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The Choices

RETOLD FROM THE FRENCH OF NICOLAS DE CAEN

BY JAMES BRANCH CABELL

HERE we have to do with the fourth 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 1327 (thus Nicolas begins) you could have found in all England no lovers more ardent in affection or in despair more affluent than Rosamund Eastney and Sir Gregory Darrell. She was Lord Berners' only daughter, a brown beauty, and of extensive repute, thanks to such among her retinue of lovers as were practitioners of the Gay Science and had scattered broadcast innumerable canzons in her honor; and Lord Berners was a man who accepted the world as he found it.

"Dompnedex!" the Earl was wont to say; "in sincerity I am fond of Gregory Darrell, and if he chooses to make love to my daughter that is none of my affair. The eyes and the brain preserve a proverbial warfare, which is the source of all amenity, for without lady-service there would be no songs and tourneys, no measure and no good breeding; and, in a phrase, a man delinquent in it is no more to be valued than an ear of corn without the grain. Nay, I am so profoundly an admirer of Love that I can never willingly behold him slain, of a surfeit, by Matrimony; and besides, the rascalion could not to advantage exchange purses with Lazarus; and, moreover, Rosamund is to marry the Earl of Sarum a little after All Saints' day."

"Sarum!" people echoed. "Why, the old goat has had two wives already!"

And the Earl would spread out his hands. "One of the wealthiest persons in England," he was used to submit.

Thus it fell out that Sir Gregory came

and went at his own discretion as concerned Lord Berners' fief of Ordish, all through those gusty times of warfare between Sire Edward and Queen Ysabeau, until at last the Queen had conquered. Lord Berners, for one, vexed himself not inordinately over the outcome of events, since he protested the King's armament to consist of fools and the Queen's of rascals; and had with entire serenity declined to back either Dick or the devil.

It was in the September of this year, a little before Michaelmas, that they brought Sir Gregory Darrell to be judged by the Queen, for notoriously the knight had been Sire Edward's adherent. "Death!" croaked Adam Orleton, who sat to the right hand, and, "Young de Spencer's death!" amended the Earl of March, with wild laughter; but Ysabeau leaned back in her great chair—a handsome woman, stoutening now from gluttony and from too much wine—and regarded her prisoner with lazy amiability, and devoted the silence to consideration of how scantily the man had changed.

"And what was your errand in Figgis Wood?" she demanded in the ultimate,— "or are you mad, then, Gregory Darrell, that you dare ride past my gates alone?"

He curtly said, "I rode for Ordish."

Followed silence. Queen Ysabeau lolled in her carven chair, considering the comely person who stood before her, fettered, at the point of shameful death. There was a little dog in the room which had come to the Queen, and now licked the palm of her left hand, and the soft lapping of its tongue was the only sound you heard. "So at peril of your life you rode for Ordish, then, messire?"

The tense man had flushed. "You have harried us of the King's party out of England,—and in reason I might not leave England without seeing her."

"My friend," said Ysabeau, as half in



Painting by Howard Pyle

QUEEN YSABEAU IN HER CARVEN CHAIR

sorrow, "I would have pardoned anything save that." She rose. Her face was dark and hot. "By God and all His saints! you shall indeed leave England to-morrow and the world as well! but not without a final glimpse of this same Rosamund. Yet listen: I, too, must ride with you to Ordish, as your sister, say!—Gregory, did I not hang last April the husband of your sister? Yes, Ralph de Belomys, a thin man with eager eyes, the Earl of Farrington he was. As his widow will I ride with you to Ordish, upon condition you disclose to none at Ordish, saving only if you will this quite immaculate Rosamund, even a hint of our merry carnival. And to-morrow (you will swear according to the nicest obligations of honor) you must ride back with me to encounter—that which I may devise. For I dare to trust your naked word in this, and, moreover, I shall take with me a sufficiency of retainers to leave you no choice."

Darrell knelt before her. "I can do no homage to Queen Ysabeau; yet the prodigal hands of her who knows that I must die to-morrow and cunningly contrives, for old time's sake, to hearten me with a sight of Rosamund, I cannot but kiss." This much he did. "And I swear in all things to obey her will."

