THE QUEEN'S ROSES.

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CHAPTER I.

How Pompon Became An Oracle.

Perhaps it is because the tragedy of Fotheringay is still fresh in my mind that my eyes linger sadly on the faded roses I have taken from my cabinet and placed with tender hands before me.

It is a week ago since Blancheforet, on his way back from Paris, drew rein at Besme to give me the news of that deed of infamy, and left me stunned and bewildered, as he galloped off, red-spurred, to bear the tidings to Malezieux.

There are those who say she deserved her death; there are stories, I know, about her; but they lie in their throats who repeat them, and I blush with shame for my country that no sword was drawn to save her who was once queen of France.

As I stare at the flowers before me, their delicate fragrance returns to them; they seem to bloom again in their rich, crimson splendor, and the memory of that night in June when I received them from the hands of Mary of Scotland, comes back to me, so that my heart is full and my eyes grow dim.

She was of those women born to be queens over men; of those women who come once in a thousand years, who are in themselves the embodied spirits of romance, and for whose smile men would throw aside life, riches, empire, even honor, as lightly as a worn-out glove.

It was my fate to come within the range of her power, and I did as the rest. I, the poor gentleman of Quercy—the king's jester—dared to love her.

And yet I was not mad; the feeling in my heart was as if I had met in flesh and blood that vision of the perfect woman which lies in all men's souls. There was an immeasurable distance between us. I knew all that. I nursed no idle hopes. I looked upon her as a shepherd on the mountains might gaze upon the morning star—as some wandering angel of light that had come, to pass away, yet never to be forgotten.

And so, because a jester must have something of the poet in his spirit, I was accustomed to day-dream a little, and used to slip out from the Louvre into that wilderness of a garden that stretched as far as the walls of Paris, between the Tour de Bois and the Porte St. Honore, and lose myself there in enchanted dreams. The place exists no longer, I hear. It is all changed now, since the Medicis began the new palace of the Tuileries, near the tile-fields; and the sweet disorder of my garden has given place to sedate parterres, trimly-cut hedges, and walks that look like diagrams in the book of Euclid that Lorgnac used to pore over at college and I hated with a bitter hatred.

But at the time I speak of, when the sun was bright and the flowers were out, except my own home in the far-off Quercy there was no spot more lovely to my mind than those neglected walks where the blind-weed and dog-rose starred the hedges, where the celandine and red champion made a gay border to the green rides, and from amidst its spotted leaves, the cuckoo-pint lifted its purple wand, dripping with dew. Here, on a grassy bank, near an old oak, I would lie for hours, listening to the wind in the trees, listening to the hum of the city that was so near and yet so far, and building my castles in cloudland, whilst Pompon, my ape, gambolled in the branches above me. And here one morning in June I took my lute, and, with Pompon hobbling gravely at my heels, sought my retreat, to eat my lotus and be happy in my dreams. I had almost come to the old rose pleasance, beyond which lay my oak, when I met Lorgnac face to face, as he stepped through a gap in the hedge, and stood in the middle of the path. His drawn sword was in his hand, and for once the color was out of his cheek, and his lips set and hard, making him look, though he was but five-and-twenty, a man touching on middle age.

"You cannot pass," he said, stiffly, without any other greeting, and whilst I stopped for a moment in amazement, Pompon, who knew him well, ran up to him and began clutching at his cloak for a caress; but he shook the ape from him with a curse, saying again:

"You cannot pass, De Besme. Go back!"

He called me by my own name, which he knew well, for we were next-door neighbors in the Quercy, and sworn friends at college, and ever after. Only last night he had bidden me a laughing adieu, calling me Le Brusquet, the nickname by which I was known to my intimates, and indeed to all the court; and now here he was, cold and stiff as a Spaniard, ordering me off the path as if I were a street beggar.

But I took him quietly. Whistling Pompon back to me I said:

"Come, Lorgnac! I am only going to my oak"——

"You canont pass," he interrupted, speaking like a machine.

"Tu-dieu!" I burst out, my temper rising, "if it is the king's order, I go back; but if it is some grasshopper you have in your head, monsieur"—I clapped my hand to my side, forgetting that I wore but a gilded wooden sword, and as my fingers touched the hilt I stopped, disconcerted, and began to laugh. And while I laughed Lorgnac caught the humor of it and began smiling, too, as he stepped forward, and put his hand on my shoulder.

"No, old friend! There must be no quarrel between us, but I pray you, go back!"

"Is the road, then, blocked?"

