



Painting by Howard Pyle

Illustration for "The Rat-Trap"

MEREGRETT, DAUGHTER OF PHILIPPE THE BOLD

The Rat-Trap

RETOLD FROM THE FRENCH OF NICOLAS DE CAEN

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

HERE we have to do with the third 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 1298, a little before Candlemas (thus Nicolas begins), came letters to the first King Edward of England from his kinsman and ambassador to France, Earl Edmund of Lancaster. It was perfectly apparent, the Earl wrote, that the French King meant to surrender to the Earl's lord and brother neither the duchy of Guienne nor the Lady Blaunsh.

The courier found Sire Edward at Ipswich, midway in celebration of his daughter's marriage to the Count of Holland. The King read the letters through and began to laugh; and presently broke into a rage such as was possible only to the demon-tainted blood of Anjou. So that next day the keeper of the privy purse entered upon the household-books a considerable sum "to make good a large ruby and an emerald lost out of his coronet when the King's grace was pleased to throw it into the fire"; and upon the same day the King recalled Lancaster, and more lately despatched yet another embassy into France to treat about Sire Edward's second marriage. This last embassy was headed by the Earl of Aquitaine.

The Earl got audience of the French King at Mezelais. Walking alone came this Earl of Aquitaine, with a large retinue, into the hall where the barons of France stood according to their rank; in russet were the big Earl and his attendants, but upon the scarlets and purples of the French lords many jewels

shone; as through a corridor of gayly painted sunlit glass came the grave Earl to the dais where sat King Philippe.

The King had risen at close sight of the new envoy, and had gulped once or twice, and without speaking, hurriedly waved his lords out of ear-shot. His perturbation was very extraordinary.

"Fair cousin," the Earl now said, without any prelude, "four years ago I was affianced to your sister, Dame Blaunsh. You stipulated that Gascony be given up to you in guaranty, as a settlement on any children I might have by that incomparable lady. I assented, and yielded you the province, upon the understanding, sworn to according to the faith of loyal kings, that within forty days you assign to me its seignory as your vassal. And I have had of you since then neither the enfeoffment nor the lady, but only excuses, Sire Philippe."

With eloquence the Frenchman touched upon the emergencies to which the public weal so often drives men of high station, and upon his private grief over the necessity—unavoidable, alas!—of returning a hard answer before the council; and became so voluble that Sire Edward merely laughed, in that big-lunged and disconcerting way of his, and afterward lodged for a week at Mezelais, nominally passing by his lesser title of Earl of Aquitaine, and as his own ambassador.

And negotiations became more swift of foot, since a man serves himself with zeal. In addition, the French lords could make nothing of a politician so thick-witted that he replied to every consideration of expediency but with parrotlike reiteration of the trivial circumstance that already the bargain was signed and sworn to; and, in consequence, while daily they fumed over his stupidity, daily he gained his point.



Painting by Howard Pyle

THEN SANG SIRE EDWARD

During this period he was, upon one pretext or another, very largely in the company of his affianced wife, Dame Blaunsh.

This lady, I must tell you, was the handsomest of her day; there could nowhere be found a creature more agreeable to every sense; and she compelled the eye, it is recorded, not gently, but in a superb fashion. And Sire Edward, who till this had loved her merely by report, and, in accordance with the high custom of old, through many perusals of her portrait, now appeared besotted. He was an aging man, near sixty; huge and fair he was, with a crisp beard, and stalwart as a tower; and the better-read at Mezelais likened the couple to *Sieur Hercules* at the feet of *Queen Omphale* when they saw the two so much together.

The ensuing Wednesday they hunted and slew a stag of ten in the woods of *Ermenoueil*, which stand thick about the *château*; and upon that day these two had dined at *Rigon* the forester's hut, in company with *Dame Meregrett*, the French King's younger sister. She sat a little apart from the betrothed, and stared through the hut's one window. We know nowadays it was not merely the trees she considered.

