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Illustration for "The Fox-Brush"

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"I LOVED THE HUSK OF A MAN"



# HARPER'S MONTHLY MAGAZINE

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## *The Fox-Brush.* *Retold from the French of Nicolas* *de Caen by James Branch Cabell*

HERE we have to do with the tenth tale of the third dizain of Nicolas de Caen, which is the Dizain of Queens. I abridge, since the scantiness of our leisure is balanced by the abundance of our prudery; the result is that to the Norman cleric appertains whatever the tale may have of merit, whereas what you find distasteful in it you must impute to my delinquencies in skill rather than in volition.

Early in the year of grace 1418 (thus Nicolas begins), Queen Ysabeau came with her daughter the Lady Katherine to Chartres. There the Queen was met by the Duke of Burgundy, and these two laid their heads together to such good effect that presently they got back into Paris and in that city massacred some



three thousand Armagnacs. This, however, is a matter that touches history; the rest of our concernment is that when the Queen and the Duke rode off to attend to this butcher's business, the Lady Katherine was left behind in the Convent of the Ursulines, which then stood upon the outskirts of Chartres, in the bend of the Eure just south of that city.

There one finds her upon the day of the decollation of St. John the Baptist, the fine August morning that starts the tale. Katherine the Fair, men called her, with some show of reason. She was very tall, and slim as a rush. Her eyes were large and black, having an extreme lustre, like that of undried ink—a lustre that was uncanny. Her abundant hair, too, was black, and to-day doubly sombre by contrast with the gold netting that confined it. Her mouth was scarlet, all curves, and her complexion famous for its brilliancy; only a precisian would have objected that she possessed the Valois nose, long and thin and somewhat unduly overhanging the mouth.

To-day as she came through the orchard, crimson-garbed, she paused with lifted eyebrows. Beyond the orchard wall there was a hodgepodge of noises, among which a nice ear might distinguish the clatter of hoofs, a yelping and scurrying, and a contention of soft bodies, and above all a man's voice commanding the turmoil. She was seventeen, so she climbed into the crotch of an apple-tree and peered over the wall.

He was in rusty brown and not unshabby; but her regard swept over this to his face, and there noted how his eyes were blue winter stars under the tumbled yellow hair, and the flash of his big teeth as he swore between them. He held a dead fox by the brush, which he was cutting off; two hounds, lank and wolfish, were scaling his huge body in frantic attempts to get at the carrion. A horse grazed near by.

So for a heart-beat she saw him. Then he flung the tailless body to the hounds, and in the act spied two black eyes peeping through the apple leaves. He laughed, all mirth to the heels of him. "Mademoiselle, I fear we have disturbed your devotions. But I had not heard it was an Ursuline custom to rehearse *aves* in tree-tops." Then, as she leaned farther forward, both elbows resting more comfortably upon the wall, and thereby disclosing her slim body among the foliage like a crimson flower green-calyxed: "You are not a nun! Blood of God! you are the Princess Katherine!"

The nuns, her present guardians, would have declared the ensuing action horrific, for Katherine smiled frankly at him and demanded how he could be certain of this.

He answered slowly: "I have seen your portrait. Hah, your portrait!" he jeered, head flung back and big teeth glinting in the sunlight. "There is a painter who merits crucifixion."

She considered this indicative of a cruel disposition, but also of a fine taste in the liberal arts. Aloud:

"You are not a Frenchman, messire. I do not understand how you can have seen my portrait."

The man stood for a moment twiddling the fox-brush. "I am a



SO FOR A HEART-BEAT SHE SAW HIM



harper, my Princess. I have visited the courts of many kings, though never that of France. I perceive that therein I have been unwise."

This trenched upon insolence—the look of his eyes, indeed, carried it well past the frontier—but she found it interesting. Straightway she touched the kernel of those year-blurred legends whispered about her cradle and now clamant.

"You have, then, seen the King of England?"

"Yes, highness."

"Is it true that he is an ogre—like Agrapard and Angoulaffre of the Broken Teeth?"

His gaze widened. "I have heard a deal of scandal concerning him. But never that."

