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MONTE-CRISTO'S DAUGHTER.

SEQUEL TO

ALEXANDER DUMAS'

**GREAT NOVEL, THE "COUNT OF MONTE-CRISTO," AND CONCLUSION
OF "EDMOND DANTÈS."**

By

Edmund Flagg

"MONTE-CRISTO'S DAUGHTER," a wonderfully brilliant, original, exciting and absorbing novel, is the Sequel to "The Count of Monte-Cristo," Alexander Dumas' masterwork, and the continuation and conclusion of that great romance, "Edmond Dantès." It possesses rare power, unflagging interest and an intricate plot that for constructive skill and efficient development stands unrivalled. Zuleika, the beautiful daughter of Monte-Cristo and Haydée, is the heroine, and her suitor, the Viscount Giovanni Massetti, an ardent, impetuous young Roman, the hero. The latter, through a flirtation with a pretty flower-girl, Annunziata Solara, becomes involved in a maze of suspicion that points to him as an abductor and an assassin, causes his separation from Zuleika and converts him into a maniac. The straightening out of these tangled complications constitutes the main theme of the thrilling book. The novel abounds in ardent love scenes and stirring adventures. The Count of Monte-Cristo figures largely in it, and numerous Monte-Cristo characters are introduced. "MONTE-CRISTO'S DAUGHTER" is the latest addition to Petersons' famous series, consisting of "The Count of Monte-Cristo," "Edmond Dantès," "The Countess of Monte-Cristo," "The Wife of Monte-Cristo," and "The Son of Monte-Cristo."

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MONTE-CRISTO'S DAUGHTER.

SEQUEL TO ALEXANDER DUMAS' GREAT NOVEL, "THE COUNT OF MONTE-CRISTO," AND CONTINUATION AND CONCLUSION OF "EDMOND DANTÈS."

CHAPTER I.

MONTE-CRISTO AND THE PRIMA DONNA.

The Count of Monte-Cristo was in Rome. He had hired one of the numerous private palaces, the Palazzo Costi, situated on a broad thoroughfare near the point where the Ponte St. Angelo connects Rome proper with that transtiberine suburb known as the Leonine City or Trastevere. The impecunious Roman nobility were ever ready to let their palaces to titled foreigners of wealth, and Ali, acting for the Count, had experienced no difficulty in procuring for his master an abode that even a potentate might have envied him. It was a lofty, commodious edifice, built of white marble in antique architectural design, and commanded from its ample balconies a fine view of the Tiber and its western shore, upon which loomed up that vast prison and citadel, the Castle of St. Angelo, and the largest palace in the world, the Vatican.

The Count of Monte-Cristo had always liked Rome because of its picturesque, mysterious antiquity, but his present mission there had nothing whatever to do with his individual tastes. He had fixed himself for a time in the Eternal City that his daughter Zuleika, Haydée's^[1] child, might finish her education at a famous convent school conducted under the auspices of the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart.

Zuleika was fifteen years of age, but looked much older, having the early maturity of the Greeks, whose ardent blood, on her dead mother's side, flowed in her youthful veins. She had attained her full height, and was tall and well-developed. She strongly resembled her mother, possessing brilliant beauty of the dreamy, voluptuous oriental type. Her hair was abundant and black as night. She had dark, flashing eyes, pearly teeth, full ruby lips and feet and hands that were of fairylike diminutiveness, as well as miracles of grace and dainty shapeliness. In temperament she was more like Haydée than the Count, though she possessed her father's quick decision and firmness, with the addition of much of his enthusiasm.

The Palazzo Costi was magnificently furnished, so the Count had made no alterations in that respect, bringing with him only the family wardrobe and a portion of his library, consisting mainly of oriental manuscripts written in weird, cabalistic characters and intelligible to no one but himself.

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The household was made up solely of the Count, his son Espérance,^[2] his daughter Zuleika, the faithful Nubian mute Ali and five or six male and female domestics. Having no other object than his daughter's education, the Count wished to live in as thorough retirement as he could, but it was impossible for him to keep his presence a secret, and no sooner had it become known that he was in Rome than he was besieged by hosts of callers belonging to the highest nobility, mingled with whom came numerous patriots, disciples of the unfortunate Savonarola, distinguished for their firm devotion to the cause of Italian liberty.

At an early hour of the morning upon which this narrative opens the Count of Monte-Cristo sat alone in a small apartment of the Palazzo Costi, which had been arranged as his study and in which his precious manuscripts were stored in closely locked cabinets. The Count had a copy of a Roman newspaper before him, and his eyes were fixed on a paragraph that seemed to have fascinated him as the serpent fascinates the bird. The paragraph read as follows:

"Mlle. Louise d' Armilly, the famous prima donna, who will sing to-night at the Apollo Theatre her great rôle of *Lucrezia Borgia*, has, it appears, a deep impenetrable mystery surrounding her. She is French by birth, and is said to be the daughter of a banker, who vanished under peculiar circumstances, but, as she positively declines to speak of her history, we can only give the rumors concerning her for what they are worth. M. Léon d' Armilly, brother of the prima donna, who supports her in Donizetti's opera, also refuses to be communicative. At any rate, the mere hint of the mystery has already caused quite a flutter of excitement in high society circles and that is sufficient to insure a crowded house."

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"Louise d' Armilly!" murmured the Count, half-audibly. "The name is familiar, certainly, though where I have seen or heard it before I cannot now recall. The lady is French by birth, the paper says, and that fact, at least, is a sufficient pretext for me to visit her. I will call on her as a fellow countryman, and the interview will demonstrate if she is known to me."

The Count arose, went to his desk and, seating himself there, wrote the following brief epistle:

"Edmond Dantès,^[3] Count of Monte-Cristo, desires permission to call upon Mlle. Louise d' Armilly at ten o'clock this morning. In this desire M. Dantès is actuated solely by the wish to lay the homage of a Frenchman at the feet of so distinguished an artiste of his own nation as Mlle. d' Armilly."

Having finished, sealed and addressed this note, the Count touched a bell which was immediately answered by the ever-watchful Nubian.

"Ali," said the Count, in the Arabic tongue, "take this letter to the Hôtel de France and wait for a reply."

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The faithful servant bowed almost to the floor, took the missive and departed. When he had gone, the Count walked the apartment with the long strides habitual to him at such times as he was engrossed by some all-powerful thought.

"Surely," he muttered, "this artiste can in no way interest me personally, and yet I feel a subtle premonition that it would be wise in me to see her."

He was still pacing the study when Ali returned. The Nubian's usually impassible face bore traces of excitement and horror. He prostrated himself at his master's feet and, with his visage pressed against the floor, held up his hand, presenting to the Count the identical letter of which he had been the bearer.

"Why, how is this, Ali?" asked the Count, frowning. "My letter sent back without an answer. The seal has been broken, too. It must have been read."

The mute slowly arose and began an eloquent pantomime which his master readily translated into words: "You went to the Hôtel de France and sent up the letter. In ten minutes it was returned to you by the lady's valet, who said all the answer the Count of Monte-Cristo deserved from his mistress was written on the back."

Ali nodded his head in confirmation of his master's translation, looking as if he expected to be severely reprimanded for being the bearer of such an indignity. The Count, however, merely smiled. Curiosity rather than anger predominated in him. He turned the letter over and read, scrawled in pencil in a woman's hand, the following brief and enigmatical but insulting communication:

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"Any Frenchman save the ignominious M. Dantès, the so-called Count of Monte-Cristo, would be welcome to Mlle. d' Armilly. That person she does not wish to see and will not."

The Count was perplexed and also amused. The fervor of the prima donna made him smile. He certainly did not know her, certainly had never seen her. Why then was she so bitter against him? He could make nothing out of it. Was it possible her name was really as familiar to him as it had seemed? The irate artiste had surely heard of the Count of Monte-Cristo and, therefore, could not be mistaken in regard to his identity, but in what way could he have injured her or incurred her

anger? The more he thought of the matter the more perplexed he grew. As he was debating within himself what action he ought to take, there was a knock at the door and a domestic entered, handing him a card upon which was inscribed: "Captain Joliette."

"Ha!" cried Monte-Cristo, "he comes in time. He will aid me in solving this mystery."

He motioned Ali from the study, and directed the valet who had brought the card to show the visitor up at once. In another instant Captain Joliette entered the room. The Count sprang forward to greet him.

"Welcome, Captain," said he. "I have not seen you since our stirring adventures in Algeria.^[4] I hope you are well and happy. By the way, what are you doing, in Rome? I was not aware you were here."