"O comely fool!" the Queen said, not ungently, "I contrive, it may be, but to demonstrate that many tyrants of antiquity were only bunglers. And, besides, I must have other thoughts than that which now occupies my heart; I must this night take holiday, lest I go mad."

So to Ordish in that twilight came the Countess of Farrington, with a retinue of twenty men-at-arms, and her brother Sir Gregory Darrell. Lord Berners received the party with boisterous hospitality.

"And the more for that your sister is a very handsome woman," was Rosamund Eastney's comment. The period appears to have been after supper, and she sat with Gregory Darrell in not the most brilliant corner of the main hall.

The wretched man leaned forward, bit his nether lip, and then with a sudden splurge of speech informed her of the sorry masquerade. "The she-devil designs some horrible and obscure mischief, she plans I know not what."

"Yet I—" said Rosamund. The girl had risen, and she continued with a fine

irrelevance. "You have told me you were Pembroke's squire when long ago he sailed for France to fetch this woman into England—"

"—which you never heard!" Lord Berners shouted at this point. "Jasper, a lute!" And then he halloaed, more lately: "Gregory, Madame de Farrington demands that racy song you made against Queen Ysabeau during your last visit."

Thus did the Queen begin her holiday.

It was a handsome couple which came forward, hand quitting hand a shade too tardily, and the blinking eyes yet rapt; but these two were not overpleased at being disturbed, and the man in particular was troubled, as in reason he well might be, by the task assigned him.

"Is it, indeed, your will, my sister," he said, "that I should sing—this song?"

"It is my will," the Countess said.

And the knight flung back his comely head and laughed. "What I have written I shall not disown in any company. It is not, look you, of my own choice that I sing, my sister. Yet if she bade me would I sing this song as willingly before Queen Ysabeau, for, Christ aid me! the song is true."

Then sang Sir Gregory:

*"Dame Ysabeau, la prophécie
Que li sage dit ne ment mie,
Que la royne sut ceus grever
Que tantost lacquais sot aymer—"*

and so on.* It was a lengthy ditty and in its wording not oversqueamish; the Queen's career in England was detailed without any stuttering, and you would have found the catalogue unhandsome; but Sir Gregory sang it with an incisive gusto, though it seemed to him to counter-sign his death-warrant, and with the vigor that a mangled snake summons for its last hideous stroke, it seemed to Ysabeau regretful of an ancient spring.

But the minstrel added, though Lord Berners did not notice it, a fire-new peroration.

For in conclusion sang Sir Gregory:

*"Ma voix mocque, mon cuer gémit,—
Pen pense à ce que la voix dit,*

* Nicolas gives this ballad in full, but, and for obvious reasons, his translator prefers to do otherwise.

*Car me membre du temps jadis,
Et d'ung garson, d'amour surpris,
Et d'une fille—et la vois si—
Et grandement suis esbahi."*

And when he had ended, the Countess of Farrington, without speaking, swept her left hand toward her cheek and by pure chance caught between thumb and forefinger the autumn-numbed fly that had annoyed her. She drew the little dagger from her girdle and meditatively cut the buzzing thing in two. Then she flung the fragments from her, and resting the dagger's point upon the arm of her chair, one forefinger upon the summit of the hilt, considerably twirled the brilliant weapon.

"This song does not err upon the side of clemency," she said at last,—“nor by ordinary does Queen Ysabeau.”

“That she-wolf!” said Lord Berners, comfortably. “Hoo, Madame Gertrude! since the Prophet Moses wrung healing waters from a rock there has been no such miracle recorded.”

“We read, Messire de Berners, that when the she-wolf once acknowledges a master she will follow him as faithfully as any dog. Nay, my brother, I do not question your sincerity, yet you sing with the voice of an unhonored courtier. Suppose Queen Ysabeau had heard your song all through and then had said—for she is not as the run of women—‘Messire, I had thought till this there was no thorough man in England saving only Roger Mortimer. I find him tawdry now, and—I remember. Come you, then, and rule the England that you love as you may love no woman, and rule me, messire, for I find even in your cruelty—England! bah, we are no pygmies, you and I!’” the Countess said, with a great voice; “‘yonder is squabbling Europe and all the ancient gold of Africa, ready for our taking! and past that lies Asia, too, and its painted houses hung with bells, and cloud-wrapt Tartary, wherein we twain may yet erect our equal thrones, whereon to receive the tributary emperors! For we are no pygmies, you and I.’” She paused and more lately shrugged. “Suppose Queen Ysabeau had said this much, my brother?”