Katherine settled back luxuriously in the crotch of the apple-tree. "Tell me about him."

Composedly he sat down upon the grass and began to acquaint her with his knowledge and opinions concerning Henry, the fifth of that name to reign in England. Katherine punctuated his discourse with eager questionings, which are not to our immediate purpose. In the main he thought the man now buffeting France a just king, and, the crown laid aside, he had heard him to be sufficiently jovial and even prankish. He educed anecdotes. He considered that the King would manifestly take Rouen, which he was now besieging. Was the King in treaty for the hand of the Infanta of Aragon? Yes, he had heard so.

Katherine sighed her pity for the ill-starred woman. "And now tell me about yourself."

He was, it appeared, Alain Maquedonnieux, a harper by avocation and by birth a native of Ireland. Beyond the fact that it was a savage kingdom adjoining Cataia, Katherine knew nothing of Ireland. The harper assured her that her idea was incorrect, since the kings of England claimed Ireland as an appanage, though the Irish themselves were of two minds as to the justice of these pretensions; all in all, he considered that Ireland belonged to St. Patrick, and that the holy man had never accredited a vicar.

"Doubtless, by the advice of God," Alain said: "for I have read in Master Roger de Wendover's Chronicles that at the dread day of judgment all the Irish are to muster before the high and pious Patrick, as their liege lord and father in the spirit, and by him be conducted into the presence of God; and that, by virtue of St. Patrick's request, all the Irish will die seven years to an hour before the second coming of Christ, in order to give the blessed saint sufficient time to marshal his company, which is considerable." Katherine admitted the convenience of this arrangement, as well as the neglect of her education. Alain gazed up at her for a long while, as in meditation, and presently said, "Doubtless the Lady Heleine of Argos also was thus starry-eyed and found in books less diverting reading than in the faces of men." This flooded her cheeks with a livelier hue; if she cared to read this man's face, the meaning was plain enough.



I give you the gist of their talk, and that in all conscience is trivial. But it was a day when one entered love's wardship with a splurge, not in more modern fashion venturing forward bit by bit, as though love were so much cold water. So they talked for a long while, with laughter mutually provoked and shared, with divers eloquent and dangerous pauses. The harper squatted upon the ground, the Princess leaned over the wall; but to all intent they sat together upon the loftiest turret of Paradise, and it was a full two hours before Katherine hinted at departure.

Alain rose, approaching the wall. "To-morrow I ride for Milan to take service with Duke Filippo. I had broken my journey these three days past at Châteauneuf yonder, where this fox has been harrying my host's chickens. To-day I went out to slay him, and he led me, his murderer, to the fairest lady earth may boast. Do you not think this fox was a true Christian, my Princess?"

Katherine said: "I lament his destruction. Farewell, Messire Alain! Destiny brought you hither, and now it appears that destiny summons you hence."

"Destiny brought me hither," Alain assented, a mastering hunger in his eyes. "Destiny has been kind; I will make a prayer to her that she continue so." But when Katherine demanded what this prayer would be, Alain shook his tawny head. "Presently you shall know, highness, but not now. I return to Châteauneuf on certain necessary businesses; to-morrow I set out at cockcrow for Milan and the Visconti's livery. Farewell!" He mounted and rode away in the golden August sunlight, the hounds frisking about him. The fox-brush was fastened in his hat. Thus Tristan le Léonois may have ridden a-hawking in drowned Cornouailles, thus statelily and composedly, Katherine thought, gazing after him. She went to her apartments, singing,

"El tems amoreus plein de joie,  
El tems où tote riens s'esgaie—"

and burst into a sudden passion of tears. There were hosts of women-children born every day, she reflected, who were not princesses and therefore compelled to marry ogres; and some of them were beautiful. And minstrels made such an ado over beauty.

