

STAKES on

They had mistaken him for the King and there was no way he could convince them he wasn't. And for a little while the fate of France was in the point of his sword.

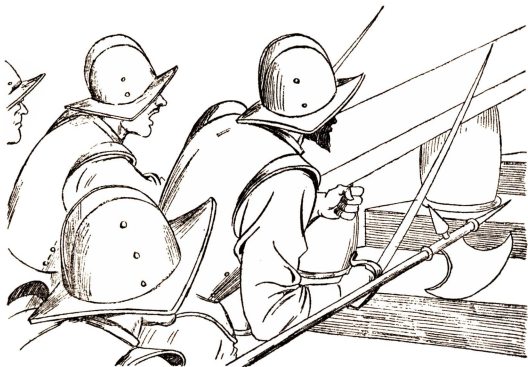
FRANÇOIS, the young Sieur d'Alembert, crawled out from beneath the pile of cauliflowers in the market-cart and looked about him. Paris was atwinkle with lights, but the market was very dark, and there was no further need of the disguise of the unsavory peasant's smock, which François flung from about him.

Now he stood revealed as an elegant gallant in wine-colored doublet and stout jerkin, his rapier by his side. He laughed, for he had assured King Henri of Navarre that it would be child's play to enter Paris with his message to

Mademoiselle d'Estaing, in her big Hotel.

Easier to get in than to get out again, perhaps, he pondered, as he still stood looking about him. Especially since François knew nothing of what was afoot, and could form innumerable surmises.

Certainly it was known that Mademoiselle d'Estaing was on extremely friendly terms with the Duc de Mayenne. And she had come stealthily to Henri's camp outside the walls by night, and there had been a long confabulation, and, though pretty women were irresistible to Henri, it didn't seem to have been a love tryst.



the BLACK

By HUGH SPEER

"We fight to the death!"
Crillon roared.



This was after Henri's victory at Ivry had made him master of all France, with the exception of rebellious Paris. In the capital the Duc de Mayenne ruled, with the aid of the Catholic League, and the Committee of Sixteen of the parliament. And nothing but Henri's acceptance of the Catholic faith could give him Paris—unless he were willing to do a thing that would be abhorrent to every Frenchman, and take the city by storm.

What, then, had been the cause that had brought Mayenne's friend, the lovely golden-haired owner of the great Hotel d'Estaing to Henri's camp by night, accompanied only by that dark, pretty maid of hers?

After the women had departed, young François, being on guard outside the royal tent, had heard Henri and his boon companion, the swashbuckling Crillon, storming and swearing at each other within; then Henri had come out and caught François by the shoulder, and roared:

"A short time ago I heard you complaining of lack of action, my young spark. Now here is action for you. Get into Paris tomorrow night, go to the Hotel of Mademoiselle d'Estaing, and tell her that we play the black, and not the red. Go in one of the market carts that we permit to enter after nightfall, or borrow a pair of wings and fly, but see that you hurry back with Mademoiselle's answer!"

TWIRLING his moustaches, which he had allowed to grow, as much as Nature permitted, after the fashion set by Henri, young

François proceeded to orientate himself. He knew where he was, of course, though he had not been in Paris since his boyhood. Here were the *halles*, the markets along the bank of the Seine; in the moonlight he could see the great façade of Notre Dame looming up further away. And the first of the great hotels a little back from the shore was that of Mademoiselle d'Estaing.

Occupied more with preserving his red leather shoes against the mire than with any thought of danger, François proceeded toward his destination. Suddenly flambeaux flared on either side of him, and a dozen men came running at him with cries of "Curfew! Curfew!"

François cursed his evil luck, which had brought him into contact with the patrol. These men—archers, as they were still called, though they were presenting harquebuses at his chest and head—were one of the nightly bands sent through the city by General Grommeyer, in charge of the policing of Paris.

In imagination he saw himself within the grim confines of the Saint-Lazare. The truth would have to come out, and, in the embittered state of religious wrangling, his death as a spy was a foregone conclusion.

The best he could hope for, as a member of the lesser nobility, was death by the axe, instead of being broken on the wheel.

This realization burst on him even as the yelling troop came charging forward from both sides. François threw up his left arm in a motion of surrender, then, duck-

ing low, ran headfirst into the nearest flambeau-bearer, knocking him down and extinguishing the torch.