"Yes," he said, in a hesitating voice, and I was about to shrug my shoulders and turn away when there was a rustling in the hedge, and a man leaped lightly through, saying in an alarmed voice:

"Lorgnac, we are watched—spied upon!" And then he stopped and stared at me, and I, too, stared back in blank astonishment, for it was the Prince of Conde, the second prince of the blood, whom we all thought at the siege of Marienbourg.

His face was haggard and wan and he was gray with dust, as one who had ridden fast and far. He struck nervously at his boot with his riding whip, and as we looked at each other I noticed that in his clenched hand lay a woman's glove, small and white.

I took his words to apply to me, and, recaving myself, hastened to explain:

"Monseigneur! Not spied upon by me. I came here"——

But Conde himself interrupted me.

"It was not you I meant, Brusquet. It was some one else."

"No one has passed this way, monseigneur."

"Then some one was in hiding before we came, Lorgnac. Listen—I was just about to come for you, when I heard a laugh and a rustling in the hedges. I rushed forward, but could see nothing. At last I heard voices and came here." Then, as if a sudden suspicion had struck him: "It was not you, Brusquet?" and he cast a keen eye on me.

I shook my head and Conde went on, turning again to Lorgnac, whose eyes were bent reproachfully upon him: "Man, do not look at me like that! It was madness my coming here, I know, but I could not help it. And now—I suppose it will be all over Paris in an hour." And he looked at me once more.

I knew well enough that the king was boiling with wrath against Conde. Young as he was, his brilliant achievements, his personal grace and happy spirits had won all hearts. Everything that a subject can hope for seemed within his grasp, and he was more than an ordinary subject, as the second prince of the blood. In a moment all this was changed. His commission as colonel-general was taken from him, his government of Picardy given to Coligny, and he who, in the morning, was in the full tide of court favor had hurried off at dusk a simple volunteer for the defense of Marienbourg. What the secret of this was I did not know, but Conde's last words and the look he gave me pricked me, and I answered him coldly.

"Monseigneur, so far as I am concerned, no one will know that I have seen you."

"I would put my honor on M. de Besme's word," said Lorgnac, as he added: "And now, monseigneur, let us go at once, I pray you! Too much mischief has been done already."

"It is not for myself, I fear, but"—and the prince stopped, for Lorgnac made a warning gesture that stayed his words.

For a space we three young men looked at each other, and then monseigneur held out his hand to me.

"M. de Besme, I spoke in haste. I thank you for your promise. Adieu! Till better times."

I took the hand he held out to me, and his grasp was firm and cordial. Then he went back as he had come, and Lorgnac with him; but, ere the latter left me, he bent forward and said in a low voice:

"Stay here for an hour or so! Let me know if any one passes. There is life and death on this, old friend."

With that he followed the prince, leaving me with all my day dreams knocked out of my head, a prey to the most complete wonder and astonishment.

I made up my mind to do what Lorgnac wished. There was a council that day, at which it was not necessary that Le Brusquet should attend, and I would not be required until after the dinner hour. Besides, my curiosity was stirred to its depths, and so I lingered, keeping a careful watch to the right and left of me, but saw nothing. At last I began to weary of this, and on reflecting that there were three ways out of the garden—one by the wicket leading into the Louvre, the second near the Porte St. Honore, and the third at the Tour de Bois—I came to the conclusion that if there was a spy about he would have plenty of chance to escape. So I consulted the oracle. I picked Pompon up and let him drop on the sward, determined to follow the course he took. As he touched the ground the little beast gave a chuckle, and scampered across the grass in the direction of the river. In brief, it was the river bank near the Tour de Bois that the oracle pointed at, and I followed Pompon across the hedge, and we went noiselessly through a tangled maze of brush and shrub and tree, until we came to the old city wall, that ended here on the river face. No sooner had we reached it than Pompon swarmed up the wall. With the aid of a friendly yew tree I followed his example, and, stretching myself on the flat surface, with the ape curled up close beside me, I waited and watched.

The day was perfect, and I basked like a lizard in the warm sunshine, listening to the buzzing of the wasps, and the cheery whistle of a blackcap from a thorn bush not a bowshot from me. But my eyes were not idle. I had a good view from where I was, and I watched like a hawk from a cliff. But nothing came in sight except the slow procession of boats passing up and down the river and the crowd on the opposite bank, like so many ants, hurrying to and fro. I was beginning to despair, and was laughing to myself at my oracle when a little skiff that had been hugging the shore on my side stole quietly up, and grounded softly on the bank just beneath me. There was only one man within; but I saw at a glance he was not a regular boatman of our river. He was too tall and dark and had a foreign air about him. With the aid of a towline he fastened the boat to a heavy stone, and then, throwing his coat on his arm—for he was in his shirt sleeves—he stepped up the bank, and sat contentedly down beneath the yew tree.

