The SONG OF RENNY

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SYNOPSIS.

IN the days of the robber barons Earl Gernulf, Red Bull o' the North, is master of the fief of Pikpoyntz, where he lives in the Castle of Speir. This fearless, blustering giant returns from a border foray with a captive girl of twelve years, whom he establishes at Speir as his ward, to be called Donna Sabine. He has murdered her parents and her five brothers. She is an imperious little personage, and soon the household is at her feet—Dame Clotilda, the housekeeper; Blanchmains and Nitidis, maids of honor; Shrike, a negro chamberlain; Father Sorges, spiritual adviser; Bubo, a hunchback, and Firmin, a strapping youth of good parentage, Master of the Bridle. She reigns as queen of Speir for three and a half years. Firmin she chooses as her friend. Preparing her for her first communion, Sorges learns that she is Renny of Coldscaur, head of the great house of ancient lineage.

CHAPTER III. (Continued).

FATHER SORGES wiped the sweat from his forehead with a red handkerchief; he gulped down his dismay twice or thrice before he could speak. When at last he was articulate there was a different note in his voice—a note which announced that he had taken a side.

"Ah, my sweet and gracious lady," he said, "I see it all! He has murdered your father, mother, brothers. You are alone." Sabine said nothing; but she heard him. "Renny of Coldscaur!" went on the good Sorges, apparently addressing Heaven; "Renny of Coldscaur, the greatest next the Throne, a child twelve years old, in the house of her father's assassin!" He turned suddenly. "What of your kinsfolk, lady? What of the Prince Bishop Valeric? What of Bishop Stephen, my old master? What of your cousins whom these princes have in ward?"

But she stopped him with a lifted hand. "Blaise, my father, knew nothing of these persons, Father, nor they of him. He denied them his lands and would never enter theirs."

Sorges wailed. "I might have known, Lord help me! Did ever Renny do else to his brother but hate him? Oh, house of sorrow, house of sorrowful fate! Oh, proud house brought low! Lord God, shall this endure? Madam," he said, turning to the silent girl, "the pity of this fact overwhelms me. But I will grow stronger by the mercy of the just God. You are alone but for me. Therefore I will be strong. Let us pray."

Sabine stared at him, but did not see it at all.

"Thank you, Father," said she, very much Renny. "I have Firmin." But at this the priest lost hold of himself.

"Firmin! Firmin!" he shrilled. "Firmin, that clod! Do you put Firmin up against the Earl of Pikpoyntz, Madam? As well put up a rag doll. Oh, Madam, Madam de Renny, you are mad, you are mad! The man will eat you raw, devour your great inheritance; you will be as a field flower in the hollow of his hand. He has slain Blaise; now do you think he will stay for you? No more o' this, i' God's name, or I shall rave!"

He began to wring his hands, dimly conscious that he was adjuring rock. Sabine looked him full in the face. Her unflinching eyes had a cold, bright speck apiece.

"I will never meet the Earl of Pikpoyntz until I can come as Renny against his foes," said she. Whereat Sorges laughed aloud—a laugh of agony.

"I have been a servant of your father's brother," he said, "of Bishop Stephen, of Havilot. I know the traditions, the incredible greatness and sorrow of your high house. You will meet the Earl, you say—you, child—and with Firmin. Firmin! Firmin! O Lord of us all, what is this?"

He mocked at her in his distress, more of a fool for his pains than Firmin could ever have been. Sabine grew dryer and dryer, less of an orphan and more of a queen, with every groan of the infatuate old man.

She got up; she was very cool indeed, without resentment or gratitude, but plainly mistress of her resolve. "I think our discussion is concluded," she said. "We will go on with our preparation another time." Then she walked out of the room in her stateliest manner to the arm of Firmin, attendant on the terrace. Sorges saw her begin to talk to that impassive youth; he threw his arms up like a man drowning, shut his eyes and strained his despair through clenched teeth. The terrace window was a loadstone, drew him to watch and judge. He saw the two heads together, the girl's leaning, eager, confidential; she was talking very fast and, he believed, really crying. Firmin kept his; it was hung, but he looked round once or twice as if uneasy. Then Sorges saw him drop his mistress' arm and put his own lightly round her waist. She did not seem to notice the liberty; the torrent of her troubles, voiced at last, perhaps carried off her wits. Sorges, frozen to the window, could do nothing but stare. His heart hammered at his ribs, well-nigh choked him. Then he heard a light step behind and, turning, saw Blanchmains. Speir has many windows; the view of the Valley of Stones over the terraces is very fine.

The priest whipped his hands behind his back to glare at the maid. The maid smiled tenderly in his face; that poor face was streaked with wet.

"Dear Father Sorges," said she with her hand on her heart, "are you going forth on your errand of mercy?"

"I am so engaged, mistress."

"And can you tell me where to find our lady? She was with you of late."