At the same instant, the two parties came into near-collision, and arquebuses were hastily averted.

This was François's moment. With a slash of his broad-bladed cavalry sword, he cut in two the breastplate of the officer who was in his way, sending him to earth like a tortoise clashed from its shell.

INSTANTLY he was running like a hare toward the looming bulk of the great medieval hotel, with the patrol giving full cry behind. A harquebus roared, and the ball whizzed past his cheek. Nevertheless, the young man was speedily outstripping his pursuers when a second patrol debouched down a side-alley into the street, and came forward, shouting and waving their pikes.

"Now I am undone," thought François, and stopped dead.

He glanced about him in that moment of desperation. The advancing party would cut off his flight toward the Hotel. There was a short alley on the left, but it ran down only to the swampy bank of the Seine. There was just the alternative—surrender, or fight and be cut to pieces.

François was almost beneath the grim old pile of masonry that was the Hotel d'Estaing. If he could cut his way through the newcomers, he could vanish in the maze of small courts and gardens at its base. With a reckless shout of "Ivry!" on his lips, which at once

betrayed him for one of Henri's Huguenot followers, he leaped forward, one against twelve.

But, before he could thrust himself upon the outstretched pike, there came a singular intervention.

With a roar like a wounded bull, a man detached himself from the shadows of the houses, and, yelling "Ivry!" too, raced at the oncoming troop. Behind him followed a second man, silent, but waving his sword as if he knew how to use it.

François stopped still again in amazement and horror. For he recognized that voice, if not the figures. The foremost of the two, now almost upon the pikemen, was Crillon, the most brave and reckless swordsman in the Huguenot army.

And the man behind him—now almost at his side—must be the one who held Crillon as his boon companion, his inseparable second—King Henri of Navarre himself!

WHAT prank or impatience had brought the two men into Paris in his own wake, François couldn't attempt to guess. And there wasn't time for guesswork. A swift glance behind showed him that the first patrol had still a little leeway to make up. With a shout of "Ivry!" upon his lips again, he flung himself at the troop in front, upon whose corselets the swords of Henri and Crillon were already hammering.

The pikes wavered and vanished. Before the charge of those two old swordsmen, the troop scattered. François saw Crillon sheer a mailed arm from its shoulder, saw Henri's sword clash through a hel-

met and dissolve a bobbing skull. His own point pierced a throat beneath a bushy beard and white, fear-harried face.

Then the three had won clear, and were standing breathless, while the remnants of the troop scurried away, leaving their pikes where they had fallen.

Suddenly the roar of the harquebuses rang out again, and a storm of balls hooted through the air. The troop behind had stopped to fire, regardless of the fact that some of the other patrol were in the roadway.

"Sire, I am François d'Alembert," pleaded the young man, trying to catch Henri by the arm.

"A million devils, shall we at those rascals again, Sire?" roared the enraged Crillon.

But by this time the combat had awakened the entire quarter. From all sides could be heard the shouts of more guards hurrying to the scene. The harquebusiers behind were ramming down bullets and getting ready to apply wick-matches to priming-pans.

"Sire, France is at stake!" cried François to the King.

"*Ventre Saint Gris*, yes!" shouted Henri, ejaculating his favorite oath. "Discretion wins the day, Louis." He grabbed his companion by the shoulder and swung him about. And almost instantly the two were lost in the shadows cast by the great Hotel.

Left alone, François stood on no ceremony. He took to his heels and followed them, first along a narrow alley, then through a garden, then through the empty basement of an apparently deserted house. But there was no sign of Crillon or

the King. François found himself alone in what seemed a tiny quadrangle surrounded by stone walls, and the cries behind him indicated that his pursuers were on his trail.

A figure detached itself from the shadows. François made ready to thrust. What stayed his arm was the low, agitated woman's voice that came to his ears—for he could hardly distinguish the woman's dress.

"Quick, this way! Follow me!"

François almost lost her again, then saw that she was holding open a little postern in the wall. He leaped through in her wake, heard the roars behind him grow louder, but didn't stop to look. He sped on after the running woman, along a passage-way between two walls, then into a little doorway in what seemed to be the Hotel d'Estaing itself. In the complete darkness, the woman grasped him by the arm and hurried him along. She opened doors, and closed them behind her, but they two seemed to be alone in that part of the Hotel.