Dawn found her in the orchard. She was to remember that it was a cloudy morning, and that mist tatters trailed from the more distant trees. In the slaty twilight the garden's verdure was lustreless, grass and foliage uniformly sombre save where dewdrops showed white like pearls. Nowhere in the orchard was there absolute shadow, nowhere a vista unblurred; but in the east, half-way between horizon and zenith, two belts of coppery light flared against the gray sky like embers swaddled by their ashes. The birds were waking; there were occasional scurryings in tree-tops and outbursts of peevish twittering; and presently there was singing, less sweet than theirs, perhaps, but far more



HE CAME TO HER,—IN HIS HELMET A FOX-BRUSH SPANGLED WITH JEWELS





grateful to the girl who heard it, heart in mouth. A lute accompanied the song demurely.

Sang Alain:

“O Madam Destiny, omnipotent,  
Harken and heed us! Unto you we pray  
That this the fleet, sweet time of youth be spent  
In laughter as befits a holiday,  
From which the evening summons us away,  
From which to-morrow wakens us to strife  
And toil and grief and wisdom,—and to-day  
Grudge us not life!

“O Madam Destiny, omnipotent,  
Why need our elders trouble us at play?  
We know that very soon we shall repent  
The idle follies of our holiday,  
And being old, shall be as wise as they,  
But now we are not wise, and lute and fife  
Seem sweeter far than wisdom,—so to-day  
Grudge us not life!

“O Madam Destiny, omnipotent,  
You have given us youth—and must we cast away  
The cup undrained and our one coin unspent  
Because our elders’ beards and hearts are gray?  
They have forgotten that if we delay  
Death claps us on the shoulder, and with knife  
Or cord or fever mocks the prayer we pray—  
*Grudge us not life!*

“Madam, recall that in the sun we play  
But for an hour, then have the worm for wife,  
The tomb for habitation,—and to-day  
Grudge us not life!”

Candor in these matters is best. Katherine scrambled into the crotch of the apple-tree. The dew pattered sharply about her, but the Princess was not in a mood to appraise discomforts.

“You came!” he said, transfigured; and then again, “You came!”

She breathed, “Yes.”

So for a long time they stood looking at one another. She found adoration in his eyes and quailed before it; and in the man’s mind not a grimy and mean incident of the past but marshalled to leer at his unworthiness: yet in that primitive garden the first man and woman, meeting, knew no sweeter terror.

It was by the man that familiar earth and the grating speech of earth were regained. “The affair is of the suddenest,” Alain observed, as he swung the lute behind him. He indicated no intention of touching her, though he might easily have done so as he sat there exalted by the height of his horse. “A meteor arrives with more prelude. But Love



is an arbitrary lord; desiring my heart, he has seized it, and accordingly I would now brave hell to come to you, and finding you there, esteem hell a pleasure-garden. I have already made my prayer to Destiny that she concede me love, and now of God, our Father and Master, I entreat quick death if I am not to win you. For, God willing, I shall come to you again, though in doing so it were necessary that I split the world like a rotten orange."

"Madness! Oh, brave, sweet madness!" Katherine said. "I am a king's daughter, and you a minstrel."

"Is it madness? Why, then, I think all sensible men are to be commiserated. And indeed I spy in all this some design. Across half the earth I came to you, led by a fox. Heh, God's face!" Alain swore; "the foxes that Samson, that sinewy captain, loosed among the corn of heathenry kindled no disputation such as this fox has set afoot. That was an affair of standing corn and olives spoilt, a bushel or so of disaster; now poised kingdoms topple on the brink of ruin. There will be martial argument shortly if you bid me come again."

"I bid you come," said Katherine; and after they had stared at one another for a long while, he rode away in silence. It was through a dank, tear-flawed world that she stumbled conventward, while out of the east the sun came bathed in mists, a watery sun no brighter than a silver coin.

And for a month the world seemed no less dreary, but about Michaelmas the Queen Regent sent for her. At the Hôtel de St. Pol matters were much the same. Her mother she found in foul-mouthed rage over the failure of her third attempt to poison the Dauphin of Vienne, as she had previously poisoned her two elder sons; I might here trace out a curious similitude between the Valois and that dragon-spawned race which Jason very anciently slew at Colchis, since the world was never at peace so long as any two of them existed; but King Charles greeted his daughter with ampler deference, esteeming her Presbyter John's wife, the tyrant of Æthiopia. However, ingenuity had just suggested card-playing for his amusement, and he paid little attention nowadays to any one save his opponent.

