

The Tenson

RETOLD FROM THE FRENCH OF NICOLAS DE CAEN

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

HERE we have to do with another tale of the Dizain of Queens. I abridge, as heretofore, at discretion; and 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.

In the year of grace 1265 (Nicolas begins), about the festival of St. Peter *ad Vincula*, the Prince de Gâtinais came to Burgos. Before this he had lodged for three months in the district of Ponthieu; and the object of his southern journey was to assure the tenth Alphonso, then ruling in Castile, that the latter's sister Elinor, now resident at Entréchat, was beyond any reasonable doubt the transcendent lady whose existence old romancers had anticipated, however cloudily, when they fabled in remote time concerning Queen Heleine of Sparta.

There was a postscript to his news, and a pregnant one. The world knew that the King of Leon and Castile desired to be King of Germany as well, and that at present a single vote in the Diet would decide between his claims and those of his competitor, Earl Richard of Cornwall. De Gâtinais chattered fairly; he had a vote, Alphonso had a sister. So that, in effect—ohé, in effect, he made no question that his Majesty understood!

The Astronomer twitched his beard and demanded if the fact that Elinor had been a married woman these ten years past was not an obstacle to the plan which his fair cousin had proposed?

Here the Prince was armed cap-a-pie, and in consequence hauled out a paper. Dating from Viterbo, Clement, Bishop of Rome, servant to the servants of God, to his well-beloved son in Christ, stated that a compact between a boy of fifteen and a girl of ten was an affair of no

particular moment; that in consideration of the covenantors never having clapped eyes on one another since the wedding-day—even had not the precontract of marriage between the groom's father and the bride's mother rendered a consummation of the childish oath an obvious and a most heinous enormity—why, that, in a sentence, and for all his coy verbosity, the new pontiff was amenable to reason.

So in a month it was settled. Alphonso would give his sister to de Gâtinais, and in exchange get the latter's vote; and Gui Foulques, of Sabionetta—now Clement, fourth Pope to assume that name—would annul the previous marriage they planned, and in exchange get an armament to serve him against Manfred, the late and troublesome tyrant of Sicily and Apulia. The scheme promised to each one of them that which they very urgently desired, and messengers were presently sent into Ponthieu.

It is now time we put aside these Castilian matters and speak of other things. In England, Prince Edward had fought, and won, a shrewd battle at Evesham; the barons' power was demolished, there would be no more internecine war; and spurred by the unaccustomed idleness, he began to think of the foreign girl he had not seen since the day he wedded her. She would be a woman by this, and it was befitting that he claim his wife. He rode with Hawise d'Ebernoe to Ambresbury, and at the gate of the nunnery they parted, with what agonies are immaterial to the tale's progression; the tale merely tells that latterly the Prince went into Lower Picardy alone, riding at adventure as he loved to do, and thus came to Entréchat, where his wife resided with her mother, the Countess Jehane.

In a wood near by the castle he ap-



Painting by William Hurd Lawrence

SO THESE TWO RODE EVER SOUTHWARD

proached a company of Spaniards, four in number, their horses tethered while they drank about a great stone which served them for a table. Being thirsty, he asked and was readily accorded hospitality, so that within the instant these five fell into an amicable discourse. One fellow asked his name and business in those parts, and the Prince gave each without hesitancy as he reached for the bottle, and afterward dropped it just in time to catch, cannily, with his naked left hand, the knife-blade with which the rascal had dug at the unguarded ribs. He was astounded, but he was never a subtle man: here were four knaves who for reasons unexplained—but to them of undoubted cogency—desired the death of Prince Edward, the King of England's son: and manifestly there was here an actionable difference of opinion; so he had his sword out and presently killed the four of them.

