

COUNT HANNIBAL
A ROMANCE OF THE COURT OF FRANCE
by
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SORORI
SUB CAUSSB CARAE
PRO ERGA MATREM AMORE
ETIAM CARIORI
HOC FRATER.

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CHAPTER I. CRIMSON FAVOURS.

M. de Tavannes smiled. Mademoiselle averted her eyes, and shivered; as if the air, even of that close summer night, entering by the door at her elbow, chilled her. And then came a welcome interruption.

"Tavannes!"

"Sire!"

Count Hannibal rose slowly. The King had called, and he had no choice but to obey and go. Yet he hung a last moment over his companion, his hateful breath stirring her hair.

"Our pleasure is cut short too soon, Mademoiselle," he said, in the tone, and with the look, she loathed. "But for a few hours only. We shall meet to-morrow. Or, it may be—earlier."

She did not answer, and "Tavannes!" the King repeated with violence. "Tavannes! Mordieu!" his Majesty continued, looking round furiously. "Will no one fetch him? Sacri nom, am I King, or a dog of a—"

"I come, sire!" the Count cried hastily. For Charles, King of France, Ninth of the name, was none of the most patient; and scarce another in the Court would have ventured to keep him waiting so long. "I come, sire; I come!" Tavannes repeated, as he moved from Mademoiselle's side.

He shouldered his way through the circle of courtiers, who barred the road to the presence, and in part hid her from observation. He pushed past the table at which Charles and the Comte de Rochefoucauld had been playing primero, and at which the latter still sat, trifling idly with the cards. Three more paces, and he reached the King, who stood in the *ruelle* with Rambouillet and the Italian Marshal. It was the latter who, a moment before, had summoned his Majesty from his game.

Mademoiselle, watching him go, saw so much; so much, and the King's roving eyes and haggard face, and the four figures, posed apart in the fuller light of the upper half of the Chamber. Then the circle of courtiers came together before her, and she sat back on her

stool. A fluttering, long-drawn sigh escaped her. Now, if she could slip out and make her escape! Now — she looked round. She was not far from the door; to withdraw seemed easy. But a staring, whispering knot of gentlemen and pages blocked the way; and the girl, ignorant of the etiquette of the Court, and with no more than a week's experience of Paris, had not the courage to rise and pass alone through the group.

She had come to the Louvre this Saturday evening under the wing of Madame d'Yverne, her *fianci's* cousin. By ill-hap Madame had been summoned to the Princess Dowager's closet, and perforce had left her. Still, Mademoiselle had her betrothed, and in his charge had sat herself down to wait, nothing loth, in the great gallery, where all was bustle and gaiety and entertainment. For this, the seventh day of the *fetes*, held to celebrate the marriage of the King of Navarre and Charles's sister—a marriage which was to reconcile the two factions of the Huguenots and the Catholics, so long at war—saw the Louvre as gay, as full, and as lively as the first of the *fete* days had found it; and in the humours of the throng, in the ceaseless passage of masks and maids of honour, guards and bishops, Swiss in the black, white, and green of Anjou, and Huguenot nobles in more sombre habits, the country-bred girl had found recreation and to spare. Until gradually the evening had worn away and she had begun to feel nervous; and M. de Tignonville, her betrothed, placing her in the embrasure of a window, had gone to seek Madame.

She had waited for a time without much misgiving; expecting each moment to see him return. He would be back before she could count a hundred; he would be back before she could number the leagues that separated her from her beloved province, and the home by the Biscay Sea, to which even in that brilliant scene her thoughts turned fondly. But the minutes had passed, and passed, and he had not returned. Worse, in his place Tavannes—not the Marshal, but his brother, Count Hannibal—had found her; he, whose odious court, at once a menace and an insult, had subtly enveloped her for a week past. He had sat down beside her, he had taken possession of her, and, profiting by her inexperience, had played on her fears and smiled at her dislike. Finally, whether she would or no, he had swept her with him into the Chamber. The rest had been an obses-

sion, a nightmare, from which only the King's voice summoning Tavannes to his side had relieved her.