So the French King chirped his senile jests over the card-table, while the King of England was besieging his city of Rouen sedulously and without mercy. In late autumn an armament from Ireland joined Henry's forces. The Irish fought naked, it was said, with long knives. Katherine heard discreditable tales of these Irish, and reflected how gross are the exaggerations of rumor.

In the year of grace 1419, in January, the burgesses of Rouen, having consumed their horses, and finding frogs and rats unpalatable, yielded the city. The Queen Regent brought the news to Katherine.

"God is asleep," the Queen said; "and while He nods, the Butcher of Agincourt has stolen our good city of Rouen." She sat down and breathed heavily. "Never was poor woman so pestered as I! The puddings to-day were quite uneatable, and on Sunday the Englishman entered Rouen in great splendor, attended by his chief nobles; but the





Butcher rode alone, and before him went a page carrying a fox's brush on the point of his lance. I put it to you, is that the act of a sane man? Euh! euh!" Ysabeau squealed on a sudden; "you are bruising me."

Katherine had gripped her by the shoulder. "The King of England—a tall, fair man? with big teeth? a tiny wen upon his neck—here—and with his left cheek scarred? with blue eyes, very bright, bright as tapers?" She poured out her questions in a torrent, and awaited the answer, seeming not to breathe at all.

"I believe so," the Queen said.

"O God!" said Katherine.

"Ay, our only hope now. And may God show him no more mercy than he has shown us!" the good lady desired, with fervor; "the hog, having won our Normandy, is now advancing on Paris itself. He repudiated the Aragonish alliance last August; and until last August he was content with Normandy, they tell me, but now he swears to win all France. The man is a madman, and Scythian Tamburlaine was more lenient. And I do not believe that in all France there is a cook who understands his business." She went away whimpering and proceeded to get tipsy.

The Princess remained quite still, as the Queen had left her; you may see a hare crouch so at sight of the hounds. Finally she spoke aloud. "Until last August!" Katherine said. "Until last August! *Poised kingdoms topple on the brink of ruin, now that you bid me to come to you again.* And I bade him come!" Presently she went into her oratory and began to pray.

In the midst of her invocation she wailed: "Fool, fool! How could I have thought him less than a king!"

You are to imagine her breast thus adrum with remorse and hatred of herself, what time town by town fell before the invader like card houses. Every rumor of defeat—and they were many—was her arraignment; impotently she cowered at God's knees, knowing herself a murderess, whose infamy was still afoot, outpacing her prayers, whose victims were battalions. Tarpeia and Pisidice and Rahab were her sisters; she hungered in her abasement for Judith's nobler guilt.

In May he came to her. A truce was patched up, and French and English met amicably in a great plain near Meulan. A square space was staked out and on three sides boarded in, the fourth side being the river Seine. This the Queen Regent, Jehan of Burgundy, and Katherine entered from the French side. Simultaneously the English King appeared, accompanied by his brothers, Clarence and Gloucester, and followed by the Earl of Warwick. Katherine raised her eyes with I know not what lingering hope; it was he, a young Zeus now, triumphant and uneager. In his helmet in place of a plume he wore a fox-brush spangled with jewels.

These six entered the tent pitched for the conference,—the hangings of blue velvet embroidered with fleurs-de-lys of gold blurred before the girl's eyes, and till death the device sickened her,—and there the Earl of Warwick embarked upon a sea of rhetoric. His French was indifferent,



his periods interminable, and his demands somewhat exorbitant; in brief, the King of England wanted Katherine and most of France, with the reversion at the French King's death of the entire kingdom. Meanwhile Henry sat in silence, his eyes glowing.

"I have come," he said, under cover of Warwick's oratory—"I have come again, my lady."

Katherine's gaze flickered over him. "Liar!" she said, very softly. "Has God no thunder in His armory that this vile thief should go unblasted? Would you filch love as well as kingdoms, sir?"