Anon there came to him an apple-cheeked boy, habited as a page, who, riding jauntily through the forest, lighted upon the Prince, now in bottomless vexation. The lad drew rein, and his lips outlined a whistle. At his feet were several dead men in a very untidy condition; and seated among them, as throned upon the boulder, was a gigantic and florid person, so tall that the heads of few people reached to his shoulder; a person of handsome exterior, fair, and chested like a stallion, whose left eyebrow drooped so oddly that even in anger the stupendous man appeared to confide to you, quite confidentially, that the dilapidation he threatened was an excellent jest.

"Fair friend," said the page, "God give you joy! and why have you converted this forest into a shambles?"

The Prince told him of the half-hour's action as has been narrated. "I have perhaps been somewhat hasty," he considered, by way of peroration, "and it vexes me that I did not spare, say, one of these lank Spaniards, if only long enough to ascertain why, in the name of Termagaunt, they should have desired my destruction."

But midway in his tale the boy had dismounted with a gasp, and he was now inspecting the features of one carcass. "Felons, my Prince! You have slain

some eight yards of felony which might have cheated the gallows had they got the Princess Elinor safe to Burgos. Only two days ago this chalk-eyed fellow conveyed to her a letter."

Prince Edward said, "You appear, lad, to be somewhat overheels in the confidence of my wife."

Now the boy rose and defiantly flung back his head in shrill laughter. "Your wife! Oh, God ha' mercy! Your wife, and for ten years left to her own devices! Why, look you, to-day you and your wife would not know one another were you twain brought face to face."

Prince Edward said, "That is very near the truth." But, indeed, it was the absolute truth, and as concerned himself already attested.

"Sire Edward," the boy then said, "your wife has wearied of this long waiting till you choose to whistle for her. Last summer the Prince de Gâtinais came a-wooing—and he is a handsome man." The page made known all that de Gâtinais and King Alphonso planned, the words jostling as they came in torrents, but so that one might understand. "I am her page, my lord. I was to follow her. These fellows were to be my escort, were to ward off possible pursuit. Cry haro, beau sire! cry haro, and lustily, for your wife in company with six other knaves is at large between here and Burgos—that unreasonable wife who grew dissatisfied after a mere ten years of neglect."

"I have been remiss," the Prince said, and one huge hand strained at his chin; "yes, perhaps I have been remiss. Yet it had appeared to me— But as it is, I bid you mount, my lad!" he cried, in a new voice.

The boy demanded, "And to what end?"

"Oy Dicus, messire! have I not slain your escort? Why, in common reason, equity demands that I afford you my protection so far as Burgos, messire, just as equity demands I on arrival slay de Gâtinais and fetch back my wife to England."

The page wrung exquisite hands with a gesture that was but partially tinged with anguish and presently began to laugh. Afterwards these two rode southward.

For it appeared to the intriguing little

woman a diverting jest that in this fashion her own husband should be the promoter of her evasion. It appeared to her even more diverting that in two days' space she had become genuinely fond of him. She found him rather slow of apprehension, and was namelessly humiliated by the discovery that not an eyelash of the man was irritated by his wife's decampment; he considered, to all appearance, that some property of his had been stolen, and he intended, quite without passion, to repossess himself of it, after, of course, punishing the thief.

This troubled the Princess somewhat; and often, riding by his more stolid side, the girl's heart raged at memory of the decade so newly overpast that had kept her always dependent on the charity of this or that ungracious patron—on any one who would take charge of her while the truant husband fought out his endless squabbles in England. Slights enough she had borne during the period, and squalor, and hunger even. But now at last she rode toward the dear southland; and presently she would be rid of this big man, when he had served her purpose; and afterward she meant to wheedle Alphonso, just as she had always done, and later still she and Etienne would be very happy: and, in fine, to-morrow was to be a new day.

So these two rode ever southward, and always Prince Edward found this new page of his—this Miguel de Rueda—a jolly lad, who whistled and sang inapposite snatches of balladry, without any formal ending or beginning, descanting always with the delicate irrelevancy of a bird-trill.