"Oh, ho!" I muttered to myself, "the oracle is working." Craning over, I took another look at my man; but I could see little except his shoulders and the top of his head. His coat, however, was on the grass beside him, and on its breast was embroidered the arms of Spain.

"From the Spanish embassy!" I murmured again. "This grows interesting." And I stretched myself so that I could watch him without moving. My only fear was lest Pompon should make some noise, or start off in pursuit of some idle fancy; so I stroked his fur gently to keep him quiet, and the ape blinked at me with sleepy, bead-like eyes.

I had not long to wait, maybe a half hour or so, when a shrill whistle rang out from amongst the trees, and my Spaniard, jumping up, whistled back as shrilly. Then there was a moment's silence, followed by the sound of hurrying feet, as a man ran up, breathless with haste.

"Caramba!" exclaimed the Spaniard, "You are late!"

"'Twas not to be helped. I caught sight of the fool Le Brusquet, and his cursed ape moping about the gardens, and lay quiet to give the pair time to go. By the way, they came this way. Have you seen anything of them?"

"No one has been here," and the Spaniard, lifting his coat, prepared to descend to the boat.

At first I could not recognize the voice, but as the two went down to the boat I got a glimpse of the newcomer's face. It was Aramon, or d'Aramon, as he called himself, a broken captain of the regiment of Aunis, and an utter scoundrel, if ever there was one.

That there was villainy afoot I was sure now. I was hoping—nay, longing—that they would stay and talk a little ere they went. But this was not to be. When they had stepped into the boat, however, and pushed off, d'Aramon threw himself back in the stern and laughed long and loudly to himself. As for the Spaniard, he said nothing, but pulled steadily across the river, and ere the skiff had gone half way across the Seine it vanished from my eyes in the golden, dazzling glare of the sunshine.

I lay still for a few minutes, and then rising, shook Pompon by the neck.

"Mon ami," I said, "the Delphic oracle was nothing to you!"

Whereat he scuffled with me; but I pacified him with a ginger-nut; and then we took our way slowly, but with great content, towards the palace.

CHAPTER II.

The Ambassador's Wager.

As I walked on, however, my mind was working like a clock. Lorgnac's agitated manner, his strange words at our parting, the presence of Conde in Paris, the fact of his being spied upon by the Spanish embassy, and by such an agent as d'Aramon; all these pointed to some mystery. My curiosity was excited to the highest pitch. At that time no badaud of Paris was as eager as I to poke his nose into matters that did not concern him. And now that I am speaking of myself, I might as well describe myself as I was then. I was tall and slightly built, but strong and active as a cat. My features were sharp and pointed, so that at college I got the unenviable nickname of La Fouine, or The Ferret. The mention of this always led to trouble; sometimes for me, sometimes for my tormentors. But the name had dropped into oblivion since I had come to man's estate, although my sharp features remained.

"I TOOK ANOTHER LOOK AT MY MAN."

In the meantime there was this mystery to be solved, and I was determined to get at the bottom of the well. It was clear that it was a political matter, and then—I looked around me, and saw that I was near a most inviting-looking seat, where the branches of a fallen tree spread out like an easy chair. My companion, whose perception in matters of this nature was even keener than mine, was already there, and, following Pompon's example, I settled myself down to unravel the skeins of the puzzle.

I had not been there above half an hour, during which I made but little progress, when I heard my name called out, and saw Lorgnac walking towards me with hasty steps.

"Well," he said, as he came up to me, "have you seen anyone?"

I did not exactly like to give away my nuts for nothing; but I swear that had I known how matters stood, I would not have played with him as I did, but have spoken out at once. As it was, I answered:

"Cabbage for cabbage, Lorgnac—tell me your secret and I'll tell you mine."

"My secret is not my own," he answered.

"Nor, I suppose, is mine; and I am growing old and wise. You remember the proverb—a close mouth catches no flies."

He stamped impatiently. "Look here, Le Brusquet! If you have seen any one let me know who it is. If the prince has ben spied upon and seen, there will be a frightful disaster, unless we can prevent it. Not only disaster for him, but for"— He stopped, hesitating, and I lifted my hand.

"Do not give away your secret! Sit down and let us talk, and I'll tell you what I have seen."

He took a seat beside me and I went on:

"You see! I am going to tell you in my own way. But first I must ask you a question."

"And that is?"