They were in a little room now, its four walls and the four-poster barely visible in the thread of moonlight that came through a slit. The woman turned toward François, and he knew that she was young and beautiful. He could feel the warm radiance of her.

Without a word, she glided toward him. François heard the soft rustle of falling garments. He saw the gleam of milk-white shoulders. He felt the pressure of soft lips on his. And, because life was sudden, swift, and apt to be extremely short, one didn't wait for reasons or explanations in the year 1592.



The girl swung viciously, and there was a dagger in her hand.

He grasped the girl in his arms, and felt her own tighten about his neck. He heard her quickened breathing, the soft whisper:

“Oh my King, you honor me too much!”

He thrust her away in horror, and at the same instant one hand, that had caressed his moustaches, seemed to discover that they were only an imitation of King Henri's. With a scream, the girl slapped the young man's face. And suddenly he recognized the dark beauty of Mademoiselle d'Estaing's maid.

“You are deceiving me! You are

tricking me! I'll have your life for this!”

It was easy now to understand why Henri had stolen into Paris too. Henri would risk his neck any day for a petticoat with a beautiful body inside it.

THE girl's arm swung viciously, and François guessed that there was a dagger in the hand that missed his chest. Girls had to carry daggers in those distracted days. But before he could grasp her arm—before she could swing again, there sounded a low burst of

vicious feminine laughter from where François imagined the door to be.

Another woman's form leaped past him, and in another moment there sounded a rough-and-tumble, the shrieks and hisses of women, the pummeling of fists, the rending of feminine garments, and a hollow, quivering slap that could only have been on resilient flesh.

François stood nonplussed, wondering what his next best move would be. The pummeling and the abuse went on and on. It was clearly a one-sided battle, and, dark though it was, François could distinguish, by the variations in the sound of the blows, just which particular part of the feminine anatomy was taking punishment.

François knew by experience the inadvisability of interfering in a feminine fracas; besides, he realized that he had almost committed *lèse-majesté* in approaching the latest young woman to have captured Henri's fickle fancy. His blood was still at fever-heat, for the girl had been adorable. But what worried François most was the realization that Henri must be somewhere in the purlieus of the Hotel, and in imminent danger—if he had not already been captured.

And, while he stood rooted there, though only for the fraction of a second, suddenly he heard a sound, a frightful sound that he knew well. It was the bull-roar of Crillon, echoing from vault to vault and room to room of the structure. It was the bellowing challenge with which Crillon started out to do battle.

Then Henri must be close at

hand, beset, perhaps, by the Duc de Mayenne's men, or those of General Grommeyer, the military Marshal of Paris.

His King was in danger. Like a shadow, François crept through the open doorway. Hardly had he passed when the two women began shrieking in fear, in response to Crillon's bull-throated challenge. One of them leaped for the door, passed out, and, turning, bolted it, shooting home a great iron tongue that burred along its socket.

She passed François, who was crouching against the wall, without seeing him, but not before a ray of moonlight, shining through a crevice, disclosed to him, as he had expected, the golden hair of *Mademoiselle d'Estaing*!

Crouching there, again and again François heard the roar of Crillon echo through the Hotel, the screams of frightened servants, and the clash of blades. Then François was on his feet, and running forward, trying to find the old warrior, whose triumphant shouts indicated that he was holding his own.

It seemed impossible to locate Crillon in that wilderness of empty corridors, which, in the few and infrequent rays of moonlight, seemed to stretch out to eternity.

And yet Henri must be fighting beside Crillon, silently, as was his wont.

François rushed along the corridor, in the direction from which the sounds seemed to be coming. Then he stopped again, for now they seemed to come from the opposite direction. Bewildered, he raged to and fro, until a gasping cry sounded almost beside him,

and he saw a narrow stairway that he had missed.

He darted down it, and came upon a landing-stage half-way. Crillon was standing there, mailed and sword in hand, facing a little crowd that clustered at the foot.

But Crillon was alone. At François's approach he half-turned for a moment.

"*Haron, mon roi!*" he shouted, and plunged downward.

The crowd beneath him broke and fled, leaving a litter of pikes upon the stairs, and three dead men. François stopped again.

"Fool! Fool!" cried a voice above him.