His ruddy face went white. "I love you, Katherine."

"Yes," she answered, "for I am your pretext. I can well believe, messire, that you love your pretext for theft and murder."

They neither spoke after this, and presently, the Earl of Warwick having come to his peroration, the matter was adjourned till the next day. The party separated. It was not long before Katherine had informed her mother that, God willing, she would never again look upon the King of England's face uncoffined. Ysabeau found her a madwoman. The girl swept opposition before her with gusts of demoniacal fury, wept, shrieked, tore at her hair, and eventually fell into a sort of epileptic seizure; between rage and terror she became a horrid, frenzied beast. I do not dwell upon this, for it is not a condition in which the comeliest maid shows to advantage. But, for the Valois, insanity always lurked at the next corner, expectant, and they knew it; to save the girl's reason the Queen was forced to break off all discussion of the match. Accordingly, the Duke of Burgundy went next day to the conference alone. Jehan began with "ifs," and over these flimsy barriers Henry, already maddened by Katherine's scorn, presently vaulted to a towering fury.

"Fair cousin," the King said, after a deal of vehement bickering, "we wish you to know that we will have the daughter of your King, and that we will drive both him and you out of this kingdom." Then he went away in a rage.

It had seemed an approvable business to win love incognito, according to the example of many ancient emperors, but in practice he had tripped over an ugly outgrowth from the legendary custom. The girl hated him; there was no doubt about it; and it was equally certain that he loved her. Particularly caustic was the reflection that a twitch of his finger would get him Katherine as his wife, for in secret negotiation the Queen Regent was soon trying to bring this about; yes, he could get her body by a couple of pen-strokes; but, God's face! what he wanted was to rouse the look her eyes had borne in Chartres orchard that tranquil morning, and this one could not readily secure by fiddling with seals and parchments. You see his position; he loved the girl too utterly to take her on lip-consent, and this marriage was now his one possible excuse for ceasing from victorious warfare. So the fighting recommenced, and he slew in a despairing rage, knowing that by every movement of his arm he became to her so much the more detestable.

He stripped the realm of provinces as you peel the layers from an onion. By the May of the year of grace 1420 France was, and knew





herself to be, not beaten, but demolished. Only a fag-end of the French army lay entrenched at Troyes, where the court awaited Henry's decision as to the morrow's action. If he chose to destroy them root and branch, he could; and they knew such mercy as was in the man to be quite untarnished by previous usage. He drew up a small force before the city and made no overtures toward either peace or throat-cutting.

This was the posture of affairs on the evening of the Sunday after Ascension day, when Katherine sat at cards with her father in his apartments at the Hôtel de Ville. The King was pursing his lips over an alternative play, when Malise came into the room and, without speaking, laid a fox-brush before the Princess.

Katherine twirled it in her hand, staring at the card-littered table. "So you are in his pay, Malise? I am sorry. But you know that your employer is master here. Who am I to forbid him entrance?" The girl went away silently, abashed, and the Princess sat quite still, tapping the brush against the table.

"They do not want me to sign another treaty, do they?" her father asked, timidly. "It appears to me that they are always signing treaties, and I cannot see that any good comes of it. And I would have won that last game, Katherine, if Malise had not interrupted us. You know I would have won."

"Yes, father, you would have won. Oh, he must not see you!" Katherine cried, a great tide of love mounting in her breast, the love that draws the mother fiercely to shield her backward boy. "Father, will you not go into your chamber? I have a new book for you, father—all pictures, dear. Come—" She was coaxing him when Henry appeared in the doorway.

"But I do not wish to look at pictures," Charles said, peevishly; "I wish to play cards. You are an ungrateful daughter, Katherine. You are never willing to amuse me." He sat down with a whimper and began to pinch at his dribbling lips.

Katherine had gone a little toward the door, deathly white. "Welcome, sire!" she said. "Welcome, O great conqueror, who in your hour of triumph can find no nobler recreation than to shame a maid with her past folly! It was valorously done, sire. See, father, here is the King of England come to note how low we have fallen."

