HIS QUEST

by VERA CHAPMAN.

PART L.

The picture of Sir John de Creke, printed in black on white linen, hangs on my wall. It is the impression of the church brass over his tomb, and bears his name, and the date. His armour and accourrements are those of the 12th Century; on the three visible joints of his armour are three grotesque heads, of devils or Saracens?-- and at

his feet is his dog, a strange creature, with haunches and paws like a lion, and an almost human face, with squinting, blank, black eyes. On his shield is his own device, of three lozenges enclosing wavy lines for the water of the 'creek' from which he took his name.

One night I woke in brilliant moonlight, and in its glare I saw him move. He took solid form, stepped down from his picture, and spoke to me.

'I must go,' he said. 'It is full moon, andI must be off on my quest. My horse is below.' And sure enough, as I looked out of my window, there was a noble white destrier, harnessed and caparisoned, stamping with its hooves in the moonlit road. I turned back to the gleaming figure in my room. I noticed differences—— his shield no longer carried his own device, but a red cross like a Crusader's; on his helmet was a fine plume; and the three heads were gone from the joints of his armour, leaving plain rosettes in their place.

'Where are you going?' I said.

'I do not know, yet. But I must follow my Quest, wherever it leads me.'

'And what is your Quest?'

'I seek my Lady, the most beautiful in all the world.'

'Who is your lady, most noble knight?'

'She is Rosamunda, the Rose of the World. There is none more beautiful. Come, I must not delay.'

'May I go with you?' I said.

'Come, and welcome.'

'But how shall I come?' I cried, 'And in what guise? I cannot be either your Squire or your Damosel. Suppose I come as your little dog?'

'Yes,' he said, ' you shall be Blanche the faithful brachet, who lies at my feet.'

I agreed heartily. 'That way I can see all, hear all, and-well, say almost nothing, except with very good reason.'

So suddenly I found myself in the shape of that same strange little dog, with the enormous paws and the black squinting eyes. There I was, out in the moonlight, while Sir John mounted his horse with a flash of silver armour, and we set out.

I was very glad of those enormous paws, since by their help I was enabled to keep up with the great horse without much difficulty. We turned out of the very ordinary road where I live, and round another corner into a park I had never seen before, and then along a narrow white road between trees, away and away into country that was quite strange to me. Not w wind stirred in the tall black pines, and the moon shone steadily. Mile after mile we went, and the day came, and we travelled through wild heath country without a sign of men; somewhere we rested, and somewhere we ate, but I remember nothing of it.

But towards sundown the scenery became rocky and wild, and we drew towards the foot of a mountain. There, in the fold of the craggy foothills, with the setting sun behind us, we came upon a little chapel, and a hut beside it, near a spring of clear water; a hermitage, it would seem. One bell hung above the chapel door; and sounded clear and cold in the stillness. A tall old man in a white robe came out to meet us, and Sir John dismounted.

'I must go in here alone,' he said. 'Not even a little dog may come with me, so you, my faithful brachet, must keep company with my horse.' And he went inside, and the chapel door was shut.

hundreds of people falling over each other, starting things cooking and forgetting them, letting the roasts burn and the pots boil dry— how anything ever got to the table I couldn't think, for they ate more than they cooked, and wasted more than they ate. I hate to see waste and grieved to see them spoiling the good stuff. I heard one young cook say to another as he passed me, 'What'll we do when there's no more in the larder?' and the otherjust said, 'Don't be so silly,' and threw a bowlful of cream over him.

After supper I walked out inthe garden, where dusk had fallen, and the wide lawns were softly lit with strings of glimmering coloured lanterns. The revelling went on in wilder confusion. But there was a darker part of the garden, behind the palace, where the people seemd to want to stop me going. None the less, I slipped quietly away from them and went through the dark shrubberies. And there I heard what seemed to be a faint sad music coming up from the ground—— but as I came nearer, and heard it more plainly, it was the sighing and weeping of forsaken lovers and disappointed pleasure seekers.