Her aim now was to escape before he returned, and before another, seeing her alone, adopted his *rtle* and was rude to her. Already the courtiers about her were beginning to stare, the pages to turn and titter and whisper. Direct her gaze as she might, she met some eye watching her, some couple enjoying her confusion. To make matters worse, she presently discovered that she was the only woman in the Chamber; and she conceived the notion that she had no right to be there at that hour. At the thought her cheeks burned, her eyes dropped; the room seemed to buzz with her name, with gross words and jests, and gibes at her expense.

At last, when the situation had grown nearly unbearable, the group before the door parted, and Tignonville appeared. The girl rose with a cry of relief, and he came to her. The courtiers glanced at the two and smiled.

He did not conceal his astonishment at finding her there. "But, Mademoiselle, how is this?" he asked, in a low voice. He was as conscious of the attention they attracted as she was, and as uncertain on the point of her right to be there. "I left you in the gallery. I came back, missed you, and—"

She stopped him by a gesture. "Not here!" she muttered, with suppressed impatience. "I will tell you outside. Take me—take me out, if you please, Monsieur, at once!"

He was as glad to be gone as she was to go. The group by the doorway parted; she passed through it, he followed. In a moment the two stood in the great gallery, above the Salle des Caryatides. The crowd which had paraded here an hour before was gone, and the vast echoing apartment, used at that date as a guard-room, was well-nigh empty. Only at rare intervals, in the embrasure of a window or the recess of a door, a couple talked softly. At the farther end, near the head of the staircase which led to the hall below, and the courtyard, a group of armed Swiss lounged on guard. Mademoiselle shot a keen glance up and down, then she turned to her lover, her face hot with indignation.

"Why did you leave me?" she asked. "Why did you leave me, if you could not come back at once? Do you understand, sir," she continued, "that it was at your instance I came to Paris, that I came to this Court, and that I look to you for protection?"

"Surely," he said. "And —"

"And do you think Carlat and his wife fit guardians for me? Should I have come or thought of coming to this wedding, but for your promise, and Madame your cousin's? If I had not deemed myself almost your wife," she continued warmly, "and secure of your protection, should I have come within a hundred miles of this dreadful city? To which, had I my will, none of our people should have come."

"Dreadful? Pardieu, not so dreadful," he answered, smiling, and striving to give the dispute a playful turn. "You have seen more in a week than you would have seen at Vrillac in a lifetime, Mademoiselle."

"And I choke!" she retorted; "I choke! Do you not see how they look at us, at us Huguenots, in the street? How they, who live here, point at us and curse us? How the very dogs scent us out and snarl at our heels, and the babes cross themselves when we go by? Can you see the Place des Gastines and not think what stood there? Can you pass the Grhve at night and not fill the air above the river with screams and wailings and horrible cries—the cries of our people murdered on that spot?" She paused for breath, recovered herself a little, and in a lower tone, "For me," she said, "I think of Philippa de Luns by day and by night! The eaves are a threat to me; the tiles would fall on us had they their will; the houses nod to — to —"

"To what, Mademoiselle?" he asked, shrugging his shoulders and assuming a tone of cynicism.

"To crush us! Yes, Monsieur, to crush us!"

"And all this because I left you for a moment?"

"For an hour — or well-nigh an hour," she answered more soberly.

"But if I could not help it?"

"You should have thought of that — before you brought me to Paris, Monsieur. In these troublous times."

He coloured warmly. "You are unjust, Mademoiselle," he said. "There are things you forget; in a Court one is not always master of one's self."

"I know it," she answered dryly, thinking of that through which she had gone.

"But you do not know what happened!" he returned with impatience. "You do not understand that I am not to blame. Madame d'Yverne, when I reached the Princess Dowager's closet, had left to go to the Queen of Navarre. I hurried after her, and found a score of gentlemen in the King of Navarre's chamber. They were holding a council, and they begged, nay, they compelled me to remain."

"And it was that which detained you so long?"

"To be sure, Mademoiselle."

"And not—Madame St. Lo?"

M. de Tignonville's face turned scarlet. The thrust in tierce was unexpected. This, then, was the key to Mademoiselle's spirit of temper.

"I do not understand you," he stammered.

"How long were you in the King of Navarre's chamber, and how long with Madame St. Lo?" she asked with fine irony. "Or no, I will not tempt you," she went on quickly, seeing him hesitate. "I heard you talking to Madame St. Lo in the gallery while I sat within. And I know how long you were with her."

