

"No," the girl agreed, and repeated what she had said before: "I did not dance again in Saumur."

"But though I could not find you when I sought you," Francois continued, "it was my chance to see you again when I did not seek you."

"I do not think that can very well be," said Huguette decidedly, "for he that had me in charge"—she gave a little shiver and hurriedly crossed herself—"took very good care that I should not be seen abroad."

"Yet the thing is so," Francois persisted. "Do you remember one night in that hovel by the Gallows Square in Saumur when you took part in a mummery for the mystification of an honest and amorous gentleman?"

Huguette's eyes widened as recollection kindled with the words of Francois, and she laughed softly.

"Dear Lord," she said, "I remember very well. I sang a song and I came through a curtain and leaned across a sword, and there were colored flames that burned with a sharp perfume. I was dressed, as I recall, in a gown of blue and silver, and I liked the hues so well that they have been my favorite wear ever since. There was a man on his knees with a white, staring face, and I flung him a trinket which my master had given me to fling, and I called to him, as I was told to call, that I loved him and him only, and then he sprang to his feet and the lights went out."

"Did you know what was the meaning of the mystery?" Francois questioned.

Huguette shook her head.

"I had and have no notion," she said, "of why I did what I did that night. In those days I did as I was told, and had learned from experience the wisdom of obedience and asking no questions." As she spoke she wriggled in expressive suggestion and painful reminiscences. "But you," she continued, "how did you come to know of all this?"

"Because I spied at the window through a slit I made in the curtain with my dagger," Francois explained.

"Then do you know the meaning of the hocus-pocus?" Huguette asked eagerly.

Francois looked wise.

"Maybe I do," he admitted. "All in good time. Tell me now what led up to the playing of this jest?"

"There came a man to my tyrant," Huguette replied, "a man in black whose face I did not see, for it was hidden in the hood. This man and my tyrant talked for a long while apart in another room, and when their talk was ended the man in black went away, and my tyrant told me that I was not to dance any more in Saumur, which surprised me, for the folk liked my dancing"——

"Well they might," Francois interpolated. Huguette gave him an amicable nod, and continued:

"And I made money by it, and the Burgundian beast was always greedy of money that he might turn it into wine. Nay, further, I was not suffered to stir abroad any more, but made to keep indoors. Then my tyrant brought me the dress of blue and silver which he had bought at a fripster's in town and taught me to play the part you saw me play."

"What happened," asked Francois, "that night when the foolery ended and the light was quenched? At that point, to be candid, I judged it best to take to my heels."

"My master caught hold of me," said Huguette, "and dragged me through the darkness out of the hovel by a back door and bade me run with all speed to the shelter of a little wood that lay some half a mile away, and there to wait for him. I did so, and presently my tyrant came for me and took me back to the house. It was empty now. The lord that had knelt and stared was gone, and so was he in the white robe that had helped in the jugglery, and whom I supposed to be the visitor in black. My Burgundian was in good spirits, from which I should have guessed that he had made money, if I had not later, when he thought I was asleep, seen and heard him counting broad gold pieces. And the next morning at cock-crow we set off on our travels again."

Francois had listened to this narrative with the keenest interest and attention.

"And what," he asked, "became of the man in black?"

Huguette shrugged her slim shoulders.

"How should I know?" she responded. "I never saw him again, if, indeed, I can rightly say that I ever saw him at all, seeing that I know no more of him than that he was habited in black."

"And you and your Burgundian ruffian?" Francois interrogated.

The girl's face darkened.

"We wandered the world at all adventure," she said. "I could make money for him, by my dancing—and otherwise. Well, I made money for him. Always I hated him. I would have left him but that I was afraid of him, for he always swore that if I played him false he would kill me; and because I was very young and as foolish as my years I believe that I believed him. Indeed he would not have scrupled to keep his word. But when we drifted to Paris a while ago, by good luck I took the fancy of that same gay Sergeant of the Watch that you saw to-day. So when my tyrant got into trouble, Poltrot de Haucqueton came to me and asked me if it was my wish that he should be saved from the gallows. You may be very sure that I said no, and so he was hanged to-day, and I thankful to be there and see the hanging of him."