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"I am here simply by chance," answered the young soldier, with a blush that belied his words. "I was in Italy on a little pleasure trip and naturally drifted to the Eternal City. I learned only this morning that you were installed at the Palazzo Costi and instantly hastened to pay my respects."

When their cordial greetings were over and they were seated side by side upon a commodious sofa luxuriously upholstered in crimson silk, the Count said, abruptly:

"Captain, did you ever hear of a French opera singer named Louise d' Armilly?"

Again the young man colored deeply, a circumstance that did not escape the close observation of his companion, who instantly divined that the famous prima donna counted for more in the reasons that had brought the Captain to Rome than that gallant warrior was willing to admit.

"Yes," stammered Joliette, "I have heard of her, and report says she is a remarkably charming lady as well as a great artiste."

"Your tone is enthusiastic, my dear Captain," returned Monte-Cristo, smiling pleasantly. "Perhaps you are acquainted with Mlle. d' Armilly."

"Well, to confess, Count," said Joliette, with a laugh, "I am acquainted with her, and, curiously enough, part of my mission here to-day was to ask you to occupy a box at the performance of 'Lucrezia Borgia' this evening. Will you accept?"

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"With genuine delight," was Monte-Cristo's ready answer. "I desire to see this mysterious prima donna for more than one reason. In the first place, her name is dimly familiar to me, though I cannot remember where I ever heard it, and, in the second place, she flatly refused a visit from me no later than this morning."

Joliette looked greatly surprised.

"Refused a visit from you, Count! I would not believe it did I not hear it from your own lips. Mlle. d' Armilly must be mad! She surely cannot know what an honor it is to receive a visit from the Count of Monte-Cristo!"

The Count smiled in his peculiar way, and handed the Captain Mlle. d' Armilly's singular reply to his note. The young man glanced at it in amazement, reading it again and again; finally he stammered out:

"It is her handwriting, but what can she mean?"

"That is exactly what I would like to know, and I see by your manner and words that you are powerless to enlighten me. Still, you can tell me who this Mlle. d' Armilly is, and that will in all probability furnish me with the key to her rather shabby treatment of me."

"My dear Count, I am acquainted with the young lady, it is true, but, like yourself, I am in total ignorance so far as her history is concerned. She is French, that is evident, and she has gone so far as to admit to me that Louise d' Armilly is only her professional name, but what her real name is she has more than once positively refused to disclose to me. She is equally reticent as to the rumors afloat regarding her. You are, doubtless, aware that she is reputed to be the daughter of a French banker who mysteriously disappeared. This she neither denies nor affirms; she merely maintains an obstinate silence whenever it is mentioned in her presence."

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"Your recital interests me greatly, Captain," said Monte-Cristo. "You are more privileged than myself in that you enjoy the acquaintance of this eccentric young lady, but she does not seem to repose a greater degree of confidence in you than in me, for she has told you absolutely nothing."

"Well," said Joliette, "you will see her to-night, at any rate, despite her prohibition. She cannot keep you out of the theatre, for the box is purchased and here are the tickets."

"But she will be angry with you, Captain," said the Count, slyly, "for bringing such an undesirable auditor. I had better go alone and occupy some obscure seat. I do not wish you to forfeit Mlle. d' Armilly's smiles for me."

"Pshaw!" replied Joliette, "there is plainly some mistake. She does not know you, will not recognize you. She has certainly confounded you with some one else."

"Perhaps so," said Monte-Cristo; "but women's memories are good, and I warn you that you are taking a grave risk."

"None whatever, I assure you. It is more than likely that, in answering your note as she did, Mlle. d' Armilly was influenced solely by caprice. If she should ask me after the performance who was my companion, I have only to give you a fictitious name and she will be none the wiser."

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That evening Captain Joliette and the Count of Monte-Cristo made their way through the dense throng in front of the Apollo Theatre, and were finally shown into a lower proscenium box commanding a full view of the stage. Monte-Cristo instinctively sought refuge behind the curtains and drapery of the box, where he could sit unobserved and yet be enabled to closely scrutinize the mysterious singer who appeared to have such an intense aversion for him.

Although still early the house was already crowded in every part, and throngs were unable to gain even admission. The vast audience was made up chiefly of the best and most fashionable society in Rome. It included many of the highest nobility, who occupied the boxes they held for the season. Everywhere the bright colored, elegant toilets of the ladies met the eye, while the gentlemen were brilliant in fête attire. Fresh young faces and noble old visages were side by side, the beauty of youth and the impressiveness of age, and the male countenances were not less striking than those of the females. Truly, it was a grand assemblage, one that should delight the heart and flatter the vanity of even the most capricious of prima donnas.

At first there was a low hum of conversation throughout the theatre, together with preliminary visits from box to box, but the flutter began to subside as the musicians appeared, and by the time they were in their places in the orchestra absolute silence reigned. When the conductor made his appearance he was greeted with a burst of applause, which he gracefully acknowledged with a profound bow. Then he grasped his bâton, tapped lightly upon the rack in front of him, and the delightful overture to Donizetti's great work commenced.

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At its conclusion the curtain slowly rose and the opera began. Mlle. d' Armilly came forth in due course, and the house fairly rung with plaudits of welcome. She sang divinely and acted with consummate art, receiving loud encores for all her numbers. Monte-Cristo who was passionately fond of music, caught the prevailing enthusiasm and gradually emerged from the shelter of the protecting curtains and drapery. He had scanned Mlle. d' Armilly carefully through his opera-glass and was thoroughly convinced that she was a perfect stranger to him, although now and then a tone, a gesture or a movement of the body vaguely conveyed a sense of recognition of some tone, gesture or movement he had heard or seen somewhere before. The Count, however, reflected that all women possessed certain points of resemblance in voice and bearing; he, therefore, passed the present coincidences over as purely accidental, thinking no more of them.

For a long while Mlle. d' Armilly did not glance at the box occupied by Captain Joliette and the Count of Monte-Cristo,^[5] and it was not until the former threw her a costly wreath of flowers that she turned her eyes in that direction. She was about bowing her acknowledgments, when her gaze rested upon the stately form of the Count. Instantly she paused in the centre of the stage, turned deadly pale beneath the paint of her make-up, and, with a loud scream, fell in a swoon. The curtain was at once rung down, and the director, stating that the prima donna had been seized with sudden and alarming indisposition, dismissed the audience. Captain Joliette rushed to Mlle. d' Armilly's dressing-room and the Count of Monte-Cristo wended his way back to the Palazzo Costi, utterly bewildered by what had taken place.

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FOOTNOTES:

[1] A full account of the life of Haydée, will be found in that great romance "The Wife of Monte-Cristo," published complete and unabridged by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia.

[2] A full account of his life and of Espérance's remarkable career will be found in that absorbing novel, "The Son of Monte-Cristo," published complete and unabridged by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia.

[3] For a full account of the life and career of "Edmond Dantès," one of the most powerful and thrilling novels ever issued, see "Edmond Dantès," published complete and unabridged by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia.

[4] See "The Son of Monte-Cristo," complete and unabridged edition, published by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia.

[5] For a full account of the life and remarkable career of "The Count of Monte-Cristo," Alexander Dumas' masterpiece, one of the greatest romances ever written, see the illustrated and unabridged edition of it, published by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia.

CHAPTER II.

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A STRANGELY SENT EPISTLE.

Zuleika, Monte-Cristo's daughter, had been for some months in the convent school conducted by the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart. She was not a close student though a rapid learner, and was rather inclined to romance and adventure than to musty books of history and science. As has

already been stated, she had the early maturity of Greek girls. Besides, she had attracted the attention of several Roman youths of high and noble lineage, who had eagerly paid her the homage due to her beauty and oriental attractiveness. Though but fifteen, she appreciated and felt flattered by this homage, and naturally was impatient of the restraint put upon her by the regulations of the convent school, which rigorously excluded all male visitors save parents or guardians.

In the first rank of her youthful admirers was the Viscount Giovanni Massetti. He was more ardent than any of the rest and, indeed, was desperately in love with the fair and bewitching child of the dead Haydée. He belonged to a family of great antiquity and boundless wealth, and was reputed to possess a vast fortune in his own right. The Viscount was only in his twenty-first year, but was exceedingly manly, dashing and gallant. He was quite handsome and was said to be the soul of honor, though his ardent temperament and headlong pursuit of whatever he most coveted not unfrequently involved him in serious troubles, from which, thanks to his own tact and the vast influence of his family, he generally came out unscathed.