Dame Blaunsh, it seemed, was undisposed to mirth. "For we have slain the stag, beau sire," she said, "and have made of his death a brave diversion. To-day we have had our sport of death,—and presently the gay years wind past us, as our cavalcade came toward the stag, and God's incurious angel slays us; much as we slew the stag. And we will not understand, and we will wonder, as the stag did, in helpless wonder. And Death will have his sport of us, as in atonement." Here her big eyes shone, as the sun glints upon a sand-bottomed pool. "Ohé, I have known such happiness of late, beau sire, that I am hideously afraid to die." And again the fringed eyelids lifted, and within the moment sank contentedly.

For the King had murmured "Happiness!" and his glance was rapacious.

"But I am discourteous," Blaunsh said, "to prate of death thus drearily. Let us flout him, then, with some gay song." And she cast *Rigon's* lute toward him.

He caught it up. "Death is not reasonably mocked," Sire Edward said, "since in the end he conquers, and of the very lips that gibed at him remains but a little dust. Nay, rather should I who already stand beneath a lifted sword make for my immediate conqueror a *Sirvente*, which is the Song of Service."

Then sang Sire Edward:

"I sing of Death, that cometh to the king
And lightly plucks him from the cushioned throne,

And drowns his glory and his warfaring
In unrecorded dim oblivion,

And girds another with the sword thereof,
And sets another in his stead to reign,
What time the monarch nakedly must gain

Styx' hither shore and nakedly complain
'Midst twittering ghosts lamenting life
and love.

"For Death is merciless; a crack-brained king

He raises in the place of *Prester John*,
Smites *Priam*, and mid-course in conquering

Bids *Cæsar* pause; the wit of *Salomon*,
The wealth of *Nero* and the pride thereof,
And prowess of great captains—of *Gawayne*,

Darius, *Jeshua*, and *Charlemagne*—
Wheedle and bribe and surfeit Death in vain

And get no grace of him nor any love.

"Incuriously he smites the armored king
And tricks his wisest counsellor—"

"True, O God!" the tiny woman murmured that sat beside the window yonder. And *Dame Meregrett* rose and in silence passed from the room.

The two started, and laughed in common, and afterward paid little heed to her outgoing. For Sire Edward had put aside the lute and sat now regarding the Princess. His big left hand propped the bearded chin; his grave countenance was flushed, and his intent eyes shone under the shaggy brows, very steadily, like the tapers before an altar.

And, irresolutely, *Dame Blaunsh* plucked at her gown; then rearranged a fold of it, and with composure awaited the ensuing action, afraid at bottom, but not at all ill-pleased; and always she looked downward.

The King said: "Never before were

we two alone, madame. Fate is very gracious to me this morning."

"Fate," the lady considered, "has never denied much to the Hammer of the Scots."

"She has denied me nothing," he sadly said, "save the one thing that makes this business of living seem a rational proceeding. Fame and power and wealth she has accorded me, no doubt, but never the common joys of life. And, look you, my Princess, I am an old man now. During some thirty years I have ruled England according to my interpretation of God's will as it was anciently made manifest by the holy Evangelists; and during that period I have ruled England not without odd by-ends of commendation: yet, behold, to-day I quite forget that excellent King Edward, and remember only Edward Plantagenet—hot-blooded and desirous man!—of whom that so excellent King has made a prisoner all these years."

"It is the duty of exalted persons," Blaunsh unsteadily said, "to put aside such private inclinations as their breasts may harbor—"

He said: "I have done much for the happiness of every Englishman within my realm saving only Edward Plantagenet, and now I think his turn to be at hand." Then the man kept silence; and his hot appraisal daunted her.

"Lord," she presently faltered, "lord, in sober verity Love cannot extend his laws between husband and wife, since the gifts of love are voluntary, and husband and wife are but the slaves of duty."

"Troubadourish nonsense!" Sire Edward said; "yet it is true that the gifts of love are voluntary. And therefore—Ha, most beautiful, what have you and I to do with all this chaffering over Guienne?" The two stood very close to one another now.