Darrell was more pallid, as the phrase is, than a sheet, and the lute had dropped unheeded, and his hands were clenched.

“I would answer, my sister, that as she has found in England but one man, I have found in England but one woman—the rose of all the world.” His eyes were turned at this toward Rosamund Eastney. “And yet,” the man stammered—“for that I, too, remember—”

“Nay, in God’s name! I am answered,” the Countess said. She rose, in dignity almost a queen. “We have ridden far to-day, and to-morrow we must travel a deal farther—eh, my brother? I am a trifle overspent, Messire Berners.” And her face had now the weary beauty of an idol’s.

So the men and women parted. Madame de Farrington kissed her brother in leaving him, as was natural; and under her caress his stalwart person shuddered, but not in repugnance; and the Queen went bedward regretful of an ancient spring and singing cheerily.

Ysabeau would have slept that night within the chamber of Rosamund Eastney had either slept at all; yet the girl, though aware of frequent rustlings near at hand, lay quiet, half-forgetful of the poisonous woman yonder, and her entire being fulfilled with a great blaze of exultation: to-morrow Gregory must die, and then perhaps she might find time for tears; but meanwhile, before her eyes, the man had flung away a kingdom and life itself for love of her, and the least nook of her heart ached to be a shade more worthy of the sacrifice.

After it might have been an hour of this excruciate ecstasy the Countess came to Rosamund’s bed. “Ay,” she hollowly began, “it is indisputable that his hair is like spun gold and that his eyes resemble sun-drenched waters in June. And that when this Gregory laughs God is more happy. *Ma belle*, I was familiar with the routine of your meditations ere you were born.”

Rosamund said, quite simply: “You have known him always. I envy the circumstance, Madame Gertrude,—you alone of all women in the world I envy, since you, his sister, being so much older, must have known him always.”

“I know him to the core, my girl,” the Countess answered, and afterward sat silent, one bare foot jogging restlessly; “yet am I two years the junior— Did you hear nothing, Rosamund?”

"Nay, Madame Gertrude, I heard nothing."

"Strange!" the Countess said; "let us have lights, since I can no longer endure the overpopulous darkness." She kindled, with twitching fingers, three lamps and looked in vain for more. "It is as yet dark yonder, where the shadows quiver very oddly, as though they would rise from the floor—do they not, my girl?—and protest vain things. Nay, Rosamund, it has been done; in the moment of death men's souls have travelled farther and have been visible; it has been done, I tell you. And he would stand before me, with pleading eyes, and reproach me in a voice too faint to reach my ears—but I would see him—and his groping hands would clutch at my hands as though a dropped veil had touched me, and with the contact I would go mad!"

"Madame Gertrude—!" the girl stammered, in communicated terror.

"Poor innocent dastard!" the woman said, "I am Ysabeau of France." And when Rosamund made as though to rise, in alarm, Queen Ysabeau caught her by the shoulder. "Bear witness when he comes that I never hated him. Yet for my quiet it was necessary that it suffer so cruelly, the scented, pampered body, and no mark be left upon it! Eia! even now he suffers! Nay, I have lied. I hate the man, and in such fashion as you will comprehend only when you are Sarum's wife."

"Madame and Queen!" the girl said, "you will not murder me!"

"I am tempted!" the Queen hissed. "O little slip of girlhood, I am tempted, for it is not reasonable you should possess everything that I have lost. Innocence you have, and youth, and untroubled eyes, and quiet dreams, and the glad beauty of the devil, and Gregory Darrell's love—" Now Ysabeau sat down upon the bed and caught up the girl's face between two fevered hands. "Rosamund, this Darrell perceives within the moment, as I do, that the love he bears for you is but what he remembers of the love he bore a certain maid long dead. Eh, you might have been her sister, Rosamund, for you are very like her. And she, poor wench!—why, I could see her now, I think, were my eyes not blurred, somehow, almost as though Queen Ysabeau might weep! But she was handsomer than you,

since your complexion is not overclear, praise God!"