"She was; but, as you see, I am alone, or could be."

"Ah, she is gone to meditate—your counsels?"

"God, woman!" cried the old priest, "she is meditating anything else you choose. Be so good as to let me pass. Stay! Come with me. I will give you a note for her. I must make a journey—a long journey, my Saviour."

"Willingly, my father."

Blanchmains, all agog, waited, her eyes sparkling. Sorges with a fluttering hand

Basilida, Who Had Loved Him in a Wild Beast Fashion, Came Creeping Out.

botched a couple of slips. He finally achieved, folded and tied with silk a longish note.

"There, mistress," he said, "give that to your lady in one hour from now. It is important. Forget anything you choose, but forget not that. In one hour from now, if you please. There, there, my child"—for Blanchmains, with clasped hands, was kneeling before him—"there! May God and our Blessed Lady be to you all that you deserve. Watch over our Lady Sabine. I must go indeed." And gone he was.

Blanchmains sat down in Sabine's chair, playing with the note in her hand. First she compressed her red lips, then she looked out of the windows, lastly she untied the note and set herself to master it.

"Pest!" she said, "it is in Latin. Oh, a much too learned lady. Well, well, let us see. "Dilectissimae et honoratissimae suae, Dominae Sabinae," she read. Ah! an address. She wandered on till she came to something which made her frown. "Reverendo in Christo patri Stephano Havilotiensi Episcopo." Now, who might he be? But at the next name she caught her breath, literally panted. "Inclyta domus atque miserrima de Reini," she read and leapt into full conviction. Renny! Renny of Coldscaur! Now she knew with whom she had to deal. There came a green light into the eyes of the chalk faced girl at this phase, which may have become her and yet not have been very pleasant. It gave her a blank, sightless appearance, the look of a socketed statue, a tragic mask. Her lips moved, but all the words to be understood were in French. "Renie pas Reine," they were, which uttered she shook the glaze from her eyes and resumed her search for landmarks. "Firminium, garcionem improbum." Firmin? Well, Firmin would be useful. "Improbum" was improbably a compliment. At the end were four words in a language she knew. "Je vous sauveray ancor," she read and was able to smile again at the priest's simplicity. As she scrupulously refolded and retied the billet "Ah, Father Sorges, Father Sorges," she said, with a whimsical twist of the head, "if you are for saving her I must be for saving myself."

For some time she sat still, twisting her fingers, pinching her lips, frowning, as she puzzled. She guessed Stephen of Havilot to be a kinsman of Sabine's—Lord or Earl of that place, which lay, she knew, far in the West, in Campflors. If Sorges were going thither, as (knowing his Western origin) she guessed he might be, it would take him three weeks or a month. She knew his horse and guessed at the roads. Three weeks to go, three to return—six weeks. Time enough to turn round in—good! Now, what else? Sabine was a Renny, eh? That must mean Renny of Coldscaur, for Pikpoyntz was a towering falcon who flew high for his quarry. Were there any other Rennys? At this moment her eyes caught upon the book lying open on the table. She jumped at it. Father Sorges had been in such a hurry to fetch at his Stephen of Havilot that he had left the Speir Register. There then, at last, she had the whole story to her hand. Donna Sabine de Renny of Coldscaur—of course! Stephen, Bishop of Havilot—of course! Yes, and there was Valeric, Prince-Bishop of Grand Fe—also a Renny. Blanchmains grew cheerful, in a chilly sort of way, for she saw the whole thing. Sorges was going to rouse the Rennys; on Firmin's account, it appeared! Well, she was going to rouse Firmin—on her own account. It remained to be seen whose account would get quietus first. Blanchmains was clear that Sabine must not be Countess of Pikpoyntz if she could help it. She did not know, of course, that Sorges was now equally clear on that point. She thought he was only afraid of Firmin; she began to see her way. Should she deliver the note? If it discredited Firmin it would do no harm. Nothing would so effectually egg on Sabine, the little mule. But she was not certain; it would be safer to deliver it to the fire. This was done, and then she went out to watch the young couple on the terrace.

Father Sorges was in such a hurry to reach his lodging that he fluttered down his six hundred steps three at a time. His first act when he landed at his door was to thank God very heartily that he had not arrived in pieces; his next, to eat a hunch of bread; his third, to forage in his cupboard for a parchment roll. This turned out to be a rough map, made by himself, of the stages of his journey, made forty years before, from Havilot to Speir. He now turned his map upside down. "What I have to do," said he, munching his crust, "is to avoid the Earl's garrison at Cantacute. I must go west to Farlingbridge. Being then in Logres, I shall be safe. Then I drop down the two rivers to Minster-Merrow, afterward from city to city—Cragarn, Breault, Saint-Save, Blemish—until I strike on Joyeulx Saber. It may take me any time between three weeks and five, but God will be with me and I shall certainly get there." He was not long over his equipment; his breviary, his cloak, a comb completed it. Arms he would have scorned had he had any within reach. He did wear, however, his crucifix outside his cloak. Then he saddled his flea bitten old roan, pulled the girths as tight as he dared and shambled off along the western road. The mountains closed in on all hands, the roaring Sar drowned the plod of his horse's hoofs. Blanchmains had been right in one thing. He was going to rouse the Rennys—but not against Firmin.