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On Zuleika's arrival in Rome and before she had been placed in the convent school, the Viscount Massetti had made her acquaintance in a way that savored of romance and that made a deep impression upon the inexperienced young girl. In Monte-Cristo's carriage, attended only by a timid *femme de chambre*, she was one day crossing one of the two bridges leading to the Island of San Bartolomeo, when a trace broke and the horses took fright. The terrified driver lost control of them, and the mad animals dashed along at a fearful rate, almost overturning the carriage. Zuleika had arisen in the vehicle, which was an open *barouche*, and was wildly clinging to the back of the front seat, her face white with fear and her long black hair, which had become loosened, streaming out behind her. Her wide open eyes had in them a look of tearful supplication most difficult to resist. The young Viscount, who was riding over the bridge on horseback at the time of the accident, could not resist it. He sprang from his horse and, as the carriage passed him, leaped into it. Seizing Zuleika by the waist, and holding her tightly to him, he then made another spring, alighting safely with her upon the roadway of the bridge. The flying horses were ultimately stopped and the occupants of the badly shattered vehicle rescued from their dangerous situation. This adventure caused the Count of Monte-Cristo to throw open the doors of his palazzo to the young Italian, and he had been a frequent visitor there up to the time of Zuleika's departure for the convent school.

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In the interval both the Viscount and the girl had become much attached to each other, and then this mutual attachment had rapidly ripened into mutual love of that ardor and intensity experienced only by children of the southern or oriental sun. Young Massetti had avowed his passion to his beautiful charmer, and the avowal had not caused her displeasure; it was, on the contrary, exceedingly agreeable to her and she did not seek to conceal the fact from her enthusiastic suitor.

The momentous interview took place in a densely shaded alley of the garden of the Palazzo Costi one sultry afternoon of the early autumn. The youthful couple were seated very near each other upon a rustic bench. Massetti held Zuleika's small, soft hand in his and the electric touch of her tiny and shapely fingers thrilled him as the touch of female fingers had never thrilled him before. He gazed into the liquid depths of her dark, glowing eyes and their subtle fire seemed to melt his very soul. The close, sultry atmosphere, laden with heavy, intoxicating perfumes, was fraught with a delirious influence well calculated to set the blood aflame and promote the explosion of pent-up love. The thick, green foliage enclosed the pair as in a verdant cloud, effectually concealing them from observation. The opportunity was irresistible. Giovanni drew closer to his fascinating companion, so closely that her fragrant breath came full in his face, utterly subjecting him and totally obliterating all caution, everything save his absorbing passion for the palpitating girl whose slight, but clear-cut form, gracefully-outlined beneath her flowing, half-oriental garments, touched his. Suddenly carried away by a powerful transport, he threw his arm around the young girl's yielding waist and drew her without resistance upon his bosom, where she lay, gazing up into his flushed, excited countenance with an indescribable, voluptuous charm, mingled with thorough confidence and unhesitating innocence. Panting in his clasp, her ruby lips partly opened as if for breath, and the ardent Italian hastily, recklessly imprinted a fiery kiss upon them. Zuleika, with an almost imperceptible movement, returned this chaste, but ravishing salute.

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"Oh! how I love you!" murmured Giovanni, quivering from head to foot in his wild ecstasy, and clasping the lovely girl still tighter.

She made no verbal response, but did not stir, did not strive to extricate herself from his warm embrace. This was a sufficient answer for the quick Italian. Zuleika, the beautiful Zuleika, returned his love, favored his suit. His joy approached delirium.

"Oh! Zuleika," he whispered, gazing directly into her night black eyes, "you love me, I am sure! Give me the treasures of your virgin heart! Be mine—be my wife!"

"Oh! Giovanni," returned the quivering girl, in a low, but sweetly modulated voice, "I do love you—God alone knows how much!—but I am too young to be your wife! I am only a child, not yet out of school. My father would not hear of my marrying for several years to come. Can you not wait?"

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"It will be a hard task, Zuleika," answered the young man, excitedly; "but, still, I will wait if you give me a lover's hope. Promise to marry me when you are at liberty to do so, nay, swear it, and I

shall be satisfied!"

"I can neither promise nor swear it, Giovanni, without my father's approval and consent. He is a wise, experienced and thoughtful man, tender and mild to every one he loves, though hard and implacable to his enemies. Speak to him of me, of your love, of your wish. He will listen to you and he will not imperil his daughter's happiness. Go to him without delay, and rest assured that whatever he says or does will be for the best interests of us both."

She had released herself from his clasp and drawn slightly away from him, not in terror, not in prudery, not in coquetry, but as a measure of prudence. She felt intuitively that the wild, intense passion of her Italian adorer must be kept within discreet limits.

"I cannot speak to your father yet," replied Giovanni, hesitatingly. "He might listen to me, it is true; but he would treat our love as a mere childish fancy that time could not fail to dim, if not obliterate. I am deeply in earnest, Zuleika, and could not bear to be treated as a thoughtless, headlong stripling, who did not know his own mind. Ridicule, even in its mildest form, would fire my blood, fill me with mad projects of revenge. I prefer not to ask your father for your hand until certain of a favorable reception of my suit. You comprehend my scruples, do you not, Zuleika? I love you too dearly not to win you when I ask!"

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"But you will speak to my father?" said the girl, in faltering tones.

"Yes, darling, oh! yes; but not until that hated convent school has ceased to oppose its barriers between us. When you have left it, when you have completed the education the Count designs for you, I will seek your father and ask you of him for my wife; until then, until I can with safety speak, at least promise me that you will love no other man, encourage no other suitor."

"That I will do," responded the girl, joyously. "Rest assured I will love no other man, encourage no other suitor!"

Unable to control himself, the Viscount again clasped the object of his adoration in his arms, and again their lips met in a long, passionate kiss of love.

So it was settled, and Zuleika went to the convent school of the Sacred Heart, feeling that her happiness was assured, but impatient of and dissatisfied with the long delay that must necessarily intervene before the realization of her hopes, the dawn of her woman's future.

The Viscount Massetti, though he had professed himself willing to wait, was, on his side, thoroughly discontented with the arduous task he had undertaken. It was one thing to make a rash promise in the heat of enthusiasm, but quite another to keep it, especially when that promise involved a separation from the lovely girl who had inextricably entwined herself about the fibres of his heart and was the sole guiding star of his life and love.

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The convent school of the Sacred Heart was located in the convent of that Sisterhood, about three miles beyond the Porta del Popolo on the northern side of Rome. The convent was a spacious edifice, but gloomy and forbidding, with the aspect of a prison. Narrow, barred windows, like those of a dungeon of the middle ages, admitted the light from without, furnishing a dim, restricted illumination that gave but little evidence of the power and brilliancy of the orb of day. At night the faint, sepulchral blaze of candles only served to make the darkness palpable and more ghastly.

The huge school-room was as primitive and comfortless in its appointments and furniture as well could be. The walls were of dressed stone and loomed up bare and grisly to a lofty ceiling that was covered with a perfect labyrinth of curiously carved beams, the work of some unknown artist of long ago. The scholars' dormitories were narrow cell-like affairs, scantily furnished, in which every light must be extinguished at the hour of nine in the evening. Once admitted to the school, the pupils were not permitted to leave its precincts save at vacation or at the termination of their course of studies, a circumstance that heartily disgusted the gay, light-hearted Italian girls sent there to receive both mental and moral training. Another source of grave vexation to them was the regulation, already alluded to, that rigorously excluded all male visitors, with the exception of parents or guardians.

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Attached to the convent was an extensive garden, full of huge trees that had, apparently, stood there for centuries, so bent, gnarled and aged were they. An ancient gardener, with a flowing beard as white as snow and scanty locks of the same spotless hue, aided by two or three assistants almost as ancient as himself, attended to the lawns and vast flower-beds, the latter being kept constantly filled with plants of gorgeous bloom and exquisite fragrance. The picturesque appearance of the garden contrasted strongly and strangely with the rigid and staid aspect of the convent edifice, and this garden was the one spot where the pupils felt at home and thoroughly enjoyed themselves. They were allowed to walk there at noon and towards twilight in the evening, under the supervision of Sister Agatha, a sharp-sighted and vigilant nun, who never failed to rebuke and correct her vivacious charges for even the slightest infraction of discipline. Still, the girls enjoyed themselves in the garden, for its extent and the fact that Sister Agatha could not be everywhere at once enabled the frisky and light-hearted pupils to indulge in many an escapade.