There was a high terrace along one side of the building, overlooking the gaily lit gardens below, and here I lurked in the shadows, and saw two ladies come by. They were older, much older than the revelling girls and boys below--- their hair was white and elegantly dressed, and they walked stiffly, arm in arm, looking down on the dancers.

'Dis-gusting! 'said one of them. 'All that, going on down there. Thank goodness we're not like that.' But all the while her two hands were caressing her friend's hand, and cunningly drawing off her rings; and her friend, whose arm was round her waist, held a little sharp penknife, and was feeling for a joint in the other's corset where she could drive it in.

I could stand no more of them, and passed along round the next corner; there was a lighted window, and in it there sat two staid elderly men, in black coats, before a table covered with papers. The noise of the revellers came up to them, and distracted one of them from the figures. he was adding. He looked up with annoyance.

'There ought to be a Law Against It,' he said, 'All that going on down there. Ought to be a Law Against It. More law and order, that's what this country needs.—— Mind you, no law against what we do here.' And somehow I knew, without having to see, that the papers on the table were full of extortion, and unjust profits, and plans to make green valleys into deserts, and to sell men the means to murder each other.

'Oh, come now!! laughed the other man. 'No law against us, of course.

'Oh, come now!! laughed the other man. 'No law against us, of course. But them-- why, the more they go mad for pleasure, the more profit we make. On with the merry game, and let them DoAsThey Please as long as they pay us. Let them ruin themselves--- if there's any vice they haven(t tried, teach it to them-- invent new vices if you can-- it all comes back to us in money. No law but Do As You Please!

So I left them and went back to the kitchen, where I slept on a soft cushion— though I had to bare my teeth and scare off plenty of others who thought they had a right to take it from me.

But before it was light, Sir John woke me. 'Come,' he said, '
'I think we had better get out of here. They are charming people, but all
the same.... And some of the sweet ladies are too friendly by far. I
can't be discourteous to them, but I don't want to forget Rosamunda,
and if I stayed here, I'm afraid that I should.'

None opposed us, for they all seemed, at last, to have fallen into drunken sleep, and no watch was kept; none were awake but a few thieves of money or love who crept about here and there. So we slipped out and away from the white walls of the domain of Sans-Loy, and picked up the trail of the cærven roses, as the great morning star began to shine in the cold heavens.

My master had laid aside his armour, and it hung behind his saddle, but as the light grew, he said thoughtfully,

'I think we may meet with Sans-Ley again, so I will put onmy breastplate.' So he did, and I helped him to lace it up; but he said, 'Do not lace it too strait, in spite of all— there's reason and measure in all things.'

After a long time he came out alone, and he laid his hand on my head. 'Good Blanche,' he said, 'you have waited patiently. I have had word from my Lady, and a sign, and gifts too. Look, here is her sign,' and he showed me by the roadside the device of a rose carved in the stone, with an arrow pointing. 'Where we see this sign, we must go. And these are her gifts—— a ring, a rose, and her picture.' And he put the ring on his finger, the portrait about his neck, and the rose in the phume of his helmet. Then suddenly he lifted me in his arms and pointed.

'Look eastward,' he said, and there, over the shoulder of the hill, I looked, and saw the last rays of the setting sun light up a mountain peak very far off, and upon the peak stood a castle of amazing beauty. gleaming white and rosy in the wesern light. And as we looked, a flash like a diamond, or like lightning, came from one of its remote windows, and smote our eyes with its brilliance.

'That is the castle where my Lady dwells,' he said. 'She signals to me. Let us go.

So we journeyed far into the night, and next day we went on through twisting mountain passes, always following the carved stone roses, and so another day passed. And as it drew towards sunset the grass grew greener, and the trees were laden with heavy-scented blossom, and all was soft and glowing. And then we saw before us a shining white palace.