CHAPTER IV.

Inclyta Domus Atque Miserrima.

WHEN Renny came before his lord to receive investiture from kingly hands of a kingly fee and franchise he stood with his own hands held out, fettered with a golden chain. The Constable handed to the King the Sword of Estate, the King severed the chain, Renny was free. The fetter then served for cincture; with his own chain the King girt Renny round the loins; the trumpets shrilled in the market place at Renny-Helm; under the great tower the heralds craved acceptance "du tres hault, tres puissant, redoute Prince, Monseigneur Blaise par la grace de Dieu, Reini de Coldscaur, Cleur Marie, Cousin du Roy," &c., &c. Thereby this princely person stood seized of Coldscaur, and all Marvilion knew him for an Earl, though he chose to have no title but Renny of Coldscaur. Such was the custom instituted by Eudo the Wolf, sea pirate, descended from Romans (from a dim Cneius Pompilius Arrhenis, as they boasted), when he came to the kingdom of Jadis; and still it held at every violent death of a Renny.

"Inclyta domus atque miserrima," wrote Sorges to his pupil, the latest Renny; and truly enough wrote he. If the records of a famous realm, the annals, chronicles, romances, faitz et gestes, Rolls of Parliament, Files of Chancery and all the rest of such gear can report me a noble house more rooted in pride, more furiously insisting upon proud observance, more blotted with blood, more wicked or more miserable, I have searched their folios in vain. There are traditions about most of the great old families of Jadis; their names are proverbial, or symbolical, if you please. Thus De Breaute must always break women's hearts; De Flahault hand down inordinate desire from father to son; Botetort after Botetort be shifty; Melsa profuse with what Melsa spared him; but Renny, it was said, warred upon his own kind, drained his own blood, heaped sin upon sin for himself, killed without mercy, was killed without ruth—thieved, lied, debauched, blasphemed—but never abated one jot of his claim to be royal; and whether he paltered with God, his King, his honor or his salvation, never swerved from the Renny creed, which was:—"What I need I claim, what I claim I have, what I have I hold. "Renie pas Reini," ran the legend of the house cut deep upon the escutcheon over the portal at Coldscaur; "Renie pas Reini," said every man of them to his brother in turn, and enforced it or paid for it with the sword.

Inclyta domus atque miserrima Arrhenensis, indeed. There could be none more famous in the realm of Jadis and none more wretched. A race of heroes, incalculably ancient, very near the throne, handsome as some full hued rank of gods—and hag ridden by a desperate black fate. So it was with them. From that far day when Eudo Reini the Wolf, having harried Marvilion for twenty miles square and built his crag castle upon the embers, brought into it his fierce Byzantine wife, Basilida Kyriozoe, with her dyed purple plaits of hair, her white face and her green eyes—from that day a doom malignant and perverse sat down by the marriage bed. Not a Renny died in it, though each in turn killed and was killed to call it his. Not a Renny, save Eudo himself, so much as died fighting a fair field. Renny after Renny stood in his hall, flushed and splendid, and rooted his enormous claim like a flag at his right hand. He claimed to be at once master of men and slave of his own appetite. For that he always paid dear, yet the man who killed him to abate it set it up anew. I shall not attempt to follow them out in detail; they were many and of divers degrees in arrogant rascality. Let their names suffice. Eudo the Wolf had the grace to be killed in some sort of battle. True, he was shot before the engagement began—shot in the eye by a shaft from ambush and tumbled into a ditch to be out of the way. Basilida, who had loved him in a wild beast fashion, came creeping out in the dusk to find him. It is said that the sound of her wailing could be heard for two miles over Dunfleet marshes. She found him lying defaced and dishonored in his ditch, his sword untarnished by any blood.