Francois nodded his head. He felt sympathetic enough, though it was odd to hear so sweet looking a creature speak so fiercely. For a space there was silence between them. Then Francois rose to his feet with a great air of determination on his face.

"Huguette," he protested, "I hope and believe that it shall prove to your good fortune that you and I have met this day after so long a parting. When can I see you to-morrow? It may be that I shall have something to tell that may be worth the telling and the hearing."

"You may take it that I do not rise very timely, little Francois," Huguette averred with a significant laugh; "but if you will be at the pains to come hither about the hour of noon I will make shift to give you welcome, and to hear what you have to say. For it would seem as if you and I were in some way linked together and destined to be friends."

She lifted her lips to him as she spoke, and they exchanged a kiss as if they were once again the girl and boy who had gamboled in the gaunt old garret of long ago instead of the flaunting light o' love and wine-stained rascal that they stood for. And thereafter Francois said her farewell, and rattled down the stairs and into the thronging street, his head humming with strange thoughts.

CHAPTER XXI.

A Discovery.

GUILLAUME VILLON, Canon of St. Benoit, had carried himself with some difficulty, for advance of years brought increase of flesh with decrease of breath, up the many stairs to the garret of Mother Villon, hard by the church of the Celestins. Here the good woman, obstinate in her self-respect, had persisted in abiding, as she persisted in supporting herself by her own industry.

The Canon sighed heavily.

"Much is amiss," he responded, "very much is amiss."

Mother Villon's anxiety for her son was confirmed and intensified by the Canon's words.

"Francois," she cried eagerly, clasping her thin hands tightly; "is he ill?"

The gloom in the Canon's countenance increased as he answered her.

"If I were to tell you that he is very ill indeed"—Mother Villon gave a groan—"I should be conveying maybe a false impression, for the youth is in what might be called excellent bodily health." Mother Villon gave a gasp of relief. "But he is spiritually as sick as a man can be. His face is—or should be—black with infamies. In a word, he is a knave, a reprobate, a rascal, one that is walking hot-foot to the gallows. He has made a pretty fool of me, I promise you. Much may be excused to the light-heartedness of youth, but the conduct of your son—for I feel that I can no longer regard him as my nephew—is beyond all excuse."

Mother Villon whiffled piteously.

"What do you mean, brother?" she faltered.

The young man was headless in his studies; well and good. Youth must be young, I suppose, though for my own part I never had any inclination to idleness. The young man dallies with bad company. Well and good again. A man must know the world he lives in, and it takes all sorts to make the same world. God knows I am tolerant; but there is an end to my toleration, and I have come to the end and passed over it.

"I have reason to believe," the Canon continued sadly, "that our little Francois has gone to the very devil."

Mother Villon crossed herself quickly.

"What do you mean, brother?" she quavered.

"I wished to suggest to you that he kept company with thieves, that he was the friend of plunderers if not himself a plunderer."

Mother Villon uttered a wail of surprise and rage.

"Do you mean to call my son a thief?" she screamed.

"So long as the lad kept good friends always, he might keep bad company occasionally. But now the fool has lost his good friends. He has sunk so low that Messire d'Estouteville, his most profitable patron, tells me that he has forbidden him his house."

At this moment the conversation between the Canon and Mother Villon was violently interrupted by a noisy clattering of feet leading to the attic. Then the door was opened, and to the astonishment of the man and woman, the subject of their conversation plunged headlong into the room. Francois, thus interrupting, did not notice, or did not heed, the grave looks of his seniors.

"Hulloa, Unc," he said cheerily, by way of greeting to the good Canon. Then he turned to his mother.

"Mother," he cried, "a word with you. Do you remember the little girl whom that Burgundian bully fathered, years ago, when I was no bigger than a spring chicken? Little Huguette, you know, little Huguette."

Mother Villon nodded.

"Mother," Francois went on, breathless, "am I not in the right in believing that there was some parchment or other which you found on Huguette and which you put on one side at the time and have kept ever since?"

By this time Mother Villon's brisk femininity had scented a mystery of some kind.

"Very surely there was such a parchment," she cried in a voice that lit its excitement from the flame of Francois. "I kept it from the Burgundian, I scarce know why, except that I thought him not to be trusted with anything, and I have kept it by me ever since—so long, indeed, that I had almost forgotten it."