Woman against woman they were. "He has told me of his intercourse with you," the girl said, and this was a lie flatfooted. "Nay, kill me if you will, madame, since you are the stronger, yet, with my dying breath, Gregory has loved but me."

"*Ma belle*," the Queen answered, and laughed bitterly, "do I not know men? He told you nothing. And to-night he hesitated, and to-morrow, at the lifting of my finger, he will supplicate. Throughout his life has Gregory Darrell loved me, O white, palsied innocence! and he is mine at a whistle. And in that time to come he will desert you, Rosamund—though with a pleasing canzon—and they will give you to the gross Earl of Sarum, as they gave me to the painted man who was of late our King! and in that time to come you will know your body to be your husband's makeshift when he lacks leisure to seek out other recreation! and in that time to come you will long at first for death, and presently your heart will be a flame within you, my Rosamund, an insatiable flame! and you will hate your God because He made you, and hate Satan because in some desperate hour he tricked you, and hate all masculinity because, poor fools, they scurry to obey your whim, and chiefly hate yourself because you are so pitiful! and devastation only will you love in that strange time which is to come. It is adjacent, my Rosamund."

The girl kept silence. She sat erect in the tumbled bed, her hands clasping her knees, and appeared to deliberate what Dame Ysabeau had said. The plentiful brown hair fell about her face, which was white and shrewd. "A part of what you say, madame, I understand. I know that Gregory Darrell loves me, yet I have long ago acknowledged he loves me but as one pets a child, or, let us say, a spaniel which reveres and amuses one. I lack his wit, you comprehend, and so he never speaks to me all that he thinks. Yet a part of it he tells me, and he loves me, and with this I am content. Assuredly, if they give me to Sarum I shall hate Sarum even more than I detest him now. And then, I think, Heaven help me! that I would not

greatly grieve. Oh, you are all evil!" Rosamund said; "and you thrust thoughts into my mind I may not grapple with!"

"You will comprehend them," the Queen said, "when you know yourself a chattel, bought and paid for."

The Queen laughed. She rose, and either hand strained toward heaven. "You are omnipotent, yet have You let me become that into which I am transmuted," she said, very low.

Anon she began, as though a statue spoke through motionless and pallid lips. "They have long urged me, Rosamund, to a deed which by one stroke would make me mistress of these islands. To-day I looked on Gregory Darrell, and knew that I was wise in love— And I had but to crush a filthy worm to come to him. Eh, and I was tempted—!"

The fearless girl said: "Let us grant that Gregory loves you very greatly, and me just when his leisure serves. You may offer him a cushioned infamy, a colorful and brief delirium, and afterward demolishment of soul and body; I offer him contentment and a level life, made up of tiny happenings, it may be, and lacking both in abysses and in skyey heights. Yet is love a flame wherein must the lover's soul be purified, as an ore by fire, even to its own discredit; and thus, madame, to judge between us I dare summon you."

"Child, child!" the Queen said, tenderly, and with a smile, "you are brave; and in your fashion you are wise; yet you will never comprehend. But once I was in heart and soul and body all that you are to-day; and now I am Queen Ysabeau. Assuredly, it would be hard to yield my single chance of happiness; it would be hard to know that Gregory Darrell must presently dwindle into an ox well pastured, and garner of life no more than any ox; but to say, 'Let this girl become as I, and garner that which I have garnered—!' Did you in truth hear nothing, Rosamund?"

"Nay, madame, nothing save the wind."

"Strange!" said the Queen; "since all the while that I have talked with you I have been seriously annoyed by shrieks and various imprecations! But I, too, grow cowardly, it may be— Nay, I know," she said, and in a resonant voice, "that I am by this mistress of broad England, until my son—my own son,

born of my body, and in glad anguish, Rosamund,—know me for what I am. For I have heard— Coward! O beautiful sleek coward!" the Queen said; "I would have died without lamentation, and I was but your plaything!"

"Madame Ysabeau—!" the girl stammered, and ran toward her, for the girl had risen, and she was terrified.