One noon Zuleika, who was in an unusually despondent frame of mind, strayed from the rest of her companions and strolled beneath the centenarian trees. Unconsciously she approached the lofty wall of the garden. She seated herself at the foot of a gnarled old elm, the leafy branches of

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which descended to the ground and effectually screened Monte-Cristo's daughter from view. At least, so she thought, but though she could not be seen by any within the garden enclosure she was plainly visible from the wall and the trees looming above it without.

As Zuleika sat pondering on her lot and sadly thinking of her separation from her lover, she heard or imagined she heard a singular noise amid the thick boughs of an immense chestnut tree immediately outside the garden wall. She started up in affright, but could discern nothing unusual, and the singular noise was not repeated. The strangest part of the whole affair, however, was that the noise had sounded like her own name uttered by a human voice. This increased her terror and confusion, and she was about to flee from the spot when an oblong pebble to which something white was attached fluttered over the wall and fell at her feet. She was now more alarmed than ever and took several steps backward, the while regarding the white object that lay where it had fallen, motionless and fascinating.

Finally her curiosity obtained the mastery, and, approaching the suspicious object with the utmost caution, she bent over to examine it. It was an ordinary envelope and, no doubt, contained a letter. For whom was it intended? Obviously for one of the pupils. It was a clandestine epistle, too, otherwise it would have come by the regular channel through the post office. Perhaps it was a love letter. At this thought she gave a guilty start and gazed piercingly into the chestnut tree, but nothing was visible there save boughs and leaves. After all, the epistle was, doubtless, destined for some swarthy-visaged Italian beauty, and many such were in the convent school. That it had fallen at her feet was certainly but a mere coincidence. It was not, it could not be intended for her! Its rightful owner, who had clearly received many similar notes in the same way, knew where it was and presently would come for it. The envelope had fallen face downward, and she could not see the address. She touched it with her foot, then cautiously turned it with the tip of her shoe. She saw writing. It was the address. Somehow the arrangement of the characters seemed familiar to her, though she was so dazed and confused she could not make out the name. Her curiosity was unworthy of her, she knew, unworthy of Monte-Cristo's daughter. What right had she to pry into the heart secret of one of her school companions? Still she gazed; she could not help it. Suddenly she stooped and took the envelope from the ground. The address riveted her eyes like a magician's spell. Great heavens! it was her own name—Zuleika!

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Hurriedly snapping the slight string that bound the envelope to the stone, she thrust the former into the bosom of her dress. Then she glanced around her, half-fearing she had been seen by some of the pupils or the watchful Sister Agatha. But no, she was unobserved, and even now her companions and the nun were at such a distance that she could read her letter without the slightest danger of being discovered or interrupted. The temptation was strong. She yielded to it. She would read the letter. She felt convinced that it was from the Viscount Massetti, and the conviction filled her with unutterable joy. She had not heard a word concerning him since she had been immured within the sombre walls of that dismal convent, and now she had tidings of him in his own handwriting! It was rapture! What had he written to her? An assurance of his love, no doubt, and, perhaps, an exhortation to her to keep her part of their agreement—to love no other man, to encourage no other suitor! Surely she loved no one else—she never could love any one but Giovanni Massetti, for did he not possess her whole heart, all the wealth of her ardent youthful affection?

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She kissed the envelope, then opened it, took out the letter, which was written in pencil, and read:

DEAREST ZULEIKA: I can keep from you no longer. I must see you once more and again call you my own. I strove to attract your attention just now in the chestnut tree outside the wall. I uttered your beloved name, but you did not seem to understand me. This evening at twilight I will scale the wall. At that time be at the elm where you now stand and I will meet you there. Do not fail me, and, above all, do not be afraid. I assure you that no harm can possibly befall either of us. Meet me, darling.

Your own,

GIOVANNI.

Zuleika stood staring at this passionate note with sensations made up of amazement, rapture and dismay. Giovanni, her lover, was coming. He would stand there, on that very spot, and she would see him in all the glory of his youthful manhood, with the radiant love-light in his eyes. But how if he were discovered? What then would become of him and of her? She shuddered at the possibilities of danger. But on one point she was resolved—she would meet him let the danger be what it might. How Giovanni would manage to avoid observation she did not know, but she would trust to his judgment and discretion.

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She glanced in the direction of the pupils and Sister Agatha. They were coming slowly towards her. Again secreting her lover's epistle in her bosom, she went to meet them.

CHAPTER III.

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THE INTRUDER IN THE CONVENT GARDEN.

As the hour for the evening promenade drew near, Zuleika became painfully excited, and uneasy. She longed with all her heart to see Giovanni Massetti again, to hear the ardent words of love he would be sure to utter, but would she be doing right to meet him clandestinely and alone? Her mind misgave her. Of course she could trust her young Italian lover, for he was the very soul of chivalry and honor. But did others know this? How would her conduct be judged should the other pupils and Sister Agatha steal upon them unawares? Giovanni might escape without recognition, but with her it would be altogether different. She could escape only by coining an ingenious lie, and at that her whole nature revolted. She could not stoop to an innocent deception, much less to an absolute falsehood. Why had Giovanni tempted her? Why had he sought to place her in a situation he must know would be perilous? There was but one answer—because of his love—and that answer was sufficient to induce her to take the risk, however great it might be. Yes, she would meet him at the appointed time and spot.

At length the bell rang for the promenade, and Sister Agatha headed the little procession for the garden. For a brief space Zuleika lingered with her companions among the shady walks and gorgeous flowers, but at the first opportunity stole away and sought the leafy elm, beneath the friendly boughs of which she was to receive the welcome yet dreaded visit from the Viscount Massetti. She gained the rendezvous unobserved, with loudly beating heart. The young Italian was not there. She searched eagerly but vainly for him in the gathering twilight. What had happened to prevent his coming? She was on thorns of anxiety. Perhaps he had attempted to scale the wall and had fallen, sustaining some severe injury! Perhaps even then, while she was waiting for him, he was lying outside the wall, bruised and bleeding! But what could she do? Only wait, wait, with torturing thoughts seething in her troubled brain.

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She listened intently. Not a sound. If Giovanni were wounded, disabled, he was maintaining a most heroic silence. She drew a magnificent gold watch, the exquisite case of which was thickly incrustated with diamonds, from her belt and glanced at the dial. It was after seven o'clock, and by eight all the scholars were required to be safely housed within the convent. Besides, she was not sure that she would not be missed, searched for and found. What should she do, what course should she take?

As she was debating within herself, uncertain whether to remain or return, there was a rustle amid the foliage of the chestnut tree immediately outside the garden enclosure, and a man's form swung from one of the branches to the top of the wall. Zuleika's emotion well-nigh overcame her. She had recognized Giovanni. In another instant he had leaped from the wall to the ground and was at her side. He stretched out his arms to her and the girl, all of a tremble, impetuously cast herself into them.

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"Oh! Giovanni!" she murmured. "At last. I feared some terrible accident had befallen you."

"I am safe, darling Zuleika," answered the young Italian, folding her in a close embrace and showering ardent kisses upon her forehead and lips. "But you, dearest, you are well? You have not forgotten me, have not ceased to love me?"

"Forgotten you, ceased to love you, Giovanni!" whispered the quivering girl, in a tone of slight reproach, gazing fondly into his eyes. "Have I not given you my solemn promise to love you only?"

"Forgive me, my own!" cried the youthful Viscount. "What is a lover without fears and doubts? They are the proof of the strength of his adoration!"

They seated themselves at the foot of the branching elm, the friendly shelter of which shut them in. Then Zuleika said, with apprehension in her voice:

"Why did you come here, Giovanni? Are you not aware that you are running a great risk and putting me in peril? If we are found together, you will be ignominiously expelled and I severely punished. Besides, think of the disgrace for us both in such an event! The matter will get abroad, furnish food for gossip and certainly reach the ears of my father and brother, whose displeasure I dread more than all else! Think, too, that Espérance will call you to account for your conduct, and I could never bear a quarrel between you and him in which, perhaps, blood might be shed!"

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"Never fear, Zuleika," replied Massetti, gallantly. "Should we be discovered I will shield you. As to your father and brother, they cannot be displeased, for I will explain all to them and end by demanding you in marriage. Why have I come here? Simply because I could hold aloof from you no longer. I felt that I must see you, speak with you, renew my vows of love. Oh! Zuleika, the world is all dark to me without your smile!"

"But you promised me to wait!"

"I know it; but I miscalculated my strength when I made that promise. Could I see you I might be patient; but to wait for weeks and weeks without even a glimpse of your dear face, without once hearing the sound of your beloved voice, is utterly beyond me. I cannot do it!"