"Why are you, a cadet of the regiment of Aunis, not with the army?"

He blushed a little and stammered:

"The peace of Vaucelles still stands."

"And yet we are fortifying Marienbourg and Rocroy, and the admiral is levying forces openly in Picardy!"

"What has this to do with the matter in hand?"

"Wait and see. I will not be long now in coming to my point."

"Then come to it! I tell you every moment is of import."

"Hasten slowly, Lorgnac! I have told you what we are doing; and now for the others. If there is war, we will have Spain and England against us, for Mary of England will side with her husband."

"Yes—yes."

"Well, mon ami! You are aware that England is open to attack from Scotland. You are aware, too, that the Cardinal Beaton and a large embassy are coming to France. You can see that an alliance between France and Scotland—say if the dauphin were to wed the young queen of Scots—would make us strong."

"Yes"—his voice was very grave.

My thoughts had run far beyond my speech by this, and I began to tremble at the end to which they were leading me. I, who had begun this talk in an idle spirit of mischief was now being pricked by my own pins.

For a moment I remained silent, and Lorgnac's hand closed upon my arm like a vise.

"Go on!" said he, his voice husky. He seemed to be moved powerfully by some inward feling.

"Well! It would be a great thing for Spain to prevent such a marriage, would it not?"

He said nothing, but kept staring at me as I went on.

"And now, Lorgnac"—my own words came slowly and painfully—"suppose that the Spaniard could show there was truth in a story that was whispered here and there years ago—that the Dauphin could not be."

"What do you mean?" His hand dropped from my arm as he spoke. He pretended not to understand, though he knew well enough. He rose from his seat and faced me, and I rose, too, and bent toward him.

"You know what I mean, Blaise de Lorgnac. If it could be shown that Conde hurried back from Marienbourg and had a secret meeting, say under my old oak tree, with the queen of Scots"——

"You spy!" he said. "You have watched."

I could have struck him, but I held myself in, for he was my friend, and for the moment was mad.

"'Tis you who should wear the cap and bells, Lorgnac—not I. I am no spy. Yet I have watched the watcher. The secret is known, and d'Aramon is at this moment giving it to the Spanish ambassador."

"D'Aramon! That ruffian!"

"Yes."

"And you did not stay him? Made no effort to stop him?"

"I have only just found out the importance of the thing myself. Beside, I did exactly what you asked me to do. You made no mention of staying people."

He reflected for a moment, a moment only, for if ever there was a man of action it was Lorgnac. Then he spoke.

"De Besme, can I count on your old friendship? It is not for myself I ask, but for the fair name of an innocent woman and a queen."

There was no need to mention names. I understood perfectly, and for her sake would have willing given my life twice over. But, as I looked at Lorgnac's burning, eager eyes, I read in them the same secret that I kept locked in my heart. He, too! Ah! Was there a man who did not love her? I answered him gravely:

"My head and arm are with you—to the end. And now, do not waste time, or give me half confidences. What am I to do for you?"

"I must get the prince from Paris at once; but he is penniless, and dare not go for money where he will be known, and I"—he laughed bitterly—"have but a brace of Henris."

"Where is the prince now?"

"In my house."

"In the Rue Tire Boudin?"

"Precisely. I have no other."

"I know that, and should not have asked. No one knows he is there?"

"I keep no servant, and you and I alone know this."

"So that if Conde can slip out of Paris there will only be d'Aramon's word to say he was here."

"Exactly."

"Then, mon cher, things are not so black as they look."

With this I unfastened my purse from my belt and handed it to Lorgnac, saying:

"There are 40 fat crowns there. They will carry the prince to Marienbourg."

"De Besme, you are indeed a friend," and Lorgnac took the purse, as he added: "I shall get him off at once, and you must let her know he is gone."

"I?"

"Yes—manage it somehow. I have no chance of speaking to her, but you have a hundred opportunities. A word—a hint will suffice."

"Very well. And now, hasten! I will do my best."

"It is check to Spain, I think," he said, with a laugh, and turned to go, but I stayed him.

"Is there anything else, Le Brusquet?" And our eyes met. Then I said slowly:

"My friend! When this is over you had better seek the war, and I shall go back to grow pears at Besme."

He made no answer, but our hands met in a warm clasp. If I had let him see that I knew his heart, I had also let him read mine. So we stood for a moment, and then, wringing my hand, he went off without another word.