This served her turn well enough. They left five children behind them to fend for themselves; and fend they did—with steel. The first Blaise followed Eudo, Blaise Red-foot, as he was called. His sons killed him and succeeded to his inheritance, each in turn treading on his brother's body. Stephen, Halcro, then Blaise II. Blaise II., having no brothers left and his children too young for his attention, picked a quarrel with the fighting Bishop of Cragarn, a kinsman by marriage. He caught the churchman and built a blind tower of masonry to hold him fast. To this day it is called the Mitre Tower. The Bishop, indeed, died in it, but he did manage to grapple with his encloser, who had come in to revile him. The pair of them fell down the ladderway together and broke between them a dozen of worthless necks. Blaise III., Harmin, Dunstan, then three Halcros in succession—Halcro Wryneck, Halcro Stiffneck, Halcro Cutneck—the Wydos and the rest of them must be passed over. What was reported of the horses of King Duncan of Scotland would fit their case. Out of one Rolf and his high-minded, unhappy wife, Isotta de Chapres, came a fourth Blaise before Rolf was drowned in his castle ditch one dark December night. He was vilely drunk, it seems; yet he got nearer to a bed at home than any of his house before or since. Blaise IV. married his niece, Sibyl Baskerville, with talk of a dispensation from Rome, but no one ever saw the document. This Blaise was huge and middle aged, the bride a baby; and Blaise was an ill-conditioned giant. He fell foul of the Countess Isabel de Forz and had his tongue cut out by an adventurous knight, one Salomon de Born. Blaise Sanslang is his name for all time.

Out of his progeny this history comes, for he had many sons.

These were their names:—Blaise, who reigned at Coldscaur as Blaise V.; then Otho, who had a daughter Mabilla by his wife, the heiress of Joyeulx Saber, in Campflors, and no other issue; then Roger, who was killed, with all his sons, fighting against his brother, the Chieftain. He, too, left a daughter at home, Holdis, or Hold, to wit. Of these ladies anon; but there were two other brothers, churchmen both, and one of them, the elder, was Valeric, Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fe, and the other was Bishop Stephen, of Havilot, whom Sorges had served.

It was when Blaise V., son of Sanslang, had reigned some dozen years at Coldscaur with a wife alive, five sons and a daughter that the Earl of Pikpoyntz suddenly crossed his borders one misty autumn night, surprised the Scaur, reddened all the sky from edge to edge with the flames he set a-going, secured some thousand head of black cattle and paid off old scores by cutting down Blaise, his five sons and his wife in their own hall. This particular Blaise, by comparison mild mannered, was indubitably a scoundrel, but he met his death—he and his boys—as became a Renny. It was the hour of ease and minstrelsy in the hall. He was weaponless and in silk; his wife was by his side on the dais; the child, grave eyed Sabine, was on his knee. Below sat the retainers and household, all unarmed; in the midst a young minstrel was singing a song of the South, which praised in the fluent Southern fashion the great house, "miraculous flowers of beauty, of honor and of knightly deeds."

In the hush which followed the sudden burst of clamor outside the great doors were flung open and Pikpoyntz, in full armor, but bareheaded, as he always was in his fighting, strode in at the head of his guards. "Renny, you poisonous thief," he roared in the tones which had earned him his nickname, Bull of the North, "I have come to send you to hell!" Blaise, with one sweep of his eye, saw what his chances were. He never moved, but "Sit down, all of you," he said to his household, and was obeyed. His wife's hand trembled on his arm, the young men, his sons, insensibly took hands; but not a soul moved.

"To your work, Pikpoyntz," said Blaise de Renny then, and Pikpoyntz did it. There is no reason to think that a soul was left alive in that hall but one. That was the child Sabine, whom you know by this time, a prize he meant to turn to better account than his herd of trampling cattle.

For the fact was that Blaise and his five sons were the last males of the long line of Eudo, unless you are to count the two churchmen his brothers, which, for obvious reasons, is forbidden. Valeric, Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fe, in Logres was one of these—a great man, whose intellect, at least, scandal could never tarnish. The other was Stephen de Renny, Bishop of Havilot, in Campflors—Sorges' friend of the West. So far, therefore, Pikpoyntz had swooped to a purpose—if his purpose had been only to scour the Scaur.

But he had swooped to still better purpose. After the males came the women, for Coldscaur is a female fief. Donna Sabine became Renny of Coldscaur, was heiress of all Marvilion and very marriageable. In her right he could possess himself of her royalty by a clean title instead of a bloody one, and if this was not in his mind when he compassed his deed of shame he is not the man whom history reports. After her, it is true, came two other women—Mabilla, daughter of Otho, and Hold, Roger's daughter. Of these he may or may not have heard, as also that they were older than the heiress and more instantly to be wedded. But if he knew of their names he must have known also of their conditions, that Mabilla de Renny was said to be betrothed to the King's brother and that Donna Hold was in the ward of the Prince-Bishop of Grand-Fe. Wisely, I think, he chose for the bird in the hand; hawklike, he swooped where the brood lay thickest. The little Donna Sabine was the youngest of the cousins, but as well as the Renny name she has the Renny inheritance. And that was a whole shire and marched with Pikpoyntz.

I beg the reader's pardon for this long winded digression, but there was no help for it. You are to deal in this book with the fortune of the three cousins—these last of the Rennys. You must know whence they sprang in order that you may judge of the length of their jumping.

And now for Campflors, Father Sorges and Mabilla de Renny.

(To Be Continued.)