"You must. Nothing else can be done. My father wishes me to remain at the convent school for a year, and the rules positively prohibit your visits. Be patient yet awhile, Giovanni. We both are very young and have a life of happiness to look forward to. Besides, we can see each other at the Palazzo Costi during vacation, and that is something."

"It is nothing to a man who wishes to see you constantly, to be always with you. Oh! Zuleika, I cannot bear our separation, I cannot do without you!"

The young man had risen to his feet and uttered these words loudly, recklessly. Zuleika sprang up and caught him by the arm, her face white with terror. [Pg 49]

"Control yourself, Giovanni, control yourself!" she whispered, in a frightened tone. "Speak lower, with more caution, or other ears than mine will hear you!"

But the Viscount did not heed her. He was fearfully agitated and his entire frame shook with excitement and emotion.

"Fly with me, Zuleika, fly with me now, this very moment, and be my wife!" he exclaimed, in a voice so strangely altered that Monte-Cristo's daughter scarcely recognized it. "I am rich, and my family has wealth and power sufficient to protect us against everything and everybody, even your father, with all his untold gold and influence! The Count of Monte-Cristo seeks to part us; that is the reason he has sent you here, to this convent, where you are little less than a prisoner!"

He caught her wildly in his arms and held her against his breast as if defying fate. Zuleika, more terrified than ever, struggled in his embrace and finally released herself. She faced Giovanni, and said, warmly:

"You do my father injustice. He does not seek to part us. He esteems you greatly, Viscount Massetti, loves you for the service you rendered me, his daughter, and will reward that service with the highest recompense in his power to bestow—my hand. But he considers me a child as yet, wishes me to have education and experience before I marry, that I may be a wife worth having and not a mere useless doll. Respect his wishes, Giovanni, respect him. He is a good, kind-hearted man, and will do right. His wisdom has been shown too often for me to doubt it!" [Pg 50]

"His wisdom!" cried Massetti, bitterly. "Yes, he is wise, too wise to bestow your hand upon me, a mere Viscount! What is my family in his eyes? Nothing. What is my wealth? An utter trifle compared to his. I tell you, Zuleika, he does not wish us to marry. He designs you for some high potentate with riches to match the princely marriage-portion you will have!"

"No, no!" cried the girl. "You are despondent, and in your despondency misjudge him. He cares nothing for wealth or exalted station, but values a good name and an unstained reputation above all else."

"But will you not be mine, will you not fly with me from this wretched prison, in which I can see you only by stealth and like a criminal?"

The Italian's eyes sparkled in the twilight and his voice was full of eloquent persuasion. He fell upon his knees at Zuleika's feet, and, seizing her hand, kissed it passionately again and again. The trembling young girl was deeply touched by his love and entreaties. For a moment she wavered, but for a moment only; then reason asserted its sway and cooler reflection came to her aid.

"Rise, Giovanni," she said, with comparative calmness, "rise and be a man. This proposition is altogether unworthy of you, and, should I accept it, we would both be disgraced. I am yours, my heart is in your keeping, and I will be your wife at the proper time with my father's full consent. But I cannot fly with you, I will not!" [Pg 51]

The young man sprang to his feet as if an electric bat had struck him.

"You have no confidence in me, then!" he cried, impulsively. "You do not love me!"

"Do not love you!" exclaimed the girl, winding her shapely arms about his neck, as her lovely head sank upon his bosom. "I love you with all my heart, with all my soul, and it is because I love you that I will not fly with you!"

Giovanni kissed her hair rapturously, excitedly, and the beautiful girl, looking ten times more beautiful in her pleading earnestness, added, sweetly, persuasively:

"Leave me now, darling. The bell for the pupils to return to the convent will soon ring and I must not be missed from among them. Leave me, but remember the maxim, 'Wait and hope!'"

The lover was about to reply when the sound of footsteps suddenly broke upon their ears. They glanced at each other, startled, uncertain what to do. Giovanni was the first to recover self-possession. He noiselessly parted the boughs of the elm and peered cautiously in the direction of the sound.

"Three men are rapidly approaching," he said, hastily, in a whisper. "They are almost here!"

Zuleika looked, in her turn, through the branches.

"The gardener and his assistants," she whispered, nearly petrified by consternation. "They have evidently learned that you scaled the wall and are in quest of you!" [Pg 52]

"See," said Giovanni, breathlessly, pointing to a group behind the men. "A number of nuns are also coming!"

"They are searching for me! Oh! Giovanni, fly, fly instantly!"

"And leave you to suffer, to bear the weight of my imprudence! Never! I will stay and protect you!"

"You will not protect me by remaining. You will only compromise us both the more. Go, I beseech you, go, while there is yet time!"

With tears in her imploring eyes, Zuleika pushed her lover gently towards the wall. He gazed at her for an instant and then at the approaching men and nuns, who were now very near.

The girl clasped her hands supplicatingly, then mutely pointed to the wall.

"It is your wish?" asked Massetti, hurriedly.

Zuleika nodded her head affirmatively, and still more imperatively pointed to the wall.

"I will obey you," whispered the young Italian, "and I will 'wait and hope!'"

She had gained the victory. A joyous love-light came into her eyes, for the moment eclipsing her terror. Giovanni could not resist the temptation to embrace her, even in the face of the danger that threatened him. He wound his arms about her yielding form, drew her to him with a crushing strain, showering burning kisses upon her upturned lips.

"Farewell," he murmured, reluctantly releasing her, "farewell, my own!"

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He turned from her and ran to the wall, scaled it with the agility of a cat and vanished.

When the gardener and his assistants reached the elm, they found Zuleika standing there alone. Had they seen Massetti scale the wall? Had they recognized him? These thoughts shot through the girl's agitated mind. She gave no attention to her own peril.

The men came to a halt and stood silently by, waiting for the nuns to arrive. Horror was pictured on their aged countenances, and they stared at Monte-Cristo's daughter as if she had committed some heinous, unpardonable crime.

The group of nuns speedily arrived, headed by Sister Agatha, who held an open letter in her hand. Zuleika gazed at this letter in silent dismay. It was hers, the one Giovanni had written her! How had it got into Sister Agatha's possession? She mechanically felt in her bosom where she had secreted it, as she thought, safely. Her hand touched only the empty envelope. The note must have fallen upon the floor of the school-room and been found by some malicious pupil, who, after reading it and discovering its compromising contents, had surrendered it to the nun, thus divulging the weighty secret.

Zuleika stood abashed and terror-stricken. No chance of escape now. No chance for deception had she wished to essay it. The letter told the whole story, and the proof of its truth was furnished, for was she not at the appointed rendezvous, and was it not probable that the men and the nuns had seen Giovanni quit her and scale the garden wall?

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The nuns looked as horrified as the old servants, but they were more to be dreaded; they possessed the power of reprimanding and punishing, and what punishment would they think too severe in this extreme case? Sister Agatha spoke. Her tone was milder than Zuleika had expected.

"Oh! mademoiselle," she said, reproachfully, "what is this? A meeting with a lover, and within these holy precincts dedicated to celibacy, chastity and sacred things! What will your father, the Count of Monte-Cristo, say when your conduct is reported to him? You are young, and allowance must be made for youthful blood and passionate impulses; but still you have done wrong, very wrong! Is this man, who signs himself Giovanni and who just left you, your betrothed?"

"He is," murmured Zuleika, blushing and holding down her head.

"With your father's permission, mademoiselle?"

"My father does not object to him," replied the girl evasively.

"In that case your fault is not so great as I at first supposed," said the nun. "You are pardonable for receiving the man, who, with your father's consent, is in time to become your husband; but, nevertheless, in meeting him within the convent grounds you are censurable for lack of discipline, and also for conniving at a breach of our rule which excludes all male visitors, save parents or guardians."

Zuleika bowed her head in submission.

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"The punishment," continued Sister Agatha, "shall be as light as possible, however, if you have never before met this man within the convent grounds."

"I have never met him here before," said Zuleika, "and I only met him in this instance because—because—"

She hesitated and burst into tears.

"Because what, my poor child?" asked the nun, kindly.

"Because I love him so, and because I was afraid, if I did not meet him, in his desperation he would seek me out in face of you all!"

"Have you ever written to him since you have been in this school?"

"Never!"

"Has he ever written to you before?"

"You hold his first letter to me in your hand!"

"How was this letter delivered, by what means did it reach you?"