I watched him until he was lost to view behind the hawthorns, and then, calling Pompon, took my watch back to the Louvre. I made a little detour, passing my oak, and reached the ivy-grown wall, where a little wicket led to the Ladies' terrace. I had a pass key given to me by the king himself, and, opening the gate, crossed the terrace and hastened towards the Pavillon du Roy, where the court was held. This faced the river, in all the elegance of its modern construction. It had been built on the site of the Great Tower, the pride of his ancestors, which Francis, the late king, had demolished to make room for his new structure.

I went up the crowded stairway, Pompon at my heels, exchanging a word with one, a jest with another. At the archway leading into the audience rooms the throng was so great that, for the moment, I could find no passage. I looked round and called out:

"Way! Way! For the king of the Caps and Bells!"

There was a laugh and a merry voice called out:

"There is room for your majesty here—and for your prime minister, too."

I looked at the smiling eyes and the curved, laughing lips, and Pompon and I were by the speaker's side in a moment. It was Mlle. de Foix, whom we used to call the Phoenix—the same for whom poor Laval jousted in scarlet armor, at the last tourney held by the late king.

"So your majesty has not attended the council?" And she opened her silver bonbon box.

"No, mademoiselle; yet my most faithful subject and myself have been employed on high affairs of state."

"I am sure they will benefit from such united wisdom," and she gave a sweet to Pompon.

"Hein! And is there no tribute for me?" I grumbled.

"I always thought the honor went to the king, but the spoils to the minister, but if your majesty will accept an offering"—and mademoiselle held out her box. With a bow, I helped myself to a dainty morsel, and at the same moment the strains of music floated toward us, and the Phoenix clapped her hands.

"'Tis the courante!" she cried: "the queen of Scots and the Princess Elizabeth dance in this. I wish I could see."

"Trust to you knight, mademoiselle," and she put a small hand in my arm. So, with laugh and jest, and sometimes an elbow in the ribs of a gay courtier, I at last succeeded in gaining a corner of vantage for my partner and myself.

There were many fair women and brilliant cavaliers in the dance. There was the Princess Elizabeth, afterwards the hapless wife of the tyrant of Spain; there were others I could name, but I had no eyes for them—nor, indeed, had anyone else. Every look, every glance, was bent on a tall, graceful figure, robed in white, with a cluster of red roses at her bosom. With a laugh in her eyes and a smile on her lips, she floated through the dance like a thing of air. Aye! I have lived long at courts. I have seen the fairest of my land—and women are fair in France—but never one to be the peer of my queen—of Mary of Scotland.

"Is she not lovely?" It was the Phoenix who cut in upon my thoughts, and I answered her:

"Mademoiselle! The Greeks are right. Nymph and dryad and goddess have lived."

The Phoenix looked up, a little puzzled at my meaning; and then someone addressing her, I took the opportunity to slip away and move up to my seat of privilege—a cushion near the still empty chair of the king. On my way I had to pass the Medicis. She was seated, watching the dance, surrounded by some ladies. At her side stood Diana of Valentinois, with that marvelous face on which time could leave no trace. The duchess smiled at me as I bowed to her who was the real queen of France, and I knelt to her who was queen but in name, to that wonderful woman whom we then thought to be but a mere stolid piece of humanity, whom we, because we were fools, looked upon with a sort of pitying contempt. But a day came when she dropped the mask that had covered her for five and twenty years—and then we found out. Whilst I write this I can almost see the grisly trophies over the Gate of Good Men; I can almost hear again the harsh clang from the belfry of St. Germain l'Auxerrois that summoned Paris to the massacre.

As I rose from my knees before the queen—she had but given me a look from her dark, unfathomable eyes—Catherine turned to the duchess, saying, with a slight sneer:

"I see nothing to admire in her; but all your French heads have been turned by that little Scotch queenlet."

"French heads, your majesty, can but see with French eyes," answered Diana, and the queen bit her lip. But now the folding doors to our right were flung open by the ushers in violet and gold, and the king appeared, and around and behind him a brilliant group, amongst whom were De Villeville and St. Andre, whilst towering above the others was the grim figure of the cardinal of Lorraine. For a moment they stood watching the dance, and then came slowly forward. As Henri approached his seat the dancers stopped and bowed to him, and, walking up to Mary of Scotland, the king kissed her on the cheek, saying, kindly:

"My daughter, the roses you carry here bear the palm from those you have gathered in that roseguy. Pardieu!" he continued, with a laugh, whilst Mary's face grew scarlet with pleasure; "is there no knight here who can turn a rondel to these roses? What say you, my cousin of the kingdom of Folly?"

There was a general laugh; but I was tongue-tied and could say nothing; but the constable, with the rough gallantry of a bear, was ready with a speech.