The Prince had quickly fathomed the meaning of the scheme hatched in Castile. "When Manfred is driven out of Sicily they will give the throne to de Gâtinais. He intends to get both a kingdom and a handsome wife by this neat affair. And in reason England must support my uncle against El Sabio. Why, my lad, I ride southward to prevent a war that would convulse half Europe."

"You ride southward in the attempt to rob a miserable woman of her sole chance of happiness," Miguel de Rueda estimated.

"That is undeniable, if she love this

thrifty Prince, as indeed I do not question my wife does. Yet is our happiness here a trivial matter, whereas war is a great disaster. You have not seen—as I have done, my little Miguel—a man viewing his death-wound with a face of stupid wonder?—a man about to die in his lord's quarrel and understanding never a word of it? Or a woman, say—a woman's twisted and naked body, the breasts yet horribly heaving, in the red ashes of some village? or the already-dripping hoofs that will presently crush it? Well, it is to prevent a many such spectacles hereabout that I ride southward."

Miguel de Rueda shuddered. But, "She has her right to happiness," the page stubbornly said.

"Not so," the Prince retorted; "since it hath pleased the Eternal Father to appoint us twain to lofty station, to intrust to us the five talents of the parable; whence is our debt to Him, being fivefold, so much the greater than that of common persons. And therefore the more is it our sole right, being fivefold, to serve God without faltering, and therefore is our happiness, or our unhappiness, the more an inconsiderable matter. For, as I have read in the Annals of the Romans—" He launched upon the story of King Pompey and his daughter, whom a certain duke regarded with impure and improper emotions. "My little Miguel, that ancient king is our Heavenly Father, that only daughter is the rational soul of us, which is here delivered for protection to five soldiers—that is, to the five senses to preserve it from the devil, the world, and the flesh. But, alas! the too-credulous soul, desirous of gazing upon the gaudy vapors of this world—"

"You whine like a canting friar," the page complained; "and I can assure you that the Lady Elinor was prompted rather than hindered by her God-given faculties of sight, hearing, and so on, when she fell in love with de Gâtinais. Of you two, he is beyond any question the handsomer and the more intelligent man, and it was God who bestowed on her sufficient wit to perceive it. And what am I to deduce from this?"

The Prince reflected. At last he said: "I have also read in these same Gestes how Seneca mentions that in poisoned

bodies, on account of the malignancy and the coldness of the poison, no worm will engender; but if the body be smitten by lightning, in a few days the carcass will abound with vermin. My little Miguel, both men and women are at birth empoisoned by sin, and then they produce no worm—that is, no virtue; but struck with lightning—that is, by the grace of God—they are astonishingly fruitful in good works.”

The page began to laugh. “You are hopelessly absurd, my Prince, though you will never know it,—and I hate you a little,—and I envy you a great deal.”

“Nay,” Prince Edward said, in misapprehension, for the man was never quick-witted,—“nay, it is not for my own happiness that I ride southward.”

The page then said, “What is her name?” And Prince Edward answered, very fondly, “Hawise.”

“Her, too, I hate,” said Miguel de Rueda; “and I think that the holy angels alone know how profoundly I envy her.”

In the afternoon of the same day they neared Ruffec, and at the ford found three brigands ready, two of whom the Prince slew, and the other fled.

Next night they supped at Manneville, and sat afterward in the little square, tree-chequered, that lay before their inn. Miguel had procured a lute from the innkeeper, and strummed idly as these two debated together of great matters; about them was an immeasurable twilight, moonless but tempered by many stars, and everywhere an agreeable conference of leaves.

“Listen, my Prince,” the boy said more lately; “here is one view of the affair.” And he began to chant, without rhyming, without raising his voice above the pitch of talk, what time the lute monotonously sobbed beneath his fingers.

Sang Miguel:

“A little while and Irus and Menepthah are at sorry unison, and Guinevere is but a skull. Multitudinously we tread toward oblivion, as ants tread toward sugar, and presently Time cometh with his broom. Multitudinously we tread a dusty road toward oblivion; but yonder the sun shines upon a grass-plot, converting it into an emerald; and I am awearied of the trodden path.