Her face one mass of crimson, trembling from head to foot, Zuleika told the whole story of her adventure at noon that day. How she had strayed from her companions without any definite intention; how she had seated herself within the screening branches of the elm to meditate; how she had heard the singular noise in the chestnut tree, and, finally, how the letter, fastened to a stone, had come fluttering over the wall and fallen at her feet.

The nuns glanced at each other, horrified and amazed at the audacity of the young Italian.

"Zuleika," said Sister Agatha, "I told you your punishment should be as light as possible. You have been exposed and reprimanded; the blush of shame has been brought to your cheek! This, I think, is penalty sufficient for a first offense, considering also that it was, in a measure, forced upon you. But beware of a second infraction of our rules! Now, return to your companions."

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So it happened that Zuleika suffered but slightly for the imprudence and headlong devotion of her lover. Fearing gossip, the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart suppressed the matter, and the Count of Monte-Cristo never heard of it. Zuleika expected ridicule from her companions, but the warm-blooded, romantic Italian girls, instead of ridiculing her, looked upon her as a heroine and envied her the possession of a lover daring and devoted enough to scale the wall of a convent garden.

CHAPTER IV.

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A STORMY INTERVIEW.

When Captain Joliette entered the dressing-room of Mlle. d' Armilly, after quitting the Count of Monte-Cristo at the Apollo Theatre on the sudden termination of the performance of "Lucrezia Borgia," he found the prima donna lying upon a sofa and slowly recovering from the effects of her swoon. Her maid and the ladies of the company, the latter still in their stage attire, were giving her every attention. It was a strange and somewhat grotesque scene—a real drama with theatrical surroundings. The blazing lights, enclosed by their wire spheres, threw a ruddy glare upon the faces of those present, making them appear weird and witch-like in their paint and powder. On chairs and tables lay Mlle. d' Armilly's changes of dress for the performance and her street garments, while upon a broad shelf in front of a mirror were the various mysterious articles used in her make-up—rouge, grease-paint, poudre de riz, etc., together with brushes and numerous camel's hair pencils. A basin filled with water stood on a washstand, and on the floor was the pitcher, in company with a heterogeneous collection of stage and street boots belonging to the eminent songstress. The director of the theatre was standing anxiously beside the suffering prima donna, mentally calculating the chances of her ability to appear the following night. Léon d' Armilly was walking back and forth in the small apartment, wringing his hands and shedding tears like a woman, while at the open door lounged the tenor and baritone of the troupe, their countenances wearing the usual listless expression of veteran opera singers who, from long habit, are thoroughly accustomed to the indispositions and caprices of prima donnas and consider them as incidental to the profession.

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As Captain Joliette came in, Léon ran to him and exclaimed amid his tears:

"Oh! how could you bring that odious man to your box! See how the very sight of him has affected my poor sister!"

At these words Mlle. d' Armilly roused herself and, springing to her feet, faced the young soldier in a fit of uncontrollable rage.

"How dare you," she cried, her eyes flashing and her voice tremulous with anger, "come here, to me, after what has occurred to-night!"

"I was not aware, Louise," answered he, apologetically, "that you had such a terrible aversion to the Count of Monte-Cristo."

"The Count of Monte-Cristo!" exclaimed the director. "Was he in the house this evening? What an honor!"

The irate prima donna flashed upon him a terrible glance.

"If you consider it an honor to have that monster in your theatre," she fairly hissed, "I will sing for you no more!"

The humiliated director walked away without making a reply. He deemed it the part of wisdom not to embroil himself with an eminent artiste who was capable of bringing him in so much money, and who also was capable, he thought, of breaking her engagement if she saw fit to do so.

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He, therefore, left the dressing-room. The others, seeing that Mlle. d' Armilly was evidently about to have a hot dispute with her admirer and that she was sufficiently restored to need no further care, also quitted the apartment.

When they were alone, the prima donna turned fiercely upon the Captain, exclaiming:

"And you profess to love me, too! Was it love that induced you to bring my worst enemy here to-night? It was hatred rather! Captain Joliette, you hate me!"

"You know I do not, Louise," said the young soldier, warmly. "You know I love you to desperation!"

"Why then was the so-called Count of Monte-Cristo in your box?"

"I was not aware that you knew him; indeed, I felt convinced that he was a total stranger to you, and his conduct to-night tended to confirm that conviction. He looked at you without the slightest sign of recognition; and so far from being your enemy is he that he gave you louder and more enthusiastic applause than any other man in the entire theatre."

"It is his art, Captain Joliette! I tell you that man is as cunning as a serpent and as remorseless as a tiger. Only this morning he sought to gain access to me, with what iniquitous motive I know not; but I returned his letter, with an answer that must have galled his pride to the quick!"

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"I saw that answer," said the Captain. "Monte-Cristo showed it to me himself at his residence, the Palazzo Costi."

"What!" cried Mlle. d' Armilly, with augmented anger. "You saw it, read my very words, and yet brought him to your box?"

"Listen, Louise, and be reasonable. He told me that your name seemed familiar to him and yet he could not recall where or under what circumstances he had heard it. He was astonished at the tone of your reply to his formal and, I must say, very civil note. I was sure there must be some mistake on your part, that you had confounded him with some other person. I had gone to the Palazzo Costi expressly to invite him to hear you sing, to have such a great man present and assist at your triumph! I felt proud of you, Louise, proud of you as an artiste and as a woman, and I wanted my friend of friends to share my exalted appreciation of you. Such were the reasons that induced me to bring him to my box to-night, and, surely, if I committed an error, I deserve pardon for my motives!"

"I will never pardon you, be your motives what they may!" cried Mlle. d' Armilly, vindictively. "His presence ruined the performance and disgraced me, me, Louise d' Armilly, in the eyes of all Rome!"

The Captain stood speechless, appalled by her fury. White with rage, her eyes flashing and her bosom heaving, she looked like some beautiful demon.

"I would have triumphed as usual had he not been here," she continued, furiously and bitterly, "and to-morrow the Eternal City would have been at my feet, I would have been an acknowledged queen, nay, even greater than any sovereign alive, but now I have failed and am nothing! Captain Joliette, for all this you are to blame, and yet you think you deserve pardon for your motives! Why, man, you are worse than an idiot! No, I will never pardon you, never!"

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She strode about the dressing-room as she spoke, her small, white hands working as if ready to tear the young soldier to pieces. Joliette watched her for an instant and then said:

"You are a singular creature, Louise, a problem that I must admit I cannot solve. What is the Count of Monte-Cristo to you that you swoon at the mere sight of him? You certainly could not have been in any way associated with his past life, have suffered from the signal vengeance he took upon his enemies years ago!"

Mlle. d' Armilly paused suddenly in her excited walk, and, seizing the Captain by the arm with so strong a clutch that a thrill of pain shot through him, cried, menacingly:

"If you dare to mention Monte-Cristo's fiendish vengeance to me again, I will banish you forever from my presence!"

At that moment one of the officials of the theatre appeared at the dressing-room door.

"A note for mademoiselle," said he, bowing profoundly.

The prima donna took the missive from the man and glanced at the address upon the envelope. As she did so, she knitted her brows and cried out:

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"His handwriting! Another insult! I will not read it!"

The official withdrew in confusion.

"Whose handwriting?" asked Joliette, his curiosity and jealousy simultaneously excited. Mlle. d' Armilly had frequently referred to her numerous admirers and the letters she received from them, and the Captain naturally jumped to the conclusion that this note had been sent by some ardent Roman suitor. He considered the artiste's exclamation and assumption of displeasure as mere artful tricks designed to deceive him.

"Whose handwriting?" repeated Mlle. d' Armilly; scornfully. "Must I explain everything to you?"

The young man had borne all his companion in her anger had heaped upon him with comparative equanimity, but he could not bear the idea of a rival, the very thought was torture.

"Louise," he pleaded, "let me see that letter, let me read it."

"What! Must you needs examine my private correspondence! Captain Joliette, you are going too far! You have done enough to-night, without adding insult to injury!"

"I did not seek to injure you, Louise, God knows! Neither do I wish to insult you; but that letter I must and will read!"

"You talk as if I were already your wife and slave. Adopt another and less authoritative tone, monsieur. Captain Joliette, you are not yet my husband!" [Pg 63]

"Would that I were and were sure of your love, Louise! The continual uncertainty in which you keep me is insupportable! You refuse to let me read that letter?"

The young man, in his turn, began to pace the dressing-room excitedly, his jealous suspicions growing stronger and stronger.

Mlle. d' Armilly gazed at him triumphantly. She was proud of the vast influence she exercised over this brave and manly warrior. He would stand unmoved before the cannon's mouth, but she could make him quail and tremble!