"I cannot use the pen," he cried; "but, old as I am, I will try in the next war to write a verse with my sword on Spanish helmets."

A buzz arose at the words. There may perhaps have been a veiled threat concealed in them, I know not; but buzz and murmur were stilled by a voice, nasal, discordant and harsh, which rang through the room.

"I protest, your majesty! I protest in the name of my master, the king of Spain! France and Spain are at peace."

It was Chantonnay, the Spanish ambassador, and tall, somber robed and thin, with the star of St. James at his neck, he stepped forward from the group behind the king, and stood facing Montmorenci, a sinister smile playing on his lips.

It was an awkward moment. From under his bushy white eyebrows the constable glared back at his adversary, and the king looked from one to another of them, annoyance and vexation stamped upon his features.

"I protest," the ambassador repeated again, with his strange, nasal intonation, his white fingers playing with the star at his neck.

Montmorenci's hand began to finger the glove he held; the stout old soldier knew but one answer to make at such a moment; when the Medicis spoke in her calm, passionless voice:

"My lords! It seems but a light matter for all these frowns to lower—all about a rose! Put aside these dark looks, I pray you, and let us hear the song the king has commanded—will no one touch a lute?"

The constable's glove slipped back over his hand, and Chantonnay bowed low to the queen. Still there was no answer to her request, and there was a strained silence.

Suddenly a voice—it was that of the Phoenix—called out:

"Le Brusquet!"

The cry was caught up at once, with a clapping of hands, and "Le Brusquet! Le Brusquet!" echoed through the hall. I met my queen's eyes. She was smiling with the rest; and then the king's voice came to me:

"You are named, my cousin."

It had to be; but as I slipped the broad yellow ribbon from my shoulders, and took the lute in my hands, I felt my heart beat, my fingers tremble, and my voice fail me. Twice I struck the chords; but the song would not come, and then I met her eyes again and was strong, and the jester's voice rang out full and clear; but it was the knight's heart that spoke.

"Come! Choose me a flower from out thy bower!
White blows the lily; but red the rose.
Come! Choose me a flower from out thy bower!"
Belle Mabel she plucker him a red, red rose.

"Lo! Here is a flower—the queen of my bower!
Pale white is the lily; but red the rose.
I dub thee my knight. In the hour of fight
Ride ever for right, and the red, red rose."

"For God and my Lady, my Queen of Aroady!
No shield will I bear but this red, red rose.
In charge or in rally, in siege or in sally
The Paynim shall shrink at the red, red rose."

"Lo! The night is unfolden, the moonlight is golden,
Pure heart and strong arm, let them go with the rose.
Lo! The night is unfolden, the moonlight is golden.
Go! King of my Heart, and my Knight of the Rose!"

I brought my song to a close with a flourish on the lute-strings. For a little there was a hush, and then a low murmur arose that swelled to a tumult of applause. Kind faces pressed around me, there were kind voices in my ears; but I heard them not—the place had gone from me—and for a space I was in a dreamland of my own.

It was the king himself who put a gold chain round my neck, and as I rose from before him, Chantonnay held out to me a heavy purse, saying:

"The king, my master, knows also to reward a minstrel."

There was that in the tone that jarred upon me. I drew myself up and answered:

"Monseigneur! The servants of the king of France take guerdon but from France."

Chantonnay shrugged his shoulders as he put back his purse, and, looking around him, said slowly to the king:

"Your majesty has a faithful servant and a great poet to celebrate the wedding."

"I fail to understand, monseigneur."

"I crave your majesty's pardon. I understood that the Prince of Conde had returned, and that your majesty's consent was given."

There were eager faces enough around us as the nasal tones of the ambassador drawled themselves out. I glanced around and saw that Mary was gone. Chantonnay spoke slowly and deliberately, and his meaning was not to be mistaken. The king flushed with anger.

"Monseigneur!" he said. "Is this a jest?"

And Chantonnay went on, as a cat might with a mouse:

"A jest, your majesty! A jest has never passed my lips in my life!"

"Hein!" I cut in, jingling the bells on my cap, and approaching the king. "Monseigneur speaks the truth, my cousin. No word of jest has ever passed his lips. They have all come through his nose."

A half suppressed titter followed the speech. The king frowned, and Chantonnay's eyes looked death at me, but it was his turn now to be on the cross, and the constable seized the opportunity.

"Be not offended, my lord. Le Brusquet but gave you his support. 'Tis not to be despised, I assure you."