"The King of England!" Charles echoed, and rose now to his feet. "I thought we were at war with him. But my memory is treacherous. You perceive, brother of England, I am planning a new mouse-trap, and my memory is somewhat preempted. I recall now you are in treaty for my daughter's hand. Katherine is a good girl, sir, but I suppose—" He paused, as if to regard and hear some insensible counsellor, and then briskly resumed: "Yes, I suppose policy demands that she should marry you. We trammelled kings can never go free of policy—eh, brother? No; it was for that I wedded her mother, and we have been very unhappy, Ysabeau and I. A word in your ear, son-in-law: Ysabeau's soul formerly inhabited a sow, as Pythagoras teaches, and when our Saviour cast it out at Gadara, the influence of the moon drew it hither."



"Come, father," Katherine said. "Come away to bed, dear."

"Hideous basilisk!" he spat at her; "dare you rebel against me? Am I not King of France, and is it not blasphemy that a King of France should be thus mocked? Frail moths that flutter about my splendor," he shrieked, in an unheralded frenzy, "beware of me, beware! for I am omnipotent! I am King of France, God's regent. At my command the winds go about the earth, and nightly the stars are lit for my recreation. Perhaps I am mightier than God, but I do not remember now. The reason is written down and lies somewhere under a bench. Now I sail for England. Eia! eia! I go to ravage England, terrible and merciless. But I must have my mouse-traps, Goodman Devil, for in England the cats o' the middle-sea wait unfed." He went out of the room giggling, and in the corridor began to sing:

"Adieu de fois plus de cent mile!  
Aillors vois oïr l'Evangile,  
Car chi fors mentir on ne sait. . . ."

All this while Henry had remained immovable, his eyes fixed upon Katherine. Thus (she meditated) he stood among Frenchmen; he was the boulder and they the waters that babbled and fretted about him. But she turned and met his gaze squarely.

"And that," she said, "is the king whom you have conquered! It is not a notable conquest to overcome so sapient a king? to pilfer renown from an idiot? There are pickpockets in Troyes, rogues doubly damned, who would scorn the action. O God!" the girl wailed, on a sudden, "O just and all-seeing God! are not we of Valois so contemptible that in conquering us it is the victor who is shamed?"

"Flower o' the marsh!" he said, and his big voice pulsed with many tender cadences—"flower o' the marsh! it is not the King of England who now comes to you, but Alain the harper. Henry Plantagenet God has led hither by the hand to punish the sins of this realm and to reign in it like a true king. Henry Plantagenet will cast out the Valois from the throne they have defiled, as Darius Belshazzar, for such is the desire and the intent of God. But to you comes Alain the harper, not as a conqueror, but as a suppliant—Alain who has loved you whole-heartedly these two years past and now kneels before you entreating grace."

Katherine looked down into his countenance, for to his speech he had fitted action. Suddenly and for the first time she understood that he believed France his by divine grace and Heaven's peculiar intervention. He thought himself God's factor, not His rebel. He was rather stupid, this huge handsome boy; and realizing it, her hand went toward his shoulder maternally.

"It is nobly done, sire. I know that you must wed me to uphold your claim to France, for otherwise in the world's eyes you are shamed. You sell, and I with my body purchase, peace for France. There is no need of a lover's posture when hucksters meet."

"So changed!" he said, and was silent for an interval, still kneeling.





Then he began: "You force me to point out that I no longer need a pretext to hold France. France lies before me prostrate. By God's singular grace I reign in this fair kingdom, mine by right of conquest, and an alliance with the house of Valois will neither make nor mar me." She was unable to deny this, unpalatable as was the fact. "But I love you, and therefore as man woos woman I sue to you. Do you not understand that there can be between us no question of expediency? Katherine, in Chartres orchard there met a man and a maid we know of; now in Troyes they meet again—not as princess and king, but as man and maid, and wooer and wooed. Once I touched your heart, I think. And now in all the world there is one thing I covet—to gain for the poor king some portion of that love you would have squandered upon the harper." His hand closed on hers.