Even while she was speaking she had scurried across the little room, and now she dived into an ancient wooden chest in which she kept the major part of her poor belongings. She fumbled for a while among its miscellaneous contents, while Francois twitched with impatience and the Canon fumed a little and frowned a little to find that he was taken no notice of, and that his errand was, for the time being at least, set on one side. With a cluck of satisfaction Mother Villon suddenly fished out of the box a small silk bag, from which, when unfolded, she produced an ancient, stained, disreputable looking bit of paper that had been so doubled and redoubled that it seemed now to be scarcely bigger than a walnut.

Mother Villon was proceeding slowly and methodically to open out the folded paper, but her progress was too jog-trot for the anxiety and curiosity of her son. With a hurried "By your leave, mother," he nimbly picked the thing out of her fingers and in a jiffy was standing by the window, holding the paper fully expanded in his hands and scrutinizing its surface carefully. It was the first time that Francois had ever clapped eyes on the document and the sight of it gave him a thrill of surprise.

On the paper a shield was presented much of the size that is given to such shields in books of blazonry. It was neatly drawn and cunningly colored, and Francois, who had picked up not a little of the science of armorials during the time when he served Messire Robert d'Estouteville, could have read it accurately enough, even if its figures and charges had been wholly unfamiliar to him. But the shield and its bearings were not unfamiliar to him. On the contrary they were very familiar indeed.

The shield bore on a field of ermine three five-branched leaves of gold. Every true Parisian knew these three golden cinquefoils on ermine to be the arms of the former Provost of Paris, Messire Ambroise de Lore.

If the painted shield interested Francois hotly, he was even yet more interested by a little line of writing that ran beneath it. This was in a sprawling, almost childish hand, as of one little used to pen-work, who yet managed to carry a sense of a strong personality into the staggering lines and loops. The spelling was as erratic as the penmanship, but to a clerk of the standing of Francois the legend was easy enough to decipher. It ran thus:

"Ambroise is lord of the heart of Huguette."

Underneath the same scribe had written in a smaller script:

"And so says Huguette (her mark)."

This affirmation was followed by a weakly-traced cross with very unequal limbs, which evidently stood for the signature or sign-manual of the said Huguette. Francois, always easily moved by the obvious pathos of existence, found for a moment his heart in his mouth and the salt in his eyes as he read those two simple lines. But the emotion of pity yielded swiftly to the emotion of delight in his discovery. Here surely was something that might prove of great service to his old playfellow, new-found. He was beginning to understand now pretty clearly why that vague, deceptive resemblance existed between the great lady and the mountebank.

Swiftly Francois swung on his heel in eagerness to leave the room.

"Mother," he cried, in a voice thrilling with excitement, "I have great need of this paper for a while. Have I your leave to take it?"

The rascal knew very well that it was ask and have for him in any dealings between himself and his mother, but it may be that he helped to salve a somewhat uneasy conscience by airing a dutiful submission.

Mother Villon was then, as always, glad to do anything her son desired.

"Surely," she answered, "surely. But what is this paper to you that you are so eager for its possession?"

"It is nothing to me, good mother," Francois answered, "but I think it may prove much to another. For our little Huguette has turned up again. She is in Paris at this hour and a grown woman, and I think this same paper may serve her well."

Dame Villon clasped and unclasped her thin hands nervously.

"Little Huguette in Paris!" she cried. "Little Huguette grown up! Dear Saints, how glad I shall be to look upon her face again!"

Francois swayed toward the door, only to find himself confronted by the indignant figure of the Canon.

"Francois," he said solemnly, "you must not be suffered to quit this humble roof, which you profane by your unworthy presence, until I have addressed unto you some salutary exhortations and sharp remonstrances concerning the error of your ways. News has come to me, very thunder to my stunned ears, that you are banned by the respectable, shunned by the reputable; that to be brief"—Francois groaned inwardly, for brevity was never a quality of the good Canon's eloquence—"the prodigal son was a pattern of well-behaved manhood compared to you."

"Dear Uncle," said Francois, with a great air of gravity, "I can, or at least I could if I had the leisure which at this juncture I lack, assure you that I am indeed the victim of untoward circumstances. But time presses; duty calls; and with all respect I crave your permission to depart."

