But Adeline de Cevenne had not hesitated.

For a week, day by day, she had importuned the dreaded Cardinal.

It was said he was cruel. She cared not. He had sent many of the sons of Alenois to the scaffold. She was not warned by the fact. Hardly was there a house in the land which had not some cause, direct or obscure, to hate him. She was blind even to this.

One thing, however, she knew and clung to. In his hands were the reins of power. He spoke for the Prince. In all but name he was the Prince. He could break her heart or not as he chose.

Why was everything that was beautiful nothing to him? Why was he for a mere principle of policy to be allowed to commit a crime? If the aims of his statecraft were great, there were other things also to be heeded, things of beauty, joy, happiness which must not be broken, gifts of God which must not be crushed under foot for the mere aims of man. Why should he dare to decree that an innocent man should die? A man whose only crime was that he united several claims to the Princely throne, and that he had committed a trivial indiscretion.

For a mere aim of statecraft must her heart be broken, must the fairest gifts of God be as naught, must an innocent life be taken?

For days she had sought an audience with him, thrown herself on her knees at his feet, and kissed his hand. He had smiled and treated her as a child. Once he had taken her to a seat in one of the gardens, and with his courtly grace had read to her the latest poem of the Court poet, a thing, she remembered, in praise of a clipped tree and a flowerbed laid out in geometrical designs. And thus she was treated, reduced to a mere timid girl, had quailed into silence, though protest, entreaty and rebellion were at her heart.

And now, if nothing were done, in a few days the scaffold in the market place of the town whose houses clustered on the hillside under the shadow of the Palace, would once more be reddened with innocent blood.

With an inarticulate, gasping cry of helpless misery she buried her face in her hands.

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She did not know that the Cardinal was gazing at her from one of the windows of his room.

It must not be supposed that the estimate which the Court formed of the Cardinal was wholly just. Those who suffer invariably abuse the hand which causes their suffering without pausing to inquire what faults may lie at their own door.

And the faults of the nobles of Alenois were many. They were selfish, short-sighted, quarrelsome, and absurdly jealous of each other's power. They spent their time in constant feuds.

It was now some years since the Cardinal Bretani had become the chief minister and the virtual ruler of Alenois.

Trained in the intrigues surrounding the Papal throne, he had gained a not surprising belief in the virtue of a strong hand. A strong advocate of reform in the church, and a strong opponent of the corruption and nepotism prevailing in Rome, he had made violent enemies for himself in the Consistory. After several attempts upon his life, he left Italy and placed his services at the disposal of the Prince of Alenois, a weak and dissolute ruler at the mercy of his nobles. There he found himself face to face with the same problem which a century later faced Richelieu in France. He proceeded to solve it in the only way possible, by breaking the power of the nobles.

If Alenois were to remain an independent State, internal dissension must be stamped out. Otherwise the little mountain principality must inevitably be absorbed in either the possessions of France or the grasp of the Emperor.

Thus it was that the Cardinal waged unflinching war against the nobles, who cared little for Alenois but much for their own individual ambitions; thus also it was that the scaffold claimed so many victims.

Such a victim would shortly be provided in the Comte de Mervalle.

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The curtains were held aside, and the Count was brought into the Cardinal's presence. He was a young man, singularly handsome. Though he must have been aware that the days left to him to look upon the sunlight which now streamed into his face could but be few, his attitude expressed neither fear nor a disposition to conciliate. He would die with a taunt upon his lips against the man who had struck him down. He naturally supposed that he was now summoned that pressure might be brought to bear upon him to induce him to disclose the names of his supposed confederates. He was, however, mistaken, and the first indication of his mistake was furnished him when he looked into the Cardinal's face. It seemed that in the sunlight its severity had vanished.

The Cardinal, having dismissed the guards that the interview might be private, was not long in entering upon the cause of the summons.

"You are under arrest, Count," he began, in the carefully modulated tones so hatefully familiar to his victim; "for conspiring against the Prince of this State. Your claims to the throne, should it become vacant, render such conspiracy only what might be expected."