He looked back. The golden-haired Mademoiselle d'Estaing was standing at the top, calling and beckoning to him. As Crillon stood at the foot of the stairs, uttering his hull-call, François slowly re-ascended.

"My king!" he groaned.

Mademoiselle d'Estaing laid her hand upon his shoulder, and he saw the curve of her bust slide under her dress.

"He is safe. He has escaped—"

"My king, Henri, is safe!"

"You fool, why, I've locked him up for the night with a little wench who's just low enough to meet his tastes. He's safe enough. Come with me!"

IN THAT instant of relief at his king's safety, François failed to see the implication of Mademoiselle d'Estaing's words. But a moment later he understood what she meant.

In the darkness, she, too, had mistaken him for King Henri. She had beaten up the little, dark-

haired maid, because she herself had had an asignation with Henri, and was under the impression that the maid had stolen him away from her.

She had taken François for Henri, and now imagined that the King was safely locked in the maid's room.

Realizing that there was nothing he could do, until he had the opportunity of learning more, and guessing that Henri had somehow effected his escape, François yielded himself not unwillingly to Mademoiselle d'Estaing. She led him by the hand, through an open doorway, barely discernible in the darkness of the corridor, and into another room. A lock grated. Then they two stood facing each other.

It was a little lighter than it had been in the maid's room, but not much. It was light enough, however, for François to see the beautiful, shimmering golden hair, and the bodice, rent in the struggle with the maid, and revealing the thrilling outlines of two perfectly modeled breasts.

Then Mademoiselle's arms went around the young man's neck, and those same perfect breasts were strained against him.

"I'm in luck tonight after all," thought François. "Maybe this gift has come to me because I've got to die."

However, he didn't pause to analyze the gift. People had no time to stop and analyze those things. They just accepted them. And Mademoiselle d'Estaing was much more thrilling than the maid had been. She had a nobler way of making love . . . and the young man forgot himself completely. He

came back to his complete personality to find Mademoiselle still in his arms, and her lips softly brushing his cheek and moustaches.

"I love you," she said caressingly. "Now, who are you?"

"I—I am—I am named François d'Alenbert," answered the young man.

"I knew you must be of the aristocracy, because you so much resemble the Huguenot King. Perhaps you are of his kin. I should not like this to have happened if you were just an ordinary man. I am very refined. Well, I had to get even with King Henri."

"How do you mean?" asked François.

"Why, even a king can't pretend to be in love with me, and then make use of me to make love to a wretched little maid."

FRANÇOIS thought that over.

"You mean that you've just been making use of me, in order to get back at King Henri?" he asked.

"That was my original intention. Even the King of Navarre can't treat me that way. But I've found out since that I am really in love with you, so everything is all right. Now what's worrying you?"

"I'm worried about the King and Crillon," said François.

"Bah, Crillon! That old soldier can take on all the guards in Paris and beat them. And as for the King, I've explained to you that he's locked up with that maid of mine. If I know Henri of Navarre, he won't be in any hurry to regain his freedom.

"Aren't you happy here with

me? Nobody will dare disturb us. Of course, I know you're one of the Huguenots, but I'll take good care of you.

"All you've got to do now is to stay here quietly, and I'll get you back through the lines, disguised as my maid, perhaps. Only you'll have to shave off those moustaches," she continued, fondling them with dainty fingers. "What a young man to be able to grow moustaches like that! Ah, I love you! Kiss me again—hard!"

Being young, François obeyed. And because Mademoiselle d'Estaing was also young, and charming, and ardent, he obeyed with a satisfaction that drove the thought of King Henri temporarily out of his mind, as well as the message that the King had entrusted to him. Mademoiselle had a way with her that some women know by instinct, and others can never learn as long as they live.

Blissful eternities ensued, and then Mademoiselle observed, with a sigh:

"I wish this stupid war was over. When it is over, how would you like a permanent appointment in my household?"

François forced himself to come back to reality. "I should love it," he answered. "But in the meanwhile I've got my work to do."

"Ah, yes. And what was this work that brought you into Paris?"

"Why, the King sent me on a mission to you."

"The devil he did! What was this mission? What do you mean?" demanded Mademoiselle.

"Why, he told me to tell you that he had decided to play the



"The King sent me on a mission to you," he said.

black, and not the red."

Mademoiselle was on her feet, snatching at her garments. François looked at her curving undulations with interest and a sense of triumph, but again he was beginning to be a little conscience-

stricken about Henri and Crillon.