Blaunsh said: "It is a high matter." Then on a sudden the full-veined girl was aglow with passion. "It is a trivial matter." He took her in his arms, since already her cheeks flared in scarlet anticipation of the event.

And thus holding her, he wooed the girl tempestuously. Here, indeed, was *Sieur Hercules* enslaved, burned by a fiercer fire than that of *Nessus*, and the

huge bulk of him visibly shaken by his adoration. In the disordered tapestry of verbiage, passion-flapped as a flag is by a wind, she presently beheld herself prefigured by *Balkis*, the *Judean's* lure, and by the *Princess of Cyprus* (in *Aristotle's* time), and by *Nicolette*, the *King's* daughter of *Carthage*,—since the first flush of morning was as a rush-light before her resplendency, the man swore; and in conclusion, by the *Countess of Tripolis*, for love of whom he had cleft the seas, and losing whom he must inevitably die as *Rudel* did. He snapped his fingers now over any consideration of *Guienne*. He would conquer for her all *Muscovy* and all *Cataia*, too, if she desired mere acreage. Meanwhile he wanted her, and his hard and savage passion beat down opposition as with a bludgeon.

"Heart's emperor," the trembling girl more lately said, "I think that you were cast in some larger mould than we of France. Oh, none of us may dare resist you! and I know that nothing matters, nothing in all the world, save that you love me. Then take me, since you will it—and not as King, since you will otherwise, but as *Edward Plantagenet*. For listen! by good luck you have this afternoon despatched *Rigon* for *Chevrieul*, where to-morrow we hunt the great boar. And in consequence to-night this hut will be unoccupied."

The man was silent. He had a gift that way when occasion served.

"Here, then, *beau sire!* here, then, at nine, you are to meet me with my chaplain. Behold, he marries us, as glibly as though we two were peasants. Poor King and Princess!" cried *Dame Blaunsh*, and in a voice that thrilled him, "shall ye not, then, dare to be but man and woman?"

"Ha!" the King said. He laughed. "The King is pleased to loose his prisoner; and I will do it." He fiercely said this, for the girl was very beautiful.

So he came that night, without any retinue, and habited as a forester, a horn swung about his neck, into the unlighted hut of *Rigon* the forester, and found a woman there, though not the woman whom he had perhaps expected.

"Treachery, *beau sire!* horrible treachery!" she wailed. "For presently comes

not Blaunsh but Philippe, with many men to back him. And presently they will slay you. You have been trapped, beau sire. Ah, for the love of God, go! go, while there is yet time!"

Sire Edward reflected. Undoubtedly, to light on Edward Longshanks alone in a forest would appear to King Philippe, if properly attended, a tempting chance to settle divers disputations, once for all; and Sire Edward knew the conscience of his old opponent to be quite invulnerable. The act would violate all laws of hospitality and knighthood—oh, granted! but its outcome would be a very definite gain to France, and for the rest, merely a dead body in a ditch. Not a monarch in Christendom, Sire Edward reflected, but feared and in consequence hated the Hammer of the Scots, and in further consequence would lift not a finger to avenge him; and not a being in the universe would rejoice at Philippe's achievement one-half so heartily as Sire Edward's son and immediate successor, Prince Edward of Caernarvon. So that, all in all, ohimé! Philippe had planned the affair with forethought.

What he said was, "Dame Blaunsh, then, knew of this?" But Meregrett's pitiful eyes had already answered him, and he laughed a little.