"To bed!" said Ysabeau; "and put out the light lest he come presently. Or perhaps he fears me now too much to come to-night. Yet the night approaches, none the less, when I must lift some arras and find him there, chalk-white, with painted cheeks, and rigid, and smiling very terribly, or look into some mirror and behold there not myself but him— And in the instant I will die. Meantime I rule, until my son attain his manhood. Eh, Rosamund, my only son was once so tiny, and so helpless, and his little crimson mouth groped toward me, helplessly, and save in Bethlehem, I thought, there was never any child more fair— But I must forget all that, for even now he plots. Hey, God orders matters very shrewdly, my Rosamund."

And timidly the girl touched one shoulder. "In part, I understand, Madame and Queen."

"You understand nothing," said Ysabeau; "how should you understand whose breasts are yet so tiny? Nay, put out the light! though I dread the darkness, Rosamund— For they say that hell is poorly lighted—and they say—" Then Queen Ysabeau shrugged. Herself blew out each lamp.

"We know this Gregory Darrell," the Queen said in the darkness, and aloud, "ay, to the marrow we know him, however steadfastly we blink, and we know the present turmoil of his soul; and in common sense what chance have you of victory?"

"None in common sense, madame, and yet you go too fast. For man is a being of mingled nature, we are told by those in holy orders, and his life here but one unending warfare between that which is divine in him and that which is bestial, while impartial Heaven attends as arbiter of the cruel tourney. Always his judgment misleads the man, and his faculties allure him to a truce, however brief, with iniquity. His senses raise a mist about

his goings, and there is not an endowment of the man but in the end plays traitor to his interest, as of His wisdom God intends; so that when the man is overthrown, God the Eternal Father may, in reason, be neither vexed nor grieved if only he take heart to rise again. And when, betrayed and impotent, the man elects to fight out the allotted battle, defiant of common sense and of the counsellors which God Himself accorded, I think that they hold festival in heaven."

"A very pretty sermon," said the Queen, and with premeditation yawned.

Followed a silence, vexed only by the purposeless September winds; but I believe that neither of these two slept with an inappropriate profundity.

About dawn one of the Queen's attendants roused Sir Gregory Darrell and presently conducted him into the hedged garden of Ordish, where Ysabeau walked in tranquil converse with Lord Berners. The old man was in high good humor.

"My lad," said he, and clapped Sir Gregory upon the shoulder, "you have, I do protest, the very phoenix of sisters. I was never happier." And he went away chuckling.

The Queen said in a toneless voice, "We ride for Blackfriars now."

He responded, "I am content, and ask but leave to speak, and briefly, with Dame Rosamund before I die."

Then the woman came more near to him. "I am not used to beg, but within this hour you die, and I have loved no man in all my life saving only you, Sir Gregory Darrell. Nor have you loved any person as you loved me once in France. Nay, to-day I may speak freely, for with you the doings of that boy and girl are matters overpast. Yet were it otherwise,—eh, weigh the matter carefully! for absolute mistress of England am I now, and entire England would I give you, and such love as that slim, white innocence has never dreamed of would I give you, Gregory Darrell— No, no! ah, Mother of God, not you!" The Queen clapped one hand upon his lips.

"Listen," she quickly said, as a person in the crisis of panic; "I spoke to tempt you. But you saw, and clearly, that it was the sickly whim of a wanton, and you never dreamed of yielding, for you love this Rosamund Eastney, and you

know me to be vile. Then have a care of me! The strange woman am I of whom we read that her house is the way to hell, going down to the chambers of death. Yea, many strong men have been slain by me, and futurely will many others be slain, it may be, but never you among them, my Gregory, who are more wary, and more merciful, and know that I have need to lay aside at least one comfortable thought against eternity."

"I concede you to have been unwise—" he hoarsely said.

About them fell the dying leaves, of many glorious colors, but the air of this new day seemed raw and chill.

Then Rosamund came through the opening in the hedge. "Nay, choose," she wearily said; "the woman offers life and empery and wealth, and, it may be, even a greater love than I am capable of giving you. I offer a dishonorable death within the moment."

And again, with that peculiar and imperious gesture, the man flung back his head, and he laughed. "I am I! and I will so to live that I may face without shame not only God, but even my own scrutiny." He wheeled upon the Queen and spoke henceforward very leisurely. "I love you; all my life long I have loved you, Ysabeau, and even now I love you: and you, too, dear Rosamund, I love, though with a difference. And every fibre of my being lusts for the power that you would give me, Ysabeau, and for the good which I would do with it in the England I or Roger Mortimer must rule; as every fibre of my being lusts for the man that I would be could I choose death without debate, and for the man which you would make of me, my Rosamund.