"Why didn't you tell me, fool!" raved Mademoiselle.

"Why, you see—you see—" François stammered. He was afraid to tell her that Henri wasn't really locked up with the maid, and

that it had been he, not Henri. He cursed the day when he had tried to train his moustaches into the shape of his sovereign's.

BEFORE he could make confession, Mademoiselle d'Estaing was running out of the room. She didn't stop to lock the door on him. She seemed to have forgotten him. François sprang to his feet and followed her, adjusting his doublet, pulling his jerkin into place, and dragging his rapier into position. He didn't know what was going to happen, but he felt that he might need it.

As he ran, he heard Crillon's bull-voice roaring again somewhere in the Hotel. God, what a man! Crillon must have been fighting for hours, and he seemed to be on the prod the same as ever. But where was Henri?

"It's a mistake. You didn't lock—" François shouted, as he raced in pursuit of Mademoiselle along endless corridors.

She didn't seem to hear him. He had the greatest difficulty in keeping her in sight. But at last she was at the door of the maid's room, and François heard the tongue of the bolt shoot back.

Then he was in the room, and shaking Mademoiselle by the shoulder, as she beat with her fists at the cowering maid.

"The King! Where is he? How did he get away?" she screamed.

"He wasn't here. I was deceived by a traitor who pretended to be His Majesty."

François swung Mademoiselle around. "It was I whom you mistook for the King. It was my moustaches," he explained.

"*Ah mon Dieu, mon Dieu*, and I have notified the Committee of Sixteen that he was here!" wailed Mademoiselle. "And I betrayed my king for you, scum of the fish-halls!" She turned from the maid and slapped François violently across the face. "I hate you!" she cried. "Mon Dieu, where is the King? The archers of the guard should be here at any moment."

"So you betrayed him!" said François icily.

"*Mon Dieu*, I thought he had betrayed me—for that!" wept Mademoiselle.

Suddenly the bull-voice of Crillon broke upon their ears. Mademoiselle d'Estaing screamed, and then—Crillon appeared. Perhaps there was more moonlight now, but, anyway, he was visible, as he stood in the doorway.

He had on a helmet, a cuirass, and steel arm-pieces, and in his hand he held a sword. He stood there, waving his sword and leering like a terrible mask.

"*Eh bien*, Sire, I have killed the last of the patrol. Whom do we kill now?" he inquired of François. Then a terrific oath escaped him. "It is young d'Alembert! And it is for your sake I have been fighting half Paris these two hours past. Where is the King?"

The two men and Mademoiselle stared at one another, and nobody could answer the question. The maid, her hands across her bare breasts, came forward.

"It was all a mistake. He hasn't been here," she faltered.

"Name of the name of a pig, we've got to find him!" roared Crillon. "So you have been masquerading as my King?"

But there sounded the shouts of men somewhere in the darkness below. Mademoiselle d'Estaing cried:

"It is the Committee of Sixteen! They have come for the King! They will murder him! What shall we do?"

"Do? Why, we shall settle with the dogs as we settled with those others," laughed Crillon.

"No, listen! Listen quick, for I have a plan. This gentleman, Monsieur—Monsieur d'Alembert must pretend to be the King. You two must make some play of fighting, and then surrender. You, Monsieur Crillon, must make believe that Monsieur d'Alembert is the King. In that way, His Majesty, wherever he is, will have time to escape."

"Wherever he is. Aye, but where is he?" Crillon growled.

"I don't know."

"Henri is probably entangled at this moment with some petticoat. He thinks each one is different. He never can see that they are all the same. However—"

"You can make them believe that this gentleman is His Majesty. They will mistake him for the King on account of his moustaches, his beautiful moustaches. They would deceive anybody in the darkness. *Mon Dieu*, they deceived me!"

"Well, then—" said Crillon, hesitatingly.

But the tumult below was increasing. Men were running along passages and hammering at doors, bellowing the King's name. There came a rush up a staircase. Out of the darkness a voice shouted:

"Henri of Navarre, and Monsieur de Crillon, wherever you are,

this is the time to surrender. Eh, Mademoiselle d'Estaing, you, too, for the Duc de Mayenne himself will not protect you, when you harbor traitors, renegades, and Huguenots. We know that Henri of Navarre is with you. Unless he and Monsieur de Crillon surrender, your Hotel will be blown to pieces, for we have posted artillery on every side."