"You refuse to let me read that letter?" he repeated.

"What if I do not refuse?" said she, in a softer tone.

"You will make me a very happy man!"

"Then read it, for I will not! Thus I show my contempt for its miserable and cowardly author!"

She crumpled the note in her hand and cast it on the floor. Then she placed her foot upon it.

Joliette stooped and took it from beneath her boot. He straightened out the envelope, opened it, removed the missive and read as follows:

"The Count of Monte-Cristo presents his respects to Mlle. d' Armilly, and begs leave to express his deep regret that his presence in Captain Joliette's box was the cause of such a grave catastrophe. He is utterly at a loss to realize why Mlle. d' Armilly should entertain so profound an aversion for him, and why the sight of him should so seriously affect her. If Mlle. d' Armilly would condescend to explain, he would regard it as a special favor. He trusts that Captain Joliette will in nowise be blamed for what has occurred, as that gentleman, when he invited the Count to share his box, was as thoroughly convinced as the Count himself that Mlle. d' Armilly did not know and would not recognize him." [Pg 64]

As Joliette read the last lines that so completely cleared him, he could not suppress an exclamation of joy.

"Louise," he cried, "the Count of Monte-Cristo has written to exculpate me!"

"Indeed!" replied the prima donna, contemptuously.

"Yes; he also apologizes to you and asks you to explain why the sight of him so seriously affects you."

"He asks an explanation, does he?" cried Mlle. d' Armilly, her anger resuming sway. "He shall never have one!"

"But you will pardon me, as you see I am altogether blameless?"

"I will hold your pardon under advisement, Captain. My action towards you will be greatly influenced by your future conduct in regard to the wretch who calls himself Monte-Cristo!"

"You surely do not wish me to cast him off, to shun him?"

"Do you prefer him to me?"

"I love you, Louise, love you better than anything or anybody else in the whole world! But I greatly esteem the Count of Monte-Cristo. There are ties between us that you do not understand." [Pg 65]

"I do not care to understand them. I have told you that this man is my enemy. That should be sufficient for you. My lover and my enemy cannot be friends. Choose between us!"

"Would you have me quarrel with him?"

"Quarrel with him? Yes; and not only that! I would have you fight him, kill him!"

The young man stood aghast. He was totally unprepared for this explosion, this savage, vindictive demand.

"Fight him, kill him, Louise! You cannot, you do not mean what you say!"

"Am I in the habit of using idle words?"

"Louise, Louise, I entreat you, do not impose such horrible conditions upon me!"

"Are you afraid of Monte-Cristo?"

"I am afraid of no man living, Louise; but I cannot challenge Monte-Cristo to a duel even for you!"

"Then you refuse to protect, to champion me?"

"Oh! Louise, how can you speak thus! I would gladly shed every drop of blood in my veins for you, gladly lay down my life for you, but do not ask me to lift a hand against the Count of Monte-Cristo!"

The beautiful woman looked at the energetic speaker haughtily and discontentedly. She was not a little disappointed. She had thought her influence over her suitor unbounded, but now it appeared that it had its limits. She, however, did not despair. Well knowing the wonderful fascination she possessed for men, she determined to bring all its batteries to bear upon Captain Joliette. She was bent on wreaking a terrible vengeance upon the Count of Monte-Cristo for some mysterious injury he had inflicted on her in the past, an injury in regard to which she refused to be communicative even to her accepted lover, and was resolved that Joliette should give the highest proof of his devotion to her by becoming the instrument of that vengeance.

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With the shrewdness of an experienced woman of the world, she readily saw that a special effort would be required on her part to bend the gallant soldier to her will and compel him to execute her inexorable purpose. She would make that special effort and, in making it, would render herself so captivating, so enticing, so desirable that Joliette could not fail to be intoxicated with her charms and fascinations. Then under the mad sway of his blind passion, excited to the utmost, he would be ready to do anything for her, anything, even to the commission of a crime, even to shedding the blood of his dearest friend!

At this juncture Mlle. d' Armilly, turning from the Captain as if in high displeasure, for it was an important part of her plan to assume a certain degree of coldness towards him at first, touched a bell and immediately her brother Léon and her maid appeared.

"Franchette," she said, addressing the latter, "assist me with my street toilet. I have sufficiently recovered to return to the Hôtel de France."

Unmindful of the presence of the Captain and Léon, the designing prima donna at once began to remove the costume she had worn during the opera. The maid aided her in this operation with the outward impassibility of theatrical servants, though she imperceptibly smiled as she realized that this display of her mistress' personal charms was made solely for the purpose of rendering the young soldier still more the slave of that artful siren.

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As Mlle. d' Armilly stood in her corset and clinging skirts of spotless white that delicately outlined her faultless shape, her fine throat, shoulders and arms displaying their glowing brilliancy, Captain Joliette gazed at her like one entranced. Never in all his life, he thought, had he looked upon a woman so thoroughly beautiful, so goddess-like. She was as perfect as a painting of Venus, and a thousand times more lovely for being alive. He held his breath as he saw her bosom palpitate and felt that he would give all he possessed in the world to call her his own, to be with her forever.

Léon seemed somewhat abashed by his sister's proceeding and blushed like a girl, the crimson tide giving his countenance a beauty altogether feminine.

The toilet operation completed, Mlle. d' Armilly surveyed herself triumphantly in the mirror. She was well aware that she had riveted her chains very tightly upon her lover, but, for all that, she could tell only by actual experiment if he were sufficiently under her dominion to accede to her wishes concerning the Count of Monte-Cristo. Hence she determined to make that experiment without delay, ere cool reflection had come to the dazzled warrior's aid and enabled him to realize that a trap had been laid for him.

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Quitting the mirror, she went to Captain Joliette's side and, placing her hand on his arm, as she threw into his eyes all the magnetism of her glance, said, in a dulcet tone:

"Will you accompany me to the hôtel, Captain?"

The young man joyously assented, and soon an elegant equipage was bearing him swiftly towards the prima donna's apartments.

CHAPTER V.

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ANNUNZIATA SOLARA.

It was a bright, warm afternoon in spring, and the Piazza del Popolo, Rome's great promenade, was crowded with gay pleasure-seekers of both sexes, while the Corso and the two other principal thoroughfares diverging from this extensive public square were also thronged with

young and old. The trees were covered with fresh green foliage, and multitudes of blooming flowers adorned the Piazza and the windows of the adjacent palaces and humble dwellings. Sounds of joy and mirth were heard on every side, while now and then strains of soft music were audible. It was truly a most inspiring scene of light and life. Flirtations were frequent between beautiful dark-visaged girls, with hair and eyes like night, in their picturesque attire, and manly-looking youthful gallants, while here and there sullen and sombre glances spoke of jealousy as fierce as fire, hinting of marital vengeance and love tragedies characteristic of the hot-blooded, impetuous Italians.

In the midst of the throng on the Piazza two youths were strolling, arm in arm. They were the Viscount Giovanni Massetti and Espérance, the son of Monte-Cristo. Fast friends they seemed, and gayly they chatted as they passed leisurely along. Their spirits were in full harmony with the animated scene around them, and they were evidently not insensible to the charms of the many pretty maidens they encountered and upon whom they cast admiring glances.

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Suddenly a peasant girl of dazzling beauty appeared in the Piazza very near them. She was apparently about seventeen, glowing with sturdy health, her full cheeks the hue of the red rose. Her sleeves, rolled above the elbows, displayed perfect arms that would have been the envy of a sculptor. Her feet were bare and her short skirts afforded dazzling glimpses of finely turned ankles and limbs of almost faultless form. Her face had a cheery and agreeable expression, not unmingled with piquant archness and a sort of dainty, bewitching coquetry. She was a flower-girl, and was vending bouquets from a basket jauntily borne on one arm. She addressed herself glibly to the young men she met, offering her wares so demurely and modestly that she seldom failed in finding appreciation and liberal customers. There was not even a suspicion of boldness or sauciness about her, but she had that entire self-possession engendered by thorough familiarity with her somewhat risky and perilous vocation.

Giovanni and Espérance caught sight of her simultaneously. Both were struck by her appearance and demeanor, to which her gaudy but neat and clean peasant costume gave additional éclat.

"What a handsome girl!" exclaimed Espérance, involuntarily.

"A divinity!" replied the Viscount, excitedly.

Then they glanced at each other and laughed, evidently rather ashamed of the admiration they had so enthusiastically expressed.