"In that event I have to-night enregistered my name among the goodly company of Love's Lunatics—

*Sots amoureux, sots privez, sots sauvages,
Sots vieux, nouveaux, et sots de tous
âges*—

thus he scornfully declaimed, "and as yokefellow with Dan Merlin in his thorn-bush, and with wise Salomon when he capered upon the high place of Chemosh, and with Duke Ares sheepishly agrin within the net of Mulciber. Rogues all, madame! fools all! yet always the flesh trammels us, and allures the soul to such sensual delights as bar its passage toward the eternal life wherein alone lies the empire and the heritage of the soul. And why does it so impede the soul? Because Satan once ranked among the sons of God, and the Eternal Father, as I take it, has not yet forgotten the antique relationship,—and hence it is permitted even in our late time that always the flesh rebel against

the spirit, and always these so tiny and so thin-voiced tricksters, these highly tinted miracles of iniquity, so gracious in demeanor and so starry-eyed—"

Then he turned and pointed, no longer the fanatic, but the expectant captain now. "Look, my Princess!" For in the pathway from which he had recently emerged stood a man in full armor like a sentinel. "Mort de Dieu, we can but try," Sire Edward said.

"Too late," said Meregrett; and yet she followed him. And presently, in a big splash of moonlight, the armed man's falchion glittered across their way. "Back," he bade them, "for by the King's orders no man passes."

"It were very easy now to strangle this herring," Sire Edward reflected.

"But scarcely a whole school of herring," the fellow retorted. "Nay, Messire d'Aquitaine, the bushes of Ermenoueil are alive with my associates. The hut yonder, in effect, is girdled by them,—and we have our orders."

"Concerning women?" the King said.

The man deliberated. Then Sire Edward handed him three gold pieces. "There was assuredly no specific mention of petticoats," the soldier now recollected, "and in consequence I dare to pass the Princess."

"And in that event," Sire Edward said, "we twain had as well bid one another adieu."

But Meregrett only said, "You bid me go?"

He waved his hand. "Since there is no choice. For that which you have done—however tardily—I thank you. Meantime I can but return to Rigon's hut to rearrange my toga as King Cæsar did when the assassins fell upon him, and to encounter whatever Dame Luck may send with due decorum."

"To die!" she said.

He shrugged his broad shoulders. "In the end we necessarily die."

Dame Meregrett turned and passed back into the hut without faltering.

And when he had lighted the inefficient lamp which he found there, Sire Edward wheeled upon her in half-humorous vexation. "Presently come your brother and his tattling lords. be discovered here with me at night, all means infamy. If Philippe chance

fall into one of his Capetian rages it means death."

"Nay, lord, it means far worse than death." And she laughed, although not merrily.

And now, for the first time, Sire Edward regarded her with profound consideration, as may we. To the finger-tips this so little lady showed a descendant of the holy Louis he had known and loved in old years; small and thinnish she was, with soft and profuse hair that, for all its blackness, gleamed in the lamp-light with stray ripples of brilliancy, as you may see a spark shudder to extinction over burning charcoal. The Valois nose she had, long and delicate in form, and overhanging a short upper lip; yet the lips were glorious, and her skin the very Hyperborean snow in tint. As for her eyes, say, gigantic onyxes—or ebony highly polished and wet with May dew; too big for her little face they were: in fine, they made of her a tiny and desirous wraith that moved nervously through life, very strange and brightly colored, and always thrilled with some subtle mirth, like that of a Siren who notes how the sailor pauses at the bulwark and laughs a little, knowing the outcome, and does not greatly care. Yet now her countenance was rapt.

And Sire Edward moved one step toward her and paused. "Madame, I do not understand."

Dame Meregrett looked up into his face unflinchingly. "It means that I love you, sire. I may speak without shame now, for presently you die. Die bravely, sire! die in such fashion as may hearten me to live."

The little woman spoke the truth, for always since his coming to Mezélais she had viewed the great conqueror as through an awful haze of forerunning rumor, twin to that golden vapor which enswathes a god and transmutes whatever in corporeal man had been a defect into some divine and hitherto unguessed-at excellence; and I must tell you in this place, since no other occasion offers, that even until the end of her life it was so. For to her what in other persons would have seemed but flagrant dulness showed, somehow, in Sire Edward as the majestic deliberation of one that knows his verdict to be decisive, and hence appraises

cautiously; and if sometime his big, calm eyes betrayed no apprehension of the jest at which her lips were laughing, and of which her brain very cordially approved, always within the instant her heart convinced her that a god is not lightly moved to mirth.