"The man! And what is this man, this Gregory Darrell, that his welfare be considered?—an ape who chatters to himself of kinship with the archangels while filthily he digs for groundnuts! This much I know, at bottom, durst I but be honest.

"Yet more clearly do I perceive that this same man, like all his fellows, is a maimed god who walks the world dependent upon many wise and evil counsellors. He must measure, and to a hair's breadth, every content of the world by means of a bloodied sponge, tucked some-

where in his skull, which is ungeared by the first cup of wine and ruined by the touch of his own finger; and he must appraise all that he judges with no better implements than two bits of colored jelly, with a bungling makeshift so maladroit that the nearest horologer's apprentice could have devised a more accurate; for, in fine, he is under penalty condemned to compute eternity with false weights and to estimate infinity with a yardstick: and he very often does it. For though 'If then I do that which I would not I consent unto the law,' saith even the Apostle; yet the braver Pagan answers him, 'Perceive at last that thou hast in thee something better and more divine than the things which cause the various effects and, as it were, pull thee by the strings.'

"There lies the choice which every man must make,—or rationally, as his reason goes, to accept his own limitations and make the best of his allotted prison-yard; or stupendously to play the fool and swear even to himself, while his own judgment shrieks and proves a flat denial, that he is at will omnipotent. You have chosen long ago, my poor proud Ysabeau; and I choose now, and differently: for poltroon that I am! being now in a cold drench of terror, I steadfastly protest that I am not afraid, and I choose death, madame."

It was toward Rosamund that the Queen looked, and smiled a little pitifully. "Should Queen Ysabeau be angry or vexed or very cruel now, my Rosamund? for at bottom she is glad."

More lately the Queen said: "I give you back your plighted word. I ride homeward to my husks, but you remain. Or rather, the Countess of Farrington departs for the convent of Ambresbury, disconsolate in her widowhood and desirous to have done with worldly affairs. It is most natural she should relinquish to her beloved and only brother all her dower-lands,—or so at least Messire de Berners acknowledges. Here, then, is the grant, my Gregory, that conveys to you those lands of Ralph de Belomys which last year I confiscated. And this tedious Messire de Berners is willing now—nay, desirous—to have you for a son-in-law."

About them fell the dying leaves, of many glorious colors, but the air of this

new day seemed raw and chill, what while, very calmly, Dame Ysabeau took Sir Gregory's hand and laid it upon the hand of Rosamund Eastney. "Our paladin is, in the outcome, a mortal man, and therefore I do not altogether envy you. Yet he has his moments, and you are capable. Serve, then, not only his desires, but mine also, dear Rosamund."

There was a silence. The girl spoke as though it were a sacrament. "I will, Madame and Queen."

Thus did the Queen end her holiday.

A little later the Countess of Farrington rode from Ordish with all her train save one; and as she went she sang very softly, and as to herself.

Sang Ysabeau:

"As with her dupes dealt Circe
Life deals with hers, pardie!
Reshaping without mercy,
And shaping swinishly,
To wallow swinishly,
And for eternity,—

"Though, harder than the witch was,
Life, changing ne'er the whole,
Transmutes the body, which was
Proud garment of the soul,
And briefly drugs the soul,
Whose ruin is her goal,—

"And means by this thereafter
A subtler mirth to get,
And mock with bitterer laughter
Her helpless dupes' regret,
Their swinish dull regret
For what they half forget."

And within the hour came Hubert Frayne to Ordish, on a foam-specked horse, as he rode to announce to the King's men the King's barbaric murder overnight, at Berkeley Castle, by Queen Ysabeau's order.

"Ride southward," said Lord Berners, and panted as they buckled on his disused armor; "but harkee, Frayne! if you pass the Countess of Farrington's company, speak no syllable of your news, since it is not convenient that a lady so thoroughly and so intent on holy things should have her meditations disturbed by any such grisly tidings. Hey, son-in-law?"

Sir Gregory Darrell laughed, and very bitterly. "He that is without blemish among you—" he said. Then they armed completely.