In another moment his flying footsteps were heard clattering down the stairs.

CAHPTER XXII.

An Ex-Provost.

MESSIRE AMBROISE DE LORE was a man in a not uncommon class of mankind, whose portrait would be painted in very different colors by those that liked him and those that did not like him. His ideas of temperance and continence were as lax as an unstrung bow, but his fidelity to king and cause was as dogged as his infidelity to women.

Messire Ambroise noted the entrance of a serving-man, who informed him that Master Francois Villon craved permission to wait upon his honor on certain business of importance.

Master Francois, duly ushered in, saluted Messire Ambroise with the respect due to his standing.

"Well, young reprobate," he began, "what do you want with me? I hear fine tales of your behavior. Do you come to woo my favor with my virtuous son-in-law?"

Francois shook his head.

"My lord," answered Francois, "I believe I hold some property of yours which it is as much my duty to restore as I hope it may prove your pleasure to receive."

Messire Ambroise widened his eyes and pricked his ears.

"Goods of mine?" he questioned, wondering. "I cannot call to my mind that I have lost anything of late."

"That which I would offer, my lord," Francois replied, "you lost, if it be yours, not of late, but many a long year ago."

"You are damnably enigmatic," the ex-Provost averred in ever-growing astonishment. "Show me what you hold, in the devil's name, and let me judge for myself whether it be mine or no."

Francois respectfully dropped on one knee, and drawing from the bosom of his jerkin a little bag of faded silk, tendered it respectfully to his host. Messire Ambrose, taking it from him, dandled it on his own palm and gaped at it.

But when he had got the paper opened and saw its simple freight, his bearing changed with a most marvellous transformation.

"How in God's name," he cried, in a voice that was hoarse and thick with many mingled passions, "did this paper come into your hands?"

Francois told the story of Huguette.

Messire Ambroise gave vent to a sound that may have been intended for a sigh or for a groan.

"Did you never," he asked, with curious quality of anxiety in his rough voice, "have any tidings of what became of this girl?"

"The girl Huguette is at this hour within the walls of Paris."

"But I must see the girl for myself before I can come to any decision in the matter," the ex-Provost asserted.

"Even what I was about to make so bold as to suggest," Francois approved. "The girl has promised to receive me to-morrow at the hour of noon, and it occurred to me that if your lordship were pleased to pay a visit to her at that time, without disclosing your identity, you might be enabled to form a judgment at your ease."

"That is a good idea," said Ambroise, "and one that I will act upon."

When Francois had taken his leave, Messire Ambroise set musing heavily over his wine. Messire Ambroise had long ago lost count of his intrigues. But it so happened that there was one face that did show more clearly than the others, and this face had a name to it, and the name was Huguette.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A Friend of Princes.

THE fair May afternoon was slowly waning as Francois quitted the house of the ex-Provost. The streets were fairly full of people, a civic condition which pleased Villon, who never needed solitude for his reflections, but found rather that his wits were the nimbler for the jostling of his body in a crowd.

He found himself presently brought to halt by the cessation of movement in the mob.

Francois, questioning a neighbor in the press as to the reason for this affluence of humanity, was answered that the folk had gathered together to witness the passage through the streets of a certain prince of Italy and his retinue.

Even as the gossip told his news there came a murmur from the crowd, which made it very plain that the anticipated pleasure was about to be realized.

After the carriage had passed the point where Francois stood the procession came to a halt for a little while. All of a sudden Francois was aware of something that made him both careful and attentive. For his roving glance over the gay company met the fixed gaze of one of its number who was looking very steadily and earnestly in his direction, and Francois thrilled with the knowledge that he was looking into the face of Philippe Sermois.

The man had greatly changed. It was not merely that he was habited now like a man of rank and wealth; that he rode with an air on a noble jennet; that his hands shone with rings above the finger-stalls of his gloves, or that he bore himself with ease and address in the fellowship of a great man's court.

Philippe Sermois, deftly detaching himself from his companions, turned his horse toward the spot where Francois stood and drew rein directly in front of him.

"I want a word with you," Sermois said curtly.