This was too much for the Spaniard. His face became pale, his lips blue and then he said loudly, for his temper had mastered him:

"The prince is in Paris! I wager 1,000 pistoles with any one that I prove my words by 9 o'clock tonight!"

"And I take the wager."

All eyes turned to the voice that came from the middle of the hall, and then the crowd parted as Lorgnac stepped forward, and he and Chantonnay faced each other, their glances crossing like two rapiers.

(To Be Concluded Next Week.)

"Doing nothing is doing ill." Impure blood neglected will become a serious matter. Take Hood's Sarsaparilla at once and avoid the ill.

THREE AFRICAN SNAKE STORIES.

Jock McDowell was a Scot, a free-handed, whole-souled, warm-hearted representative of the "Land o' Cakes," and we all sincerely liked him. Consequently when he proposed to join our hunting party into Zululand he was received with open arms and was soon busily engaged in arranging for our departure from Durban, Natal.

Jock was a bit of a botanist, comparative anatomist, geologist, in fact, a bit of everything, always forming the most extravagant theories in connection with his hobbies and laughing as heartily as any of us when the absurdity of his conjectures was exposed by any of our party.

If there was any hot water in our neighborhood, Jock was bound to be in it, but always managed to extricate himself safely, with unimpaired good humor. On one occasion, when we were "outspanned" near the Tugela river, Jock started with one of our native servants to collect orchids in an adjoining forest. His vernacular being too broad for the columns of a newspaper, the adventures which befell him that day will have to be reduced into English.

It appears, then, that after having gone some distance into the forest, Jock's attention was attracted by an orchid in the upper branches of a grand old forest king, and he started climbing the tree to secure the prize; the climbing was not difficult, as the limbs of the tree were close together and he was soon within reaching distance of the plant.

As he stretched out his right hand to grasp it he heard the servant yell in unmitigated terror that a snake was in the tree. Glancing upwards he saw, swinging to and fro, level with his head, and slightly in front of him, a large, green snake, known throughout South Africa as the boom slang (tree snake), very venomous and greatly dreaded by the wood-cutters of that country. The reptile's jaws were stretched to its utmost capacity and its forked tongue was working nervously in and out its mouth with the rapidity of a lightning flash. Backwards and forwards it swung, while Jock, dangerously attracted by the concentrated evil expressed in the bright glitter of its infernal eyes, felt no inclination for the moment to stir. Its tail was entwined around a thin branch about four feet above him, and its body undulated gently as if moved by the zephyr breeze which stirred the leaves of the tree.

Breaking of the Spell.

For two or three seconds they remained thus, when his snakeship made a rapid snap at Jock's uplifted hand, which had not yet seized the orchid he was after. The spell was broken. Jock instantaneously withdrew his hand and as the fangs snapped viciously together he seized the snake tightly by the neck. The reptile wriggled violently, nearly causing Jock to lose his balance, but he contrived to retain his hold for about half a minute, when the snake loosened its tail from the bough above and attempted to coil itself around the Scotchman's body. Jock's fear was that it would succeed in getting its tail around his neck, in which case he stood as great a chance of being strangled as he did of dying from the effects of its bite, should it get out of his hand. He therefore extended his arm as far as possible from him and bent his body back. In this position he began to descend the tree by dropping from bough to bough with his left hand. He had not dropped many feet when, despite his strenuous efforts to prevent it, the snake managed to throw its body over the thick part of Jock's arm and instantly coiled itself round and round from wrist to bicep. The pressure of its coils was so intense that Jock feared he should be compelled to break his grip on its neck. Apart from the actual pain of the pressure and the weight of the serpent, his arm was twisted almost completely round, and he fancied he could hear the bones cracking.

It was, therefore, with extreme difficulty he descended until within eight feet of the base of the tree, when, grasping a decayed branch, down he came head first to the ground, with his friend still in his hand.

Fortunately the fall did not stun our hero, and his clutch did not relax sufficiently to allow the extrication of the snake's head. The Zulu boy who had been an open-mouthed witness of the occurrence, now drew his knife and while Jock held the serpent against the trunk of the tree, severed its head from the body. The rest of the snake was easily uncoiled from the arm, which had become all shades, owing to the tight fit of its singular ornament.

Our Scotch friend had still another snake episode during his rambles that day. He and the Zulu had retraced their steps and were out of the thick part of the forest, when they observed a covey of small birds circling wildly above a tree and twittering excitedly. Looking closely to ascertain the cause of the commotion, Jock saw a huge snake rearing its head an inch or two above the topmost branches of the tree, around which the little songsters were convulsively fluttering. Their shrill notes betrayed the great alarm they were experiencing, and yet the brilliant magnetism of their enemy's eye seemed to draw them ever nearer to him.