And now it was a god—*O deus certè!*—that had taken a woman's paltry face between his hands, half roughly. "And the maid is a Capet!" Sire Edward mused.

"Never has Blaunsh desired you any ill, beau sire. But it is the Archduke of Austria that she loves, beau sire. And once you were dead, she might marry him. One cannot blame her," Meregrett considered, "since he wishes to marry her, and she, of course, wishes to make him happy."

"And not herself, save in some secondary way!" the big King said. "In part I comprehend, madame. And I, too, long for this same happiness, impotently now, and much as a fevered man might long for water. And my admiration for the Death whom I praised this morning is somewhat abated." He took up Rigon's lute.

Then sang Sire Edward:

"Incuriously he smites the armored king
And tricks his wisest counsellor—

ay, the song ran thus. Now listen, madame—listen, while for me Death waits without, and for you ignominy."

Then sang Sire Edward:

"Anon

Will Death not bid us cease from pleasuring,

And change for idle laughter i' the sun
The grave's long silence and the peace thereof,

Where we entranced, Death our Viviane
Implacable, may never more regain
The unforgotten passion, and the pain
And grief and ecstasy of life and love?

"Yea, presently, as quiet as the king
Sleeps now that laid the plan of Chalcedon,
We, too, will sleep, and overhead the
Spring

Laugh, and young lovers laugh,—as we
have done—

And kiss,—as we, that take no heed
thereof

But slumber very soundly, and disdain
The world-wide heralding of Winter's
wane

And swift sweet ripple of the April rain
Running about the world to waken love.

"We shall have been done with love, and
Death be king
And turn our nimble bodies carrion,
Our red lips dusty;—yet our live lips
cling
Spite of that age-long severance and are
one
Spite of the grave and the vain grief
thereof
We mean to baffle, if in Death's domain
Old memories may enter, and we twain
May dream a little, and rehearse again
In that unending sleep our present love.

"Speed forth to her in sorry unison,
My rhymes: and say Death mocks us, and
is slain
Lightly by Love that lightly thinks there-
on;
And that were love at my disposal lain—
All mine to take!—and Death had said,
Refrain,
Lest I demand the bitter cost thereof,
I know that even as the weather-vane
Follows the wind so would I follow Love."

He put aside the lute. "Thus ends
the Song of Service," he said, "which
was made, not by the King of England,
but by Edward Plantagenet—hot-blood-
ed and desirous man!—in honor of the
one woman who within more years than
I care to think of has attempted to
serve but Edward Plantagenet."

"I do not comprehend," she said.
And, indeed, she dared not.

But now he held both tiny hands in
his. "At best, your poet is an egotist.
I must die presently. Meantime I crave
largesse, madame! ay, a great largesse,
so that in his unending sleep your poet
may rehearse our present love." And
even in that dim light he found her
kindling eyes not niggardly.

So that more lately Sire Edward
strode to the window and raised big
hands toward the spear-points of the
aloof stars. "Master of us all!" he
cried; "O Father of us all! the Hammer
of the Scots am I! the Scourge of
France, the conqueror of Llewellyn and
of Leicester, and the flail of the ac-
cursed race that slew Thine only Son!
the King of England am I that have
made of England an imperial nation and
have given to Thy Englishmen new
laws! And to-night I crave my hire.

Never, O my Father, have I had of any
person aught save reverence or hatred!
never in my life has any person loved
me! And I am old, my Father,—I am
old, and presently I die. As I have
served Thee—as Jacob wrestled with
Thee at the ford of Jabbok—at the place
of Peniel—" Against the tremulous
blue and silver of the forest she saw in
terror how horribly the big man was
shaken. "My hire! my hire!" he hoarse-
ly said. "Forty long years, my Father!
And now I will not let Thee go except
Thou hear me."

And presently he turned, stark and
black in the rearward splendor of the
moon. "*As a prince hast thou power
with God,*" he calmly said, "*and thou
hast prevailed.* For the Eternal Father
was never obdurate, m'amy.