Villon, to his surprise and satisfaction, found himself more amused than either alarmed or angered by this reappearance of Sermois.

"You shall have as many as twenty," Francois answered, with an air of cheerful impudence which Sermois did not seem to notice.

"Do you know of a decent tavern," he inquired in a pompous voice.

"The 'Unicorn' is hard by," said Villon cheerfully. "They have good wine at the 'Unicorn.'"

"Then lead the way," said Sermois.

A few moments brought them to the door of the "Unicorn."

"Now that I am back again in Paris," said Sermois, "I pick up old abandoned threads. Thus I remember you, whom I think I promised myself the pleasure, one day, of killing. Also I remember a certain fair lady, who still, I am happy to find, continues fair, and whom I think I promised myself, one day, the pleasure of kissing."

He suddenly changed his mood from a repulsive self-complacency to a less repulsive heat.

"I have wasted enough time with you. Take your warning, Master Francois Villon. Messire Robert d'Estouteville has kicked you out of his household; it will be my part to kick you out of existence. Your bell has knelled."

CHAPTER XXIV.

The Underworld.

FRANCOIS was inclined to consider Philippe Sermois as little, if at all, less than a madman; but the belief did not in any way diminish his estimation of the man's danger as an enemy. If his uncle's bounty still permitted Francois to lodge at the Red Gate, his uncle's bounty went no further nowadays. But Francois did not suffer himself to be consternated by the odds against him. He would make friends with the Mammon of Unrighteousness; he would find him allies in the Underworld.

In the dusk of the Fircone Tavern Francois found Rene and Guy busily drinking.

Rene looked narrowly at Francois over the edge of his cup.

"What's in the wind now?" he asked. "What do you want of us?"

"I want help," Francois answered, "help against an enemy."

Rene whistled softly.

"Who is this enemy of our dear Francois?" Rene asked.

"Do you know?" asked Francois, "that a certain great Italian nobleman has newly come to town?"

"Our distinguished visitor to whom you allude has, I believe, the honor to be in some fashion distantly related to me."

"In the train of this nobleman," continued Francois, "there is a fellow whose presence in Paris makes me uneasy, both for myself and for another. He now calls himself Filippo da Sermese, wears fine clothes and commands wealth; but he used to be plain Philippe Sermois, that went in ragged black and had never a penny. Why, you may even remember him, for he lectured once at the university years ago, when he called himself Brother Sententius."

"My dear young friend," said Rene, "there is and could be nothing that would afford me greater satisfaction than to render you any service, however insignificant or magnificent. Let us, therefore, assume that I am able to oblige, and tell me without loss of time what I can do for you."

"Is it in your power?" Francois queried, "to have this Sermois so watched and spied upon that, unknown to him, all his daily actions might be recorded and reported to me?"

"My dear lad," answered Rene amiably, "the thing is as easy to the nimble wits as thieving to the nimble fingers. Your Sermois shall eat and drink, wake and sleep, in your very presence, as it were, if I, or some good friend of mine at my instigation, pass the word to that effect among the Brotherhood. Your Sermois shall live in a house of glass, I promise you."

CHAPTER XXV.

Father and Daughter.

A SOMEWHAT sleepy Huguette yawned at her noonday reflection in a hand-mirror and won a frank satisfaction from her image. She found herself hoping that Francois would not be late for his trysting before the first stroke of noon had boomed, and the last stroke had scarcely died away before she heard a knocking at the door.

Huguette leaped to her feet briskly and was at the door in a flash. She flung it open, and a smile flooded her cheeks for Francois, facing her on the threshold, only to fade into a grimace of vexation, as she instantly saw that he was not alone. Behind the slim form of the student stood a sturdy, burly fellow, of something more than middle age.

"Huguette," said Francois, "here is a friend of mine who is very anxious to make your acquaintance, and whose friendship I think you may be pleased to accept. Suffer us to enter that we may talk together a little at our ease."

"Tell her the tale, lad," ordered Messire Ambroise, "for there is no mistake about it."

"Little Huguette," Francois began, unconsciously speaking as if time had swung back with them and they were once again in their childish days, "this good gentleman who has done you the honor of waiting upon you is Messire Ambroise de Lore, who was some time Provost of Paris; who was, is, and always will be a gallant soldier and a great noble, and, which is of more immediate concern to you, and the direct reason of this visit, who has the happiness to declare himself to be your father."