At his touch the girl's composure vanished. "My lord, you woo too timidly for one who comes with so many loud-voiced advocates. I am daughter to the King of France, and next to my soul's salvation I esteem France's welfare. Can I, then, fail to love the King of England, who chooses the blood of my countrymen as the best garb to come a-wooing in? How else, since you have ravaged my native land, since you have besmirched the name I bear, since yonder afield every wound in my dead and yet unburied Frenchmen is to me a mouth that shrieks your infamy?"

He rose. "And yet, for all that, you love me."

She could not find words with which to answer him at the first effort; but presently she said, quite simply, "To see you lying in your coffin I would willingly give up my hope of heaven, for heaven can afford no sight more desirable."

"You loved Alain."

"I loved the husk of a man. You can never comprehend how utterly I loved him."

Now I have to record of this great king a piece of magnanimity that bears the impress of more ancient times. "That you love me is indisputable," he said, "and this I propose to demonstrate. You will observe that I am quite unarmed save for this dagger, which I now throw out of the window"—with the word it jangled in the courtyard below. "I am in Troyes alone among some thousand Frenchmen, any one of whom would willingly give his life for the privilege of taking mine. You have but to sound the gong beside you, and in a few moments I shall be a dead man. Strike, then! for with me dies the English power in France. Strike, Katherine! if you see in me but the King of England."

She was rigid, but his heart leapt when he saw it was with terror.

"You came alone! You dared!"

He answered, with a wonderful smile, "Proud spirit! how else might I conquer you?"

"You have not conquered!" Katherine lifted the little baton beside the gong, poising it. God had granted her prayer—to save France. Now might the past and the ignominy of the past be merged in Judith's nobler guilt. But I must tell you that in the supreme hour,



Destiny at her beck, her main desire was to slap the man for his childishness. Oh, he had no right thus to besot himself with adoration! This dejection at her feet of his high destiny awed her, and pricked her, too, with her inability to understand him. Angrily she flung away the baton. "Go! ah, go!" she cried, as one strangling. "There has been enough of bloodshed, and I must spare you, loathing you as I do, for I cannot with my own hand murder you."

But the King was a kindly tyrant, crushing independence from his associates as lesser folk squeeze water from a sponge. "I cannot go thus. Acknowledge me to be Alain, the man you love, or else strike upon the gong."

"You are cruel!" she wailed, in her torture.

"Yes, I am cruel."

Katherine raised straining arms above her head in a hard gesture of despair. "You have conquered. You know that I love you. Oh, if I could find words to voice my shame, to shriek it in your face, I could better endure it! For I love you. Body and heart and soul I am your slave. Mine is the agony, for I love you! and presently I shall stand quite still and see little Frenchmen scramble about you as hounds leap about a stag, and afterward kill you. And after that I shall live! I preserve France, but after I have slain you I must live. Mine is the agony, the enduring agony." She stood motionless for an interval. "God, God! let me not fail!" Katherine breathed; and then: "Sire, I am about to commit a vile action, but it is for the sake of the France that I love next to God. As Judith gave her body to Holofernes, I crucify my heart for France's welfare." Very calmly she struck upon the gong.

If she could have found any reproach in his eyes during the ensuing silence, she could have borne it; but there was only love. And with all that, he smiled as one knowing the upshot of the matter.

A man-at-arms came into the room. "Germain—" Katherine said, and then again, "Germain—" She gave a swallowing motion and was silent. When she spoke it was with crisp distinctness: "Germain, fetch a harp. Messire Alain here is about to play for me."

At the man's departure she said: "I am very pitiably weak. Need you have dragged my soul, too, in the dust? God heard my prayer, and you have forced me to deny His favor, as Peter denied Christ. My dear, be very kind to me, for I come to you naked of honor." She fell at the King's feet, embracing his knees. "My master, be very kind to me, for there remains only your love."

He raised her to his breast. "Love is enough," he said.

Next day the English entered Troyes and in the cathedral church these two were betrothed. Henry was there magnificent in a curious suit of burnished armor; in place of his helmet-plume he wore a fox-brush ornamented with jewels, which unusual ornament afforded great matter of remark among the busybodies of both armies.