We approached it, and the owner came out to meet us, a handsome knight with straight fair heair to his shoulders, and a silken tunic of rich colours over which a golden chain was hung. He greeted Sir John courteously.

'Welcome, worthy Knight, and your little dog too. Come in, come in. I am called the Chevalier Sans-Loy, and this is the Palacce Delightful.'

Then he led us inside the walls, and I saw that all around us were green lawns and groves of trees, where handsome young people, both he and she, dressed in the gayest fancy, were eating, drinking and courting.

'This is the happiest place on earth,' said our host, 'for we have only one law, and that is: Do as you please.'

He led us through the merry throng, where everyone, it seemed,

'I'm all in favour of gaiety and fun, 'said Sir John, 'and nobody could call em aa Puritan--- but this is ridiculous.'

'You see,' said our host, 'we follow the philosophy of the immortal Rabelais, who said, 'Do as you please.'

'Your pardon,' said Sir John, smiling rather timidly, 'but I lived a little nearer the time of Rabelais than you, and what I think that great and misunderstood man said was, 'Fay ce que voudras,' which I would render as 'Do what you wish to do.' There is a difference, you will agree.'

He pondered a little, and then went on,

'And I believe Messire Rabelais added another clause-- I think he said, 'And love God.' "

'Ho, as to love! ' laughed out host. 'But of course, love. Yes indeed, we worship love here. We live for nothing else but love. Love is the law, we say, love under will.'

'Yes,' said Sir John, and I could see that he was troubled, 'but love is an easy word to say. Love for whom, and whose will?'

At this point some of the gentle and pleasant-faced servants came for me, the little dog, and led me away to supper in the kitchen. And there I had a most magnificent supper, but I think that most of it was stolen. For the kitchen was a chaotic place-- there were

So we went on into another morning, through pleasant cultivated cpuntry; and towards noon we came to a grey wall covered with creeping plants, and a wide doorway --- here was a place like an ancient college of learning, all gables and diamond-paned windows. A handsome elderly man came out to meet us, with smooth white hair and a small beard, and a long straight gown of dark velvet.

'Come in, good Sir John,' he said smi.ing. 'Welcome to the College of Rational Enlightenment. My name is Sans-Foy. You must come and share my table, and see my museum. '

He led us into his museum, and at first I thought this surely must be a good place, for it had a noble vaulted roof and a tall central window, and a sweet warm smell of incense pervaded it. It looked like a church, but it also looked like a mosque, or a synagogue, or a Hindu stupa, or a Greek temple, or a great many other things. All around were displayed, in glass cases and in lighted pictures, all the objects belonging to all the religions of mankind. There were crucifixes and Buddhas, voodoo bundles and Bibles, Torahs in their embroidered cases, chasubles and copes and surplices, smooth marbles of Venus and Apollo, rough country Pans with horns and hoofs, and the Goat of Mendes also; Isis and cat-headed Sekhmet, and the gross hippopotamus goddess, Tibetan prayer-wheels, and Gautama under his tree of medidation, rosaries and witches' garters and everything from every kind of faith that mankind ever thought of. And I could hear, sometimes the thin unearthly warbling of a Gregorian chant, sometimes the clean downright line of an Anglican hymn, or the brass and drums of the Salvation Army, or the 'Shema' of Israel, or the muezzin calling from his minaret; or the shrill yelling of the priests of Cybele in their frenzy, or the throbbing of the Obeah drums in the jungle. Our host shrugged his shoulders and smiled at them all.

'You see, ' he said, 'I have studied this question of religion very deeply. I have carefully considered them all --- and of course I find that they are basically all the same, and there is nothing in any one of them. They are all just notions that the mind of man has dreamed up for a number of very understandable reasons---- You do agree with me, don't you?'

'Since you ask me,' said Sir John, 'and with all courtesy, and in all frankness--- no.'

NEXT ISSUE: Sir John meets the third of the trio, Sans-Joy.

through the contract of the contract of