"We fight you to the death!" roared Crillon.

THERE came a rush. The figures of men filled the passage. Crillon, forgetful of the arrangement he had made, sent his bull's voice echoing along the corridor again as he ran forward, swinging his sword. But his rush halted. For no man advanced to meet him. In the pale, errant moonlight, François, a foot behind him, saw that the passage was filled, not with swordsmen, but with harquebusiers, their weapons extended.

And to attack that serried line meant instant death. Even stout Crillon understood that, and stopped.

"You are no longer matching your trained sword against the guards, Monsieur de Crillon," said the voice. "Majesty of Navarre, surrender instantly, or we shall blow you and Crillon to hell."

François, remembering, shouted, "I surrender!"

Crillon's curses rang through the corridor, but Crillon seemed to remember, and made no further gesture of defiance.

But François, glancing over his shoulder, had noticed something that had made his blood run chill.

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Stakes on the Black

[Continued from page 73]

What he had seen was not in front, where the harquebusiers stood, their weapons under their arms, and their wicks glowing. It was in the maid's room. And that sight had taken all the devil-may-care spirit out of him.

What he had seen was Henri IV of France and the little dark-haired maid in amorous embrace.

He had seen the girl in the King's arms, her half bare breasts quivering against his leather jerkin, and the King's great moustaches, standing out on either side of the maid's cheeks.

"Surrender, Monsieur de Crillon, or my men fire!"

"I surrender, then, in His Majesty's name," said Crillon.

"Good! Throw down your swords!"

There came a forward rush, and in a moment François and Crillon were disarmed. But François was only thinking that his King, the mirror of chivalry, had abandoned Crillon, left him to die, while he was seeking consolation in the arms of the little dark-haired maid. And yet that wasn't Henri's way.

And how the devil had Henri got into the maid's room? Had he been hiding there all the time, or had he slipped in while the girl was fighting with Mademoiselle d'Estaing?

NOBODY studied the young man's face closely in the darkness of the corridor. Everybody assumed that it was Henri of Navarre who had been captured. With yells of triumph, the two prison-

ers were pushed and prodded forward.

François looked at Crillon, and saw that the old soldier hadn't seen what he had seen, didn't know that King Henri was skulking in the maid's embraces while they were going to their death. So he decided to keep silent. No word of his should ever reveal the fact that Henri IV was a poltroon.

But when they reached the outside, somebody shook François by the shoulders, and shouted, "This isn't Henri of Navarre!"

"The devil, no!" They pressed about the youth. "This is a boy, and Henri is an old man, in his middle thirties."

"But his moustaches—look at his moustaches!"

"This is a boy, I say!" They dragged François into the light of a flambeau. "Who are you?"

"I am Henri IV, King of France."

"You lie, you lie, you lie!"

"Look at my moustache!" cried François.

The King of Navarre is skulking

"This fellow is an impostor! inside the Hotel. Get him!"

"No!" Mademoiselle d'Estaing rushed forward and flung her arms about François. "This is my liege lord, Henri!"

"Aye, this is my king. Are you all crazy?" growled Crillon. "Take your filthy hands off me, wretches. I am not used to being handled."

"He is an impostor. Take these two to the Saint Lazare. And search the Hotel, room by room.

The king of Navarre is skulking somewhere within it!" shouted the officer.

Crillon and François were torn away.

IT WAS very cold in the vault of the Saint Lazare prison. François was seated on a heap of mouldy straw, listening to the scampering of the rats, and waiting for the dawn, which was not now far away.

General Grommeyer had promised François a quick execution without the preliminary of a sentence, as a Huguenot spy captured under martial law. He had refused him all information as to the fate of Crillon in their brief interview. As the Sieur was a Huguenot, of course he would not need a priest.

Through the tiny aperture in his cell, as dawn came up, François could see the square enclosure of the Saint Lazare. Something was stirring in it. Half-a-dozen laboring men were dragging something into it.

As the light increased, François was able to make out the hideous form of the wheel. Occasionally, in the past, he had stopped to look at some poor devil being broken on the wheel, and had felt sorry for him, but he had never felt any intimate interest in the mechanism until now.