"I met Madame as I returned," he stammered, his face still hot, "and I asked her where you were. I did not know, Mademoiselle, that I was not to speak to ladies of my acquaintance."

"I was alone, and I was waiting."

"I could not know that—for certain," he answered, making the best of it. "You were not where I left you. I thought, I confess—that you had gone. That you had gone home."

"With whom? With whom?" she repeated pitilessly. "Was it likely? With whom was I to go? And yet it is true, I might have gone home had I pleased—with M. de Tavannes! Yes," she continued, in a tone of keen reproach, and with the blood mounting to her fore-

head, "it is to that, Monsieur, you expose me! To be pursued, molested, harassed by a man whose look terrifies me, and whose touch I—I detest! To be addressed wherever I go by a man whose every word proves that he thinks me game for the hunter, and you a thing he may neglect. You are a man and you do not know, you cannot know what I suffer! What I have suffered this week past whenever you have left my side!"

Tignonville looked gloomy. "What has he said to you?" he asked, between his teeth.

"Nothing I can tell you," she answered, with a shudder. "It was he who took me into the Chamber."

"Why did you go?"

"Wait until he bids you do something," she answered. "His manner, his smile, his tone, all frighten me. And to-night, in all these there was a something worse, a hundred times worse than when I saw him last—on Thursday! He seemed to—to gloat on me," the girl stammered, with a flush of shame, "as if I were his! Oh, Monsieur, I wish we had not left our Poitou! Shall we ever see Vrillac again, and the fishers' huts about the port, and the sea beating blue against the long brown causeway?"

He had listened darkly, almost sullenly; but at this, seeing the tears gather in her eyes, he forced a laugh.

"Why, you are as bad as M. de Rosny and the Vidame!" he said. "And they are as full of fears as an egg is of meat! Since the Admiral was wounded by that scoundrel on Friday, they think all Paris is in a league against us."

"And why not?" she asked, her cheek grown pale, her eyes reading his eyes.

"Why not? Why, because it is a monstrous thing even to think of!" Tignonville answered, with the confidence of one who did not use the argument for the first time. "Could they insult the King more deeply than by such a suspicion? A Borgia may kill his guests, but it was never a practice of the Kings of France! Pardieu, I have no patience with them! They may lodge where they please, across the

river, or without the walls if they choose, the Rue de l'Arbre Sec is good enough for me, and the King's name sufficient surety!"

"I know you are not apt to be fearful," she answered, smiling; and she looked at him with a woman's pride in her lover. "All the same, you will not desert me again, sir, will you?"

He vowed he would not, kissed her hand, looked into her eyes; then melting to her, stammering, blundering, he named Madame St. Lo. She stopped him.

"There is no need," she said, answering his look with kind eyes, and refusing to hear his protestations. "In a fortnight will you not be my husband? How should I distrust you? It was only that while she talked, I waited—I waited; and—and that Madame St. Lo is Count Hannibal's cousin. For a moment I was mad enough to dream that she held you on purpose. You do not think it was so?"

"She!" he cried sharply; and he winced, as if the thought hurt him. "Absurd! The truth is, Mademoiselle," he continued with a little heat, "you are like so many of our people! You think a Catholic capable of the worst."

"We have long thought so at Vrillac," she answered gravely.

"That's over now, if people would only understand. This wedding has put an end to all that. But I'm harking back," he continued awkwardly; and he stopped. "Instead, let me take you home."

"If you please. Carlat and the servants should be below."

He took her left hand in his right after the wont of the day, and with his other hand touching his sword-hilt, he led her down the staircase, that by a single turn reached the courtyard of the palace. Here a mob of armed servants, of lacqueys, and footboys, some bearing torches, and some carrying their masters' cloaks and *galoshes*, loitered to and fro. Had M. de Tignonville been a little more observant, or a trifle less occupied with his own importance, he might have noted more than one face which looked darkly on him; he might have caught more than one overt sneer at his expense. But in the business of summoning Carlat—Mademoiselle de Vrillac's steward and major-domo—he lost the contemptuous "Christaudins!" that hissed from a footboy's lips, and the "Southern

dogs!" that died in the moustachios of a bully in the livery of the King's brother. He was engaged in finding the steward, and in aiding him to cloak his mistress; then with a ruffling air, a new acquirement, which he had picked up since he came to Paris, he made a way for her through the crowd. A moment, and the three, followed by half a dozen armed servants, bearing pikes and torches, detached themselves from the throng, and crossing the courtyard, with its rows of lighted windows, passed out by the gate between the Tennis Courts, and so into the Rue des Fosses de St. Germain.