“Vine-crowned is she that guards the grasses yonder, and her breasts are naked. *Vanity of vanities!* saith the beloved. But she whom I love seems very far away to-night, though I might be with her if I would. And she may not aid me now, for not even love is all-powerful. She is fairest of created women, and very wise, but she may never understand that at any time one grows awearied of the trodden path.

“Yet though she may not understand, this woman who has known me to the marrow, I must obey her laudable behests and serve her blindly. At sight of her my love closes over my heart like a flood, so that I am speechless and glory in my impotence, as one who stands at last before the kindly face of God. For her sake I have striven, with a good endeavor, to my tiny uttermost. Pardie, I am not Priam at the head of his army! A little while and I will repent; to-night I cannot but remember that there are women whose lips are of a livelier tint, that life is short at best, that wine is a goodly thing, and that I am awearied of the trodden path.

“She is very far from me to-night. Yonder in the Hørselberg they exult and make sweet songs, songs that are sweeter, immeasurably sweeter, than this song of mine, but in the trodden path I falter, for I am tired, tired in every fibre o’ me, and I am awearied of the trodden path.”

Followed a silence. “Ignorance spoke there,” the Prince said. “It is the song of a woman, or else of a boy who is very young. Give me the lute, my little Miguel.” And presently he, too, sang.

Sang the Prince:

“I was in a path, and I trod toward the citadel of the land’s Seigneur, and on either side were pleasant and forbidden meadows, having various names. And one trod with me who babbled of the brooding mountains and of the low-lying and adjacent clouds; of the west wind and of the budding fruit-trees; and he debated the significance of these things, and he went astray to gather violets, while I walked in the trodden path.

“He babbled of genial wine and of the alert lips of women, of swinging censers and of pale-mouthed priests, and his heart was troubled by a world profuse in beauty. And he leapt a stile to share

his allotted provision with a dying dog, and afterward, being hungry, a wall to pilfer apples, what while I walked in the trodden path.

"He babbled of Autumn's bankruptcy and of the age-long lying promises of Spring; and of his own desire to be at rest; and of running waters and of decaying leaves. He babbled of the far-off stars; and he debated whether they were the eyes of God or gases that burned, and he demonstrated, very clearly, that neither existed; and at times he stumbled as he stared about him and munched his apples, so that he was all bemired, but I walked in the trodden path.

"And the path led to the gateway of a citadel and through the gateway. 'Let us not enter,' he said, 'for the citadel is vacant, and, moreover, I am in profound terror, and, besides, as yet I have not eaten all my apples.' And he wept aloud, but I was not afraid, for I had walked in the trodden path."

Again there was a silence. "You paint a dreary world, my Prince."

"Nay, my little Miguel, I do but paint the world as the Eternal Father made it. The laws of the place are written large so that all may read them; and we know that every path, whether it be my trodden one or some byway through your gayer meadows, yet leads in the end to God. We have our choice—or to come to Him as a laborer comes at evening for the day's wages fairly earned, or to come as some roisterer haled before the magistrate."

"I consider you to be in the right," the boy said, after a lengthy interval, "although I decline—and emphatically—to believe you."

The Prince laughed. "There spoke Youth," he said, and he sighed as though he were a patriarch, "but we have sung, we two, the eternal Tenson of God's will and of man's desires. And I claim the prize, my little Miguel."

Suddenly the page kissed one huge hand. "You have conquered, my very dull and very glorious Prince. Concerning that Hawise—" but Miguel de Rueda choked. "Oh, I understand! in part I understand!" the page wailed, and now it was Prince Edward who comforted Miguel de Rueda.

For he laid one hand upon his page's

hair, and smiled in the darkness to note how soft it was, since the man was less a fool than at first view you might have taken him to be, and said:

"One must play the game, my lad. We are no little people, she and I, the children of many kings, of God's regents here on earth; and it was never reasonable, my Miguel, that gentlefolk should cog at dice."