It was not actually a wheel. That was to say, sometimes the implement was so constructed as to make a half-revolution, but generally it was built to stand immovable. It was simply arranged for the victim's limbs to be attached to the spokes, after which the executioner broke them with an iron

bar. Finally, he broke the victim's chest with a blow that crushed lungs and heart.

The sun came up suddenly, a disk of red across the eastern houses. Footsteps sounded outside the cell. A red-faced man appeared, with half-a-dozen men behind him. He flung himself upon François, and in a moment had trussed his wrists in a steel contraption.

"March, Huguenot!" he shouted.

François marched out of his cell, and into the yard of Saint Lazare. Already a motley group of spectators had assembled. The executioner was leaning upon his bar, his aides, two bottle-nosed ruffians, at his side.

In an instant François was seized and bound. About him he saw a troop of halberdiers, who had appeared miraculously, as if to keep back the spectators who were pressing forward. And it was a turning wheel. The executioner raised his bar as it began to revolve, bringing François head downward. He looked up inquiringly at a little group who came strolling forward.

Upside down, François could still recognize King Henri, Crillon, Mademoiselle d'Estaing, and the saturnine features of the Duc de Mayenne.

THE Duc made a gesture, and the wheel brought the young man back into the human posture. A few motions of the executioner's hands freed him.

Dizzily standing on his feet, François was aware that everybody was laughing at him.

King Henri clapped him on the shoulder. "*Ventre Saint Gris!*" he shouted. "This is a valorous young man, and meant no offense by the killing of the watch."

"Well," answered Mayenne sourly, "neither praise nor punishment can undo that, Sire."

That word, "Sire," told François everything. It meant that Mayenne had acknowledged Henri as his liege lord—as King of France instead of merely King of Navarre. Then the war was ended! As he gazed at the Duc, dumfounded, Henri clapped him on the shoulder again.

"The wheel was but a show, a play, a jest," he said, "for last night Monsieur le Duc assured me that your life should not be forfeited. Yet he deemed some punishment necessary for the killing of the guard and the—hum—invasion of Mademoiselle's Hotel."

François saw the twinkle in the King's eye. He looked at Mademoiselle. She was fully attired, of course, and the rounded orbs that had come as a boon and a blessing to him were concealed beneath a bodice of extraordinary stiffness. Only by actual experience could one have guessed what curves and undulations lay beneath it.

François looked back at Henri, who continued, sternly:

"Such excesses on the part of young men are rightly discountenanced by Monsieur de Mayenne. However, he has decided, out of his friendship for me, to parole you in the custody of Mademoiselle."

"*Ventre bleu*, I wish I were in his shoes!" shouted Crillon.

Hand in hand—the customary means of polite progression in that

day—François and Mademoiselle d'Estaing crossed the enclosure of the Saint Lazare. Outside the gate one of the newfangled hackney-coaches was drawn up, the coachman and the footman resplendent in the gold and scarlet of the d'Estaing livery.

François handed Mademoiselle inside and followed her. His hopes were rising, but still he wasn't quite sure where they were going.

"You have been a great fool," said Mademoiselle, "and, if you wish to find favor in my eyes, I

must demand that you reduce those moustaches of yours to the ordinary size and length. They are not only dangerous, but they are too ticklish."

"I shall obey you, Mademoiselle."

"You narrowly escaped the wheel. But everything is now straightened out, and I have swallowed my chagrin over that little maid of mine, for whose sake Henri concealed himself in her room last night. I shall console myself with a more constant lover."

"Ah, Mademoiselle—!"

"It was all your fault for not telling me sooner that Henri is playing the black instead of the red, which signifies that he has chosen to become a member of the true Catholic faith, instead of continuing the war. His conversion is to be announced publicly today, and therefore the quarrel between him and Monsieur de Mayenne and the Catholic League is ended.

"Thinking that this was all understood, Henri permitted Crillon to make a mock fight instead of continuing at his side, while Monsieur de Mayenne was sending aid to him. Do you understand now?"

"Yes, I have been a fool, Mademoiselle," François agreed.

"And now that the war is ended, what are your plans?"

"Alas, Mademoiselle, being peniless, I must seek another master."

"How would you like to consider a permanent appointment in my household as Groom of the Bedchamber? Such a post is open at the moment, and—be still, you fool! Everybody can see you through the glass of the door!"