Suddenly the snake's head shot out and one poor little troubling warbler fell into the open jaws. The remaining birds flew off at once.

Scotched the Snake.

Jock's Scotch blood was up, and he determined to have that snake or know the reason why, but did not feel much like shinning up the tree to get it, after his experience of the previous hour, so he tried to move him by other means. He and the boy collected a number of stones and proceeded to make it uncomfortable for the bird catcher. Two or three of the missiles struck him, but not in a vital part, and after a while the snake seemed to think that the fun had been going on long enough, and came rapidly down the tree. They did not succeed in hitting it during its descent, and it was soon gliding down the trunk. Directly it touched the ground it made straight for the Zulu, who, dropping his handful of stones, made for an acclivity close by. Attaining the summit, he looked quickly behind him, only to find his pursuer close at his heels. The descent before him was a very steep one, in point of fact, a man under ordinary circumstances would carefully pick his way down, but the exigencies of the Zulu's situation did not leave much margin for reconnoitering. With a yell which could only have issued from the lungs of a savage, he started down the hill, closely followed by the snake. Jock did not time him, but he believes the Zulu beat the world's record by several lengths. The Scotchman followed, but a natural regard for his neck made his progress much more moderate. Besides, as he put it, in relating the incident, "he had noo sich a verra important engagement to keep as yon naygur." The Zulu had lost all control of his movements and flew down the declivity at express speed, the snake making prodigious bounds behind him. When the distance between the boy and the snake was no more than three feet, the former caught his toe in the root of a tree and fell full length on the ground, clutching some tufts of grass to prevent rolling. The snake's impetuous was evidently uncontrollable also, for it bounded clear over the prostrate Zulu and continued the pace to the bottom of the hill. Jock hastened to join the boy, thinking the snake might return to attack him, but it had abandoned the hunt. The Scot was bent on having the snake, however, and told the native to cut two stout sticks, armed with which they proceeded to hunt up their former pursuer, whom they discovered in a decayed trunk of a tree and at once despatched.

Puff Adder's Embrace.

A few weeks after this we were in another part of Zululand and joined a trader on a two days' hunt, leaving Jock, at his request, to take charge of the wagon and assort his botanical and other specimens. On our return we discovered that as usual our Highland friend had been having an adventure.

It appeared that after we left him, the night being very sultry, Jock spread his blankets on the ground and slept with the azure canopy of heaven above him. There is no more delightful feeling than that of waking up under a starlit summer sky in Africa, with the refreshing night breeze softly fanning your cheek; but on this special occasion as Jock woke he was conscious of a thrilling sensation about his neck, which took all the romance out of the situation.

Feeling cautiously to ascertain the cause, he was horrified to find his fingers come in contact with the moist body of a snake!

The position must have been fearfully trying to the nerves. He dare not shout to the wagon boys who were sleeping within ten yards of him, still less could he venture to roll away. The least movement on his part would cause his self-invited visitor to fasten its fangs in his neck. So there he lay hoping against hope that one of the snoring Zulus would wake up and discover his plight.

To make his situation still more intolerable, first his nose began to itch consumedly, then the tickling sensation spread to every individual inch of his anatomy, until he seemed to be one vast, substantial itch, and he could not venture to scratch or move in any way. He had no means of knowing in which direction the snake's head lay, or how far it had coiled itself around him.

Slowly and wearily the minutes dragged on until Jock began to think that eternity had surely arrived and that the sun never intended lighting up this globe again. Then the gray light in the east gave him some comfort, but not much, for he was now tortured with the fear that his companion would wake and perhaps give him a bite or two, just by way of reminder that they had passed the night together or that the Zulus in getting up would disturb the snake and anger him.

Jock's head was fortunately turned towards the wagon and as the sun rose, one of the wagon boys sat up and yawned. At this moment he caught the Scotchman's eye; the expression of it must have been alarming, for the yawn was suddenly strangled and he approached Jock softly. The Zulu immediately grasped the situation and, returning to the wagon, procured a spade. The snake's head was resting, luckily for our hero, on the blanket, while its body was partly on the Scot's chest and neck. With one swift scoop the boy swept the snake's head off the blanket with the spade and instantly decapitated it.

It was a monstrous puff adder, one of South Africa's deadliest serpents, and its bite would have proved fatal in half an hour.

Jock viewed the body of his late partner long and meditatively and then said solemnly: "Aweel, mon, I'd as lieve sleep wi' the deil."

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