The same night Miguel de Rueda sobbed through the prayer which St. Theophilus made long ago to the Mother of God:

Dame, je n'ose,
Flors d'aiglentier et lis et rose,
En qui li filz Diex se repose,—

and so on. Or, in other wording: "Hearken, O gracious Lady! thou that art more fair than any flower of the eglantine, more comely than the blossoming of the rose or of the lily! thou to whom was confided the very Son of God! Hearken, for I am afraid! afford counsel to me that am ensnared by Satan and know not what to do! Never will I make an end of praying. O Virgin debonaire! O honored Lady! Thou that wast once a woman—!"

You would have said the boy was dying; and in sober verity a deal of Miguel de Rueda died upon this night of clearer vision.

It was on the following day, near Bazas, that they encountered Adam de Gourdon, a Provençal knight, with whom the Prince fought for a long while, without either contestant giving way; and in consequence a rendezvous was fixed for the November of that year, and afterward the Prince and de Gourdon parted, highly pleased with one another.

Thus the Prince and his attendant came, in late September, to Mauléon, on the Castilian frontier, and dined there at the Fir Cone. Three or four lackeys were about—some exalted person's retinue? Prince Edward hazarded to the swart little landlord as the Prince and Miguel lingered over the remnants of their meal.

Yes, the fellow informed him: the Prince de Gâtinais had lodged there for a whole week, watching the north road as circumspect of all passage as a cat over a mouse-hole. Eh, monseigneur ex-

pected some one, doubtless—a lady, it might be,—the gentlefolk had their escapades like every one else. He babbled vaguely, for on a sudden he was very much afraid of his gigantic patron.

"You will show me to his room," Prince Edward said, with a politeness that was ingratiating.

The host shuddered and obeyed.

Miguel de Rueda, left alone, sat quite silent, his finger-tips drumming upon the table. He rose suddenly and flung back his shoulders, all resolution to the tiny heels. On the stairway he passed the black little landlord.

"I think," the little landlord considered, "that St. Michael must have been of similar appearance when he went to meet the Evil One. Ho, messire, will there be bloodshed?"

But Miguel de Rueda had passed the room above. The door was ajar. He paused there.

De Gâtinais had risen from his dinner and stood facing the door. He, too, was a blond man and the comeliest of his day. And at sight of him awoke in the woman's heart all of the old tenderness; handsome and brave and witty she knew him to be, past reason, as indeed the whole world knew him to be distinguished by every namable grace; and the innate weakness of de Gâtinais, which she alone suspected, made him now seem doubly dear. Fiercely she wanted to shield him, less from carnal injury than from that self-degradation she cloudily apprehended to be at hand; the test was come, and Etienne would fail. This much she knew with a sick, illimitable surety, and she loved de Gâtinais with a passion that dwarfed comprehension.

"O Madame the Virgin!" prayed Miguel de Rueda, "thou that wast once a woman, even as I am now a woman! grant that the man may slay him quickly! grant that he may slay Etienne very quickly, honored Lady, so that my Etienne may die unshamed!"

"I must question, messire," de Gâtinais was saying, "whether you have been well inspired. Yes, quite frankly, I do await the arrival of her who is your nominal wife; and your intervention at this late stage, I take it, can have no outcome save to render you absurd. Nay, rather be advised by me, messire—"

Prince Edward said, "I am not here to talk."

"—for, messire, I grant you that in ordinary disputation the cutting of one gentleman's throat by another gentleman is well enough, since the argument is unanswerable. Yet in this case we have each of us too much to live for; you to govern your reconquered England, and I—you perceive that I am candid—to achieve in turn the kingship of another realm. And to secure this, possession of the Lady Elinor is to me essential; to you she is nothing."

"She is a woman whom I have deeply wronged," Prince Edward said, "and to whom, God willing, I mean to make atonement. Ten years ago they wedded us, willy-nilly, to avert the impending war 'twixt Spain and England; to-day El Sabio intends to purchase all Germany, with her body as the price, you to get Sicily as her husband. Mort de Dieu! is a woman thus to be bought and sold like hog's flesh! We have other and cleaner customs, we of England."