The Count did not speak. Silence was more dignified than useless protest.

"The warrant here for your execution only awaits the Prince's signature."

"I am aware, your Eminence, that When the Prince writes, his hand is guided," broke in the young Count. "But," he continued, proudly, "it is useless to question me."

"Youth," observed the Cardinal, "is prone to hasty conclusions." It was a strange thing for him to indulge in an unnecessary observation.

"You are not here to be questioned," he went on, and as he spoke he saw hope, that would not be hidden, dawning in the young man's face. "A strange chance has intervened in your favour."

The words fell slowly and softly on the silence, and, as he grasped their import, the summer sunlight became once more real for the Count.

"Your Eminence is playing with me," he faltered.

"If you will listen to me," said the Cardinal, "and agree to the conditions I impose, you will see that I am not. If you do not agree, this warrant will be signed."

Even in the midst of the tumult of his re-awakened hope the Count marvelled at the strange mood which seemed to have seized the Cardinal. Was it possible that this unflinching tyrant meditated sparing a victim? What strange power could have touched him? What purpose prompted him to mercy? Was it true, as men said, that he had once possessed a heart?

"Years ago," his eminence was saying, "I chanced to be in Alenois. I was then a young man, as you are. This summer's morning, those former days are vividly recalled to me. When you are older, Count, and have eyes to see how evil the world is, you will learn that memory is given to man that he may not be without joy. Years ago I tasted happiness in the garden below the windows of this room, and I have been looking down into the garden this morning.

"You have guessed what my memory is. You smile. You think it strange that the man who has come back to Alenois to send her nobles to the scaffold should recall a memory. If you went back now and fell upon a knot of courtiers, you would tell the story with a laugh. I do not intend that you shall go back to ridicule me."

The Cardinal paused. His right hand was lying lightly upon the warrant on the table in front of him. The young Count realised that his hope rested merely upon a caprice.

"Years ago," said the Cardinal simply, as if summarising his thoughts, "in this garden youth was mine"!

Having spoken thus, he turned suddenly upon the Count and became again the quick-thinking, decisive statesman that he was wont to be.

"I then loved a woman, and in her memory I spare your life," he said. "When I looked just now into the garden I saw Mademoiselle de Cevenne, her whole attitude speaking of her breaking heart. She is the daughter of the woman I loved when, a young soldier, I was for a short time at this Court. She loves you, and has importuned me to show mercy each day since you were arrested. Because of the memory of my own youth I will respect the happiness of yours and hers. You would have died on the scaffold because, if the State needs it, not only the guilty, but also those who would probably, some day be guilty, must be removed. I am here to make Alenois strong, and her enemies, even if they are her own nobles, must fall."

And as the Cardinal spoke now, another spirit shone in his eyes. He was the stern, unflinching statesman whom the Court feared. He did not allow the Count to speak. Briefly he explained to him that he would be banished; that he would leave the Palace at night, disguised and guarded; that at a town across the frontier it would be arranged that Mademoiselle de Cevenne should meet him, and that they were there to become man and wife. On these conditions his life was spared.

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It was said next day in the Court that the Count de Mervalle had been secretly murdered, as even the Cardinal feared the public execution of one so highly born.

When the Cardinal heard this he smiled grimly. The story was a fresh proof of the hatred in which he was held. But that hatred was also an eloquent tribute to his power and to the success of his policy. And in this reflection he may have found comfort. Still it was well for him that he could live at times in the happy memory of his youth, for otherwise, in his old age, he would have had little joy.

Perhaps he also remembered that far away from Alenois the Count and Adeline de Cevenne were drinking of a cup of happiness that had come to them past expectation, and that in each other's arms they found that joy which is like no other joy, and comes only once and only in youth, and which came to men and women even in those days of secret murders and blood-reddened scaffolds, much as it comes now.

Perhaps even it may be believed that the dead woman of the Cardinal's memory saw, from some other life, her daughter's joy; and that she appeared to the Cardinal in his dreams and seemed to thank him for the mercy he had shown.