"Child! O brave, brave child!" he
said to her, a little later, "I was never
afraid to die, and yet to-night I would
that I might live a trifle longer than in
common reason I may ever hope to live!"
And their lips met.

Neither stirred when Philippe the
Handsome came into the room. At his
heels were seven lords, armed cap-à-pie,
but the entrance of eight cockchafers
had meant as much to these transfig-
ured two.

The French King was an odd man, no
more sane, perhaps, than might reason-
ably be expected of a Valois. Subtly
smiling, he came forward through the
twilight, with soft long strides, and
made no outcry at recognition of his
sister. "Take the woman away, Vic-
tor," he said, disinterestedly, to de Mon-
tespan. Afterward he sat down beside
the table and remained silent for a
while, intently regarding Sire Edward
and the tiny woman who clung to Sire
Edward's arm; and always in the flick-
ering gloom of the hut Philippe smiled
as an artist might do who gazes on the
perfected work and knows it to be adroit.

"You prefer to remain, my sister?"
he presently said. "Hé bien; it happens
that I am to-night in a mood for grant-
ing almost any favor. A little later and I
will attend to you." The fleet disorder
of his visage had lapsed again into the
meditative smile which was that of Lu-
cifer watching a toasted soul. "And so
it ends," he said. "Conqueror of Scot-

land, Scourge of France! O unconquerable King! and will the worms of Ermenoueil, then, pause to-morrow to consider through what a glorious turmoil their dinner came to them?"

"You design murder, fair cousin?" Sire Edward said.

The French King shrugged. "I design that within this moment my lords shall slay you while I sit here and not move a finger. Is it not good to be a King, my cousin, and to sit quite still and to see your bitterest enemy hacked and slain—and all the while to sit quite still, quite unruffled, as a King should always be? Eh, I never lived until to-night!"

"Now, by Heaven," said Sire Edward, "I am your kinsman and your guest, I am unarmed—"

And Philippe bowed his head. "Undoubtedly," he assented, "the deed is a foul one. But I desire Gascony very earnestly, and so long as you live you will never permit me to retain Gascony. So it is quite necessary, you conceive, that I murder you. What!" he presently said, "will you not beg for mercy? I had so hoped," the French King added, somewhat wistfully, "that you might be afraid to die, O huge and righteous man! and would entreat me to spare you. To spurn the weeping conqueror of Llewellyn, say . . . but these sins that damn one's soul are in actual performance very tedious affairs, and I begin to grow weary of the game. Hé bien! now kill this man for me, messieurs."

The English King strode forward. "O shallow trickster!" Sire Edward thundered. "*Am I not afraid!* You baby, would you ensnare a lion, then, with a flimsy rat-trap? Not so; for it is the nature of a rat-trap, fair cousin, to ensnare not the beast that imperiously desires and takes in daylight, but the tinner and the filthier beast that covets and under darkness pilfers—as you and your seven skulkers!" The man was rather terrible; not a Frenchman within the hut but had drawn back a little.

"Listen!" Sire Edward said, and came yet further toward the King of France and shook at him one forefinger; "when you were in your cradle I was leading armies. When you were yet unbreeched I was lord of half Europe. For thirty years I have driven kings before me as

Fierabras did. Am I, then, a person to be hoodwinked by the first big-bosomed huzzy that elects to waggle her fat shoulders and to grant an assignation in a forest expressively designed for stabbings? You baby, is the Hammer of the Scots the man to trust a Capet? Ill-mannered infant," the King said, with bitter laughter, "it is now necessary that I summon my attendants and remove you to a nursery which I have prepared in England." He set the horn to his lips and blew three blasts.

There came many armed warriors into the hut, bearing ropes. Here was the entire retinue of the Earl of Aquitaine; and, cursing, Sire Philippe sprang upon the English King, and with his dagger smote at the big man's heart. The blade broke against the mail-armor under the tunic. "Have I not told you," Sire Edward wearily said, "that one may never trust a Capet? Now, messieurs, bind these carrion and convey them whither I have directed you. Nay, but, Roger—" He conversed apart with his lieutenant, and what he commanded was done. The French King and seven lords of France went from that hut trussed like chickens.