"Eh, and who purchased the woman first?" de Gâtinais spat at him, and viciously, for the Frenchman now saw his air-castle shaken to the corner-stone.

"They wedded me to the child that a great war might be averted. I acquiesced, since it appeared preferable that two people suffer rather than many thousands be slain. And still this is my view of the matter. Yet afterward I failed her. Love had no clause in our agreement; but I owed her more protection than I have afforded. England has long been no place for women. I thought she would comprehend that much. But I know very little of women. Battle and death are more wholesome companions, I now perceive, than such folk as you and Alphonso. Woman is the weaker vessel—the negligence was mine—I may not blame her." The big and simple man was in an agony of repentance.

On a sudden he strode forward, his sword now shifted to his left hand and his right hand outstretched. "One and all, we are but weaklings in the net of circumstance. Shall one herring, then, blame his fellow if his fellow jostle him? We walk as in a mist of error, and Belial is fertile in allurements; yet always it is granted us to behold that sin



WILLIAM HURD LAWRENCE
+ 1934 +

Painting by William Hurd Lawrence

IN AN INSTANT THE PLACE RESOUNDED LIKE A SMITHY

is sin. I have perhaps sinned through anger, Messire de Gâtinais, more deeply than you have planned to sin through luxury and through ambition. Let us then cry quits, Messire de Gâtinais, and afterward part in peace, and in mutual repentance, if you so elect."

"And yield you Elinor?" de Gâtinais said. "Nay, messire, I reply to you with Arnaud de Marveil, that marvellous singer of eld: 'They may bear her from my presence, but they can never untie the knot which unites my heart to her; for that heart, so tender and so constant, God alone divides with my lady, and the portion which God possesses He holds but as a part of her domain, and as her vassal.'"

"This is blasphemy," Prince Edward now retorted, "and for such observations alone you merit death. Will you always talk and talk and talk? I perceive that the devil is far more subtle than you, messire, and leads you like a pig with a ring in his nose toward gross sin. Messire, I tell you that for your soul's health I doubly mean to kill you now. So let us make an end of this."

De Gâtinais turned and took up his sword. "Since you will have it," he rather regretfully said; "yet I reiterate that you play an absurd part. Your wife has deserted you, has fled in abhorrence of you. For three weeks she has been tramping God knows whither or in what company—"

He was here interrupted. "What the Lady Elinor has done," Prince Edward crisply said, "was at my request. We were wedded at Burgos; it was most natural that we should desire our reunion to take place at Burgos; and she came to Burgos with an escort which I provided."

De Gâtinais sneered. "So that is the tale you will deliver to the world?"

"When I have slain you," the Prince said,—"yes. Yes, since she is a woman, and woman is the weaker vessel."

"The reservation is wise. For once I am dead, Messire Edward, there will be none to know that you risk all for a drained goblet, for an orange already squeezed—quite dry, messire."

"Face of God!" the Prince said.

But de Gâtinais flung back both arms in a great gesture, so that he knocked a flask of claret from the table at his

rear. "I am candid, my Prince. I would not see any brave gentleman slain in a cause so foolish. And in consequence I kiss and tell. In effect, I was eloquent, I was magnificent—so that in the end her reserve was shattered like the wooden flask yonder at our feet. Is it worth while, think you, that our blood flow like its contents?"

"Liar!" Prince Edward said, very softly. "O hideous liar! already your eyes shift!" He drew near and struck the Frenchman. "Talk and talk and talk! and lying talk! I am ashamed while I share the world with a thing so base as you."

De Gâtinais hurled upon him, cursing, sobbing in an abandoned fury. In an instant the place resounded like a smithy, for there were no better swordsmen living than these two. The eavesdropper could see nothing clearly. Round and round they veered in a whirl of turmoil. Presently Prince Edward trod upon the broken flask, smashing it. His foot slipped in the spilth of wine, and the huge body went down like an oak, the head of it striking one leg of the table.