As Francois spoke Huguette, with heightened cheeks and heaving bodice, gaped alternately at the speaker and at the stalwart veteran in the chair.

"What the lad says is gospel truth, my girl," he declared. "I am indeed your daddy, and glad to find you such a handsome piece. Come to my arms, my lass."

Messire Ambroise, after another good stare at her, took her upon his knee and told her of his love affair with her mother and of its tragic conclusion, and he showed her the paper which had been found upon her when she was a baby.

Huguette explained that she had never known any other name than her Christian name of Huguette.

"Why, then," said Messire Ambroise, "what better can you do than bear your mother's name? She was a du Hamel, of a poor but honorable family; be you Huguette du Hamel in your turn. And because I have the good luck to be well-to-do I will settle upon you the revenue of a goodly portion of broad land, so that you need never want money for eating and drinking as long as you live."

He dipped his hand into his pouch and produced a large and evidently well-filled purse, the sight of which made the eyes of Francois glisten and twitch. He poised it on his great palm, then cride "Catch!"

"You may one day light on some likely lad"—here it seemed to Francois as if Messire Ambroise glinted at him with the tail of his eye—"and make a match of it, and live happy ever after, as they say in the fairy-tales."

He nodded his head gravely and quitted the room, leaving Francois and Huguette staring at one another.

CHAPTER XXVI.

Under Observation.

WHATEVER reason the Sieur Rene de Montigny might have for obliging Master Villon, apart from ordinary natural affection or admiration, he certainly did prove as good as his word and contrive to oblige him.

It is certainly scarcely possible to doubt that it would have greatly amazed that distinguished Italianate gentleman, the Count Filippo da Sermese, if he could have known how persistently, if unobtrusively, he was dogged.

It was therefore with an easy smile at the simplicity of the game that Rene greeted Francois on the occasion of their first meeting after the myrmidons of the underworld had been slipped upon the track of Philippe Sermois.

Sermois, it appeared, was in the habit of visiting a certain ancient house in a rookery of ancient houses in the not too distant neighborhood of the tower of St. Jacques. This house, which had all the appearance of being uninhabited, was, it seemed, actually in the care and charge of a queer old man, who lived in the cellarage and who admitted Philippe Sermois on the occasion of his visits.

Another curious circumstance connected with this ancient building was that, though apparently abandoned and desolate by day, it had of late received certain strange nocturnal visitations. Men portering great bundles would present themselves at its portals in the uncanny hours after midnight, would, without need of knocking, be granted instant admittance, and would presently emerge burdeness and go their ways into the night.

Francois promptly resolved that he would, for his own satisfaction, try to find out why Sermois had chosen to make himself master of so decayed and unsavory a residence in so out-of-the-way a neighborhood.

So Francois set himself to the not very difficult business of finding himself a niche in one of the unclean tenements.

From it he gained the garden easily enough. He made an easy entry by way of an ill-shuttered cellarage, whose frail defense yielded to a touch and would almost have yielded to a breath. Once inside, he found himself, with the cautious aid of his carefully hooded lantern, in the lower lands of a very aged and very dirty domicile. Heavy snoring in a subterranean room rather proclaimed than betrayed the inactive presence of the place's guardian. On tiptoe, Villon ascended rotting stairs. Pushing through heavy curtains, and peering about him with the aid of his unveiled lantern, Francois found that he had come into a room that was in startling contrast with the rest of the ancient, crazy mansion. For this room was cleanly kept and richly furnished; hung with gay hangings and thickly carpeted; and though its windows, like all the others, were solidly shuttered from the outer world, it boasted the means of ample lighting in the presence of several noble lamps of Oriental race. Investigation revealed that the curtains at the further end of this room masked a small chamber which contained a couch.

Truly, the room was like a pearl in a muck-heap, but it did not plainly answer the enigma of its existence. Francois, baffled and irritated, took his leave gingerly and returned to his disagreeable eyrie to dream confused dreams and to wake no wiser than he had been on the preceding day.

(To Be Continued.)

Life's Little "Ifs"

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