And now Sire Edward turned toward Meregrett and chafed his big hands gleefully. "At every tree-bole a tethered horse awaits us; and a ship awaits our party at Fécamp. To-morrow we sleep in England,—and, *Mort de Dieu!* do you not think, madame, that within the Tower your brother and I may more quickly come to some agreement over Guienne?"

She had shrunk from him. "Then the trap was yours! It was you that lured my brother to this infamy!"

"I am vile!" was the man's thought. And, "In effect, I planned it many months ago at Ipswich yonder," Sire Edward gayly said. "Faith of a gentleman! your brother had cheated me of Guienne, and was I to waste an eternity in begging him to restore it? Nay, for I have a many spies in France, and have for some two years known your brother and your sister to the bottom. Granted that I came hither incognito, to forecast their immediate action was none too difficult; and I wanted Guienne—and, in consequence, the person of your brother.

Mort de ma vie! shall not the seasoned hunter adapt his snare aforetime to the qualities of his prey, and take the elephant through his curiosity, as the snake through his notorious treachery?" Now he blustered.

But the little woman wrung her hands. "I am this night most hideously shamed. Beau sire, I came hither to aid a brave man infamously trapped, and instead I find an alert spider, snug in his cunning web, and patiently waiting until the gnats of France fly near enough. Eh, the greater fool was I to waste my labor on the shrewd and evil thing that has no more need of me than I of it! And now let me go hence, sire, and unmolested, for the sake of chivalry. Could I have come to you but as to the brave man I had dreamed of, I had come through the mirkiest lane of hell; as the more artful knave, as the more judicious trickster"—and here she thrust him from her—"I spit upon you. Now let me go hence."

He took her in his brawny arms. "Fit mate for me," he said. "Little vixen, had you done otherwise I had devoted you to the devil."

Anon, still grasping her, and victoriously lifting Dame Meregrett so that her feet swung quite clear of the floor, Sire Edward said: "Look you, in my time I have played against Fate for considerable stakes—for fortresses, and towns, and strong citadels, and for kingdoms even. And it was but to-night I perceived that the one stake worth playing for is love. It were easy enough to get you for my wife; but I want more than that. . . . Pschutt! I know well enough that women have these notions: and carefully I weighed the issue—Meregrett and Guienne to boot? or Meregrett and Meregrett's love to boot?—and thus the final destination of my

captives was but the courtyard of Meze-lais, in order I might come to you with hands—well! not intolerably soiled."

"Oh, now I love you!" she cried, athrill with disappointment. "But you have done wrong, for Guienne is a king's ransom."

He smiled whimsically, and presently one arm swept beneath her knees, so that presently he held her as one dandles a baby; and presently his stiff and yellow beard caressed her burning cheek. Masterfully he said: "Then let it serve as such and ransom for a king his glad and common manhood. Ah, m'amy, I am both very wise and abominably selfish. And in either capacity it appears expedient that I leave France without any unwholesome delay. More lately—hé! already I have within my pocket the Pope's dispensation permitting me to marry the sister of the King of France, so that I dare to hope."

Very shyly Dame Meregrett lifted her little mouth toward his hot and bearded lips. "Patience," she said, "is a virtue; and daring is a virtue; and hope, too, is a virtue: and otherwise, beau sire, I would not live."

And in consequence, after a deal of political bickering (Nicolas concludes), in the year of grace 1299, on the day of Our Lady's nativity, and in the twenty-seventh year of King Edward's reign, came to the British realm, and landed at Dover, not Dame Blaunsh, as would have been in consonance with seasoned expectation, but Dame Méregrett, the other daughter of King Philippe the Bold; and upon the following day proceeded to Canterbury, whither on the next Thursday after came Edward, King of England, into the Church of the Trinity at Canterbury, and therein espoused the aforesaid Dame Meregrett.