Before them, against a sky in which the last faint glow of evening still contended with the stars, the spire and pointed arches of the church of St. Germain rose darkly graceful. It was something after nine: the heat of the August day brooded over the crowded city, and dulled the faint distant ring of arms and armour that yet would make itself heard above the hush; a hush which was not silence so much as a subdued hum. As Mademoiselle passed the closed house beside the Cloister of St. Germain, where only the day before Admiral Coligny, the leader of the Huguenots, had been wounded, she pressed her escort's hand, and involuntarily drew nearer to him. But he laughed at her.

"It was a private blow," he said, answering her unspoken thought. "It is like enough the Guises sped it. But they know now what is the King's will, and they have taken the hint and withdrawn themselves. It will not happen again, Mademoiselle. For proof, see the guards" — they were passing the end of the Rue Bethizy, in the corner house of which, abutting on the Rue de l'Arbre Sec, Coligny had his lodgings — "whom the King has placed for his security. Fifty pikes under Cosseins."

"Cosseins?" she repeated. "But I thought Cosseins —"

"Was not wont to love us!" Tignonville answered, with a confident chuckle. "He was not. But the dogs lick where the master wills, Mademoiselle. He was not, but he does. This marriage has altered all."

"I hope it may not prove an unlucky one!" she murmured. She felt impelled to say it.

"Not it!" he answered confidently. "Why should it?"

They stopped, as he spoke, before the last house, at the corner of the Rue St. Honori opposite the Croix du Tiroir; which rose shadowy in the middle of the four ways. He hammered on the door.

"But," she said softly, looking in his face, "the change is sudden, is it not? The King was not wont to be so good to us!"

"The King was not King until now," he answered warmly. "That is what I am trying to persuade our people. Believe me, Mademoiselle, you may sleep without fear; and early in the morning I will be with you. Carlat, have a care of your mistress until morning, and let Madame lie in her chamber. She is nervous to-night. There, sweet, until morning! God keep you, and pleasant dreams!"

He uncovered, and bowing over her hand, kissed it; and the door being open he would have turned away. But she lingered as if unwilling to enter.

"There is—do you hear it—a stir in *that* quarter?" she said, pointing across the Rue St. Honori. "What lies there?"

"Northward? The markets," he answered. "'Tis nothing. They say, you know, that Paris never sleeps. Good night, sweet, and a fair awakening!"

She shivered as she had shivered under Tavannes' eye. And still she lingered, keeping him.

"Are you going to your lodging at once?" she asked—for the sake, it seemed, of saying something.

"I?" he answered a little hurriedly. "No, I was thinking of paying Rochefoucauld the compliment of seeing him home. He has taken a new lodging to be near the Admiral; a horrid bare place in the Rue Bethizy, without furniture, but he would go into it to-day. And he has a sort of claim on my family, you know."

"Yes," she said simply. "Of course. Then I must not detain you. God keep you safe," she continued, with a faint quiver in her tone; and her lip trembled. "Good night, and fair dreams, Monsieur."

He echoed the words gallantly. "Of you, sweet!" he cried; and turning away with a gesture of farewell, he set off on his return.

He walked briskly, nor did he look back, though she stood awhile gazing after him. She was not aware that she gave thought to this; nor that it hurt her. Yet when bolt and bar had shot behind her, and she had mounted the cold, bare staircase of that day—when she had heard the dull echoing footsteps of her attendants as they withdrew to their lairs and sleeping-places, and still more when she had crossed the threshold of her chamber, and signed to Madame Carlat and her woman to listen—it is certain she felt a lack of something.