"A candle!" de Gâtinais cried, and he panted now—"a hundred candles to the Virgin of Beaujolais!" He shortened his sword to stab the Prince of England.

And now the eavesdropper understood. She flung open the door and fell upon Prince Edward, embracing him. The sword dug deep into her shoulder, so that she shrieked once with the cold pain of it. Then she rose, all ashen.

"Liar!" she said. "Oh, I am shamed while I share the world with a thing so base as you!"

In silence de Gâtinais regarded her. There was a long interval before he said, "Elinor!" and then again, "Elinor!" like a man bewildered.

"*'I was eloquent, I was magnificent,'*" she said, "*'so that in the end her reserve was shattered.'* Certainly, messire, it is not your death that I desire, since a man dies so very, very quickly. I desire for you—I know not what I desire for you!" the girl wailed.

"You desire that I should endure this present moment," de Gâtinais said; "for as God reigns I love you, and now am I shamed past death."

She said: "And I, too, loved you. It is strange to think of that."

"I was afraid. Never in my life have I been afraid before. But I was afraid of that terrible and fair and righteous man. I saw all hope of you vanish, all hope of Sicily—in effect, I lied as a cornered beast spits out his venom," de Gâtinais said.

"I know," she answered. "Give me water, Etienne." She washed and bound the Prince's head with a vinegar-soaked napkin. Elinor sat upon the floor, the big man's head upon her knee. "He will not die of this, for he is of strong person. Look you, Messire de Gâtinais, you and I are not. We are so fashioned that we can enjoy only the pleasant things of life. But this man can enjoy—enjoy, mark you—the commission of any act, however distasteful, if he think it to be his duty. There is the difference. I cannot fathom him. But it is now necessary that I become all that he loves—since he loves it—and that I be in thought and deed all which he desires. For I have heard the Tenson through."

"You love him!" said de Gâtinais.

She glanced upward with a pitiable smile. "Nay, it is you that I love, my Etienne. You cannot understand—can you?—how at this very moment every fibre of me—heart, soul, and body—may be longing just to comfort you and to give you all which you may desire, my Etienne, and to make you happy, my handsome Etienne, at however dear a cost. No; you will never understand that. And since you may not understand, I merely bid you go and leave me with my husband."

And then there fell between these two an infinite silence.

"Listen," de Gâtinais said: "grant me some little credit for what I do. You are alone; the man is powerless. My fellows are within call. A word secures the Prince's death; a word gets me you and Sicily. And I do not speak that word, for you are my lady as well as his."

But there was no mercy in the girl, no more for him than for herself. The big head lay upon her breast what time she caressed the gross hair of it ever so lightly. "These are tinsel oaths," she crooned, as rapt with incurious content; "these are but the protestations of a jongleur. A word get you my body? a word get you, in effect, all that you are capable of desiring? Then why do you not speak that word?"

De Gâtinais raised clenched hands. "I am shamed," he said; and more lately, "It is just."

He left the room and presently rode away with his men. I say that he had done a knightly deed, but she thought little of it, never raised her head as the troop clattered from Mauléon, with a lessening beat that lapsed now into the blunders of an aging fly who doddered about the pane yonder.

She sat thus for a long period, her meditations adrift in the future; and that which she fore-read left her nor all sorry nor profoundly glad, for living seemed by this, though scarcely the merry and colorful business which she had esteemed it, yet immeasurably the more worth while.

The Clue

BY LOUISE MORGAN SILL

"SCARCE seen, the all desired, the hope profound,
Love floats, a cloud, a vision, and a dream—
The fragrance of a flower never found,
The sound of a forever hidden stream."

So spake a sage from his austere abode.

But one gainsaid him with a timid phrase:

"Prithee, hast thou in patience sought the road?
He findeth not who seeketh not Love's ways."