Perhaps the chill that possessed her came of that lack, which she neither defined nor acknowledged. Or possibly it came of the night air, August though it was; or of sheer nervousness, or of the remembrance of Count Hannibal's smile. Whatever its origin, she took it to bed with her and long after the house slept round her, long after the crowded quarter of the Halles had begun to heave and the Sorbonne to vomit a black-frosted band, long after the tall houses in the gabled streets, from St. Antoine to Montmartre and from St. Denis on the north to St. Jacques on the south, had burst into rows of twinkling lights—nay, long after the Quarter of the Louvre alone remained dark, girdled by this strange midnight brightness—she lay awake. At length she too slept, and dreamed of home and the wide skies of Poitou, and her castle of Vrillac washed day and night by the Biscay tides.

CHAPTER II. HANNIBAL DE SAULX, COMTE DE TAVANNES.

"Tavannes!"

"Sire."

Tavannes, we know, had been slow to obey the summons. Emerging from the crowd, he found that the King, with Retz and Rambouillet, his Marshal des Logis, had retired to the farther end of the Chamber; apparently Charles had forgotten that he had called. His head a little bent—he was tall and had a natural stoop—the King seemed to be listening to a low but continuous murmur of voices which proceeded from the door of his closet. One voice frequently raised was beyond doubt a woman's; a foreign accent, smooth and silky, marked another; a third, that from time to time broke in, wilful and impetuous, was the voice of Monsieur, the King's brother, Catherine de Medicis' favourite son. Tavannes, waiting respectfully two paces behind the King, could catch little that was said; but Charles, something more, it seemed, for on a sudden he laughed, a violent, mirthless laugh. And he clapped Rambouillet on the shoulder.

"There!" he said, with one of his horrible oaths, "'tis settled! 'Tis settled! Go, man, and take your orders! And you, M. de Retz," he continued, in a tone of savage mockery, "go, my lord, and give them!"

"I, sire?" the Italian Marshal answered, in accents of deprecation. There were times when the young King would show his impatience of the Italian ring, the Retzs and Biragues, the Strozis and Gondys, with whom his mother surrounded him.

"Yes, you!" Charles answered. "You and my lady mother! And in God's name answer for it at the day!" he continued vehemently. "You will have it! You will not let me rest till you have it! Then have it, only see to it, it be done thoroughly! There shall not be one left to cast it in the King's teeth and cry, 'Et tu, Carole!' Swim, swim in blood if you will," he continued, with growing wildness. "Oh, 'twill be a merry night! And it's true so far, you may kill fleas all day, but burn the coat, and there's an end. So burn it, burn it, and—" He

broke off with a start as he discovered Tavannes at his elbow. "God's death, man!" he cried roughly, "who sent for you?"

"Your Majesty called me," Tavannes answered; while, partly urged by the King's hand, and partly anxious to escape, the others slipped into the closet and left them together.

"I sent for you? I called your brother, the Marshal!"

"He is within, sire," Tavannes answered, indicating the closet. "A moment ago I heard his voice."

Charles passed his shaking hand across his eyes. "Is he?" he muttered. "So he is! I heard it too. And—and a man cannot be in two places at once!" Then, while his haggard gaze, passing by Tavannes, roved round the Chamber, he laid his hand on Count Hannibal's breast. "They give me no peace, Madame and the Guises," he whispered, his face hectic with excitement. "They will have it. They say that Coligny—they say that he beards me in my own palace. And—and, *mordieu*," with sudden violence, "it's true. It's true enough! It was but to-day he was for making terms with me! With me, the King! Making terms! So it shall be, by God and Devil, it shall! But not six or seven! No, no. All! All! There shall not be one left to say to me, 'You did it!'"

"Softly, sire," Tavannes answered; for Charles had gradually raised his voice. "You will be observed."

For the first time the young King—he was but twenty-two years old, God pity him!—looked at his companion.

"To be sure," he whispered; and his eyes grew cunning. "Besides, and after all, there's another way, if I choose. Oh, I've thought and thought, I'd have you know." And shrugging his shoulders, almost to his ears, he raised and lowered his open hands alternately, while his back hid the movement from the Chamber. "See-saw! See-saw!" he muttered. "And the King between the two, you see. That's Madame's king-craft. She's shown me that a hundred times. But look you, it is as easy to lower the one as the other," with a cunning glance at Tavannes' face, "or to cut off the right as the left. And—and the Admiral's an old man and will pass; and for the matter of that I like to hear him talk. He talks well. While the others, Guise and his kind, are young, and I've thought, oh, yes, I've thought—"