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"Her first words, however, will scatter the illusion to the winds," said Espérance, cynically. "She is, no doubt, as ignorant as she is pretty."

"Quite likely," rejoined Giovanni. "The outside beauty of these peasant girls generally conceals much internal coarseness, not to say depravity."

They were about pursuing their way, when the girl advanced, offering them her bouquets. Her voice was so sweet, so melodious, so deliciously modulated, that the young men paused in spite of themselves. She stood in a most graceful attitude, her parted coral lips exhibiting teeth as white and glittering as pearls. A subtle magnetism seemed to exhale from her that was not without its influence upon the two youths. Besides, her words did not betoken that ignorance alluded to by Espérance or that depravity the Viscount had spoken of.

"Buy some bouquets for your fair sweethearts, signors," she said. "They will gladden their hearts, for the perfume speaks of love!"

"Love!" exclaimed Giovanni, smiling at her earnestness and poetic language. "What do you know of love?"

"Ah! signor," she answered, blushing deeply and averting her eyes, "what girl does not know of love! Even the meanest peasant feels the arrow of the little blind god!"

The young men were amused and interested. Though belonging to the lower class, this poor flower-girl had certainly received some education and was endowed with a fair share of the finer feelings. Espérance felt attracted towards her, and Giovanni experienced a fascination not difficult to account for. Separated from Zuleika, filled with a lover's despair, the ardent Viscount was not averse to a little flirtation, more or less innocent. Here was his opportunity; he would cultivate this romantic and handsome girl's acquaintance. Where was the harm? He did not design being unfaithful to Zuleika, and this piquant peasant would be none the worse for brightening some of his sad hours. No doubt she was accessible and would welcome such a diversion, especially as he would pour gold liberally into her lap.

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"I will buy some flowers of you, my girl," he said, encouragingly.

"Here is a beautiful bouquet, signor," said the girl, smiling joyously at the prospect of making a profitable sale, and handing him a magnificent selection of fragrant buds and bloom.

Giovanni took the bouquet and, at the same time, gently pressed the girl's taper fingers. They were soft and velvety to his touch. A delightful thrill shot through him at the contact. The flower-girl evinced no displeasure. Clearly she was accustomed to such advances. The Viscount slipped a gold coin of considerable value into her hand, again experiencing the delightful thrill.

"This is too much, signor," said the girl, looking at the coin, "and I have not the change. You must wait a moment until I get it."

"Never mind the change," answered Giovanni. "Keep the whole."

The girl looked astonished at such liberality, then a joyous smile overspread her beautiful visage.

"Oh! thank you, thank you ever so much, signor," she said, effusively, the color deepening on her tempting cheeks. Giovanni with difficulty restrained himself from kissing them.

"What is your name, my girl?" he asked, as she moved to depart.

"Annunziata Solara, signor," she replied, surprised that such a question should be asked her.

"Where do you live?"

"In the country, just beyond the Trastavere."

"Do you live alone?"

"No; with my father, Pasquale Solara."

"What is his occupation?"

"He is a shepherd, signor."

The girl bowed to the two young men and, with a glance at Giovanni that set his blood tingling in his veins, passed on and was speedily lost in the throng of promenaders.

Espérance, who had watched this scene with amused curiosity, broke into a hearty laugh as the Viscount turned towards him with something very like a sigh.

"Giovanni," said he, "the pretty Annunziata Solara has bewitched you!"

"Not quite so much as that, Espérance," replied the young Italian. "But she is a glorious creature, isn't she?"

"Yes, as far as looks go; but all is not gold that glitters, and this fair Annunziata may turn out a perfect fiend or fury upon a closer acquaintance!" [Pg 74]

Giovanni gave his friend a glance of reproach.

"Do not insult her with such wretched insinuations," he replied, warmly.

Espérance smiled and said:

"You are smitten with her, that's plain!"

"I am not, but I admire her as I would anything beautiful."

"Put it as you please. At any rate, you will hardly be likely to see her again. She was a vision and has faded."

"But I do not intend to lose sight of her."

"You do not mean to say that you design seeking her out?"

"That is exactly what I mean to say."

Espérance looked at his friend quizzically and, at the same time, uneasily.

"When do you design seeking her out?"

"This very night."

"In the Trastavere?"

"No. You did not hear her aright. She said she lived in the country, just beyond the Trastavere. I will seek her there."

"What! Alone?"

"Alone."

"Beware, Giovanni! Her bright eyes may lead you into danger! How do you know that she has not some fierce brigand lover, who will meet you with a stiletto?"

"Nonsense! Your fears are childish!"

"I am not so sure of that. The country beyond the Trastavere is infested by daring robbers, who would not hesitate to seize you and hold you for a ransom. Only the other day the notorious Luigi Vampa performed just such an exploit, exacting a very large sum for the release of his prisoner, who was a wealthy nobleman like yourself." [Pg 75]

"I will take the chances!"

"You are mad!"

"I am not. I have no fear of brigands. They would not dare to lay even a finger upon a Massetti!"

The young Viscount drew himself up proudly as he spoke. He believed the power of his family invincible.

Espérance was at a total loss to understand the firm hold this sudden infatuation had taken upon his friend. Of course, he fully comprehended the influence of female beauty over hot, headstrong youth, and he acknowledged to himself that Annunziata was really very beautiful and alluring; still, she was not more so than hosts of other girls who would be glad to win a smile from the Viscount Massetti at almost any price, and whose pursuit would be altogether unattended with danger. It was well known that the shrewd brigands frequently sent handsome young women to Rome to entice their prey to them, and might not Annunziata Solara, with all her apparent demureness, be one of those dangerous Delilahs?

After several further attempts to dissuade the Viscount from the rash venture he had decided upon making, all of which were vain, Espérance resolved that his impetuous friend should not go alone that night in quest of the fascinating Annunziata. He would follow him unseen and endeavor to protect him should the necessity arise. He knew the Viscount's nature too thoroughly to propose accompanying him, as such a proposition would undoubtedly be received with scorn, if not as an absolute insult. He would, however, keep track of him and, if all went well, Massetti would be none the wiser. If, on the contrary, his aid should be needed, he could come forward and give it. In that event, gratitude on the Viscount's part would prevent him from demanding an explanation of his presence.

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Meanwhile the young men had continued their stroll and had passed from the Piazza del Popolo to the Corso. Giovanni was taciturn and moody. He looked straight ahead, failing to notice the gayly attired beauties thronging that great thoroughfare, who at ordinary times would have engrossed his attention. Not so with Espérance; he admired the vivacious ladies on the sidewalk or in their handsome carriages drawn by spirited horses. Now and then he recognized an acquaintance among them and bowed, but Giovanni recognized no one. He seemed plunged in a reverie that nothing could break. Scarcely did he reply to Espérance's occasional remarks, and when he did so it was with the air of a man whose thoughts are far away.

At the broad portico of the magnificent Palazzo Massetti, Espérance, the son of Monte-Cristo bade his friend farewell. As he turned to depart, he said:

"Is your determination still unaltered, do you yet intend to seek Annunziata Solara in the country beyond the Trastevere?"

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Giovanni glanced at him keenly, as he replied, somewhat impatiently:

"My determination is unaltered. I shall seek her!"

"To-night?"

"To-night!"

Espérance said nothing further, but departed, full of sad forebodings. He felt a premonition of evil, and was certain that his infatuated friend would meet with some dire mishap during the romantic and hazardous expedition of that night. It was now quite late, and the young man hurriedly bent his steps towards the Palazzo Costi, maturing his plan as he walked along. He would inform the Count of Monte-Cristo that he had been invited to accompany some friends on a pleasure excursion, requesting his permission to absent himself from Rome for a few days. This permission obtained, he would assume the garb of an Italian peasant, make his way to the Ponte St. Angelo and there, in the shadow of the bridge, await the coming of the Viscount Massetti. When the latter had passed his place of concealment, he would follow him at a distance, keeping him in view and watching him closely.

Monte-Cristo made no objection to his son's proposed absence, and the young man, after a hasty supper, hurried to his sleeping chamber, where he soon assumed a peasant's dress he had worn at a recent masquerade. Stepping in front of a toilet mirror, he applied a stain to his face, giving it the color of that of a sunburnt tiller of the fields. When his disguise was completed, he surveyed himself triumphantly in the glass. Even his father could not have recognized him, so radically had he altered his appearance.

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Gaining the street by a private door without being observed, he was speedily at the bridge. As he stepped into the shadow of one of the abutments, he heard the great clock of the Vatican strike seven. It was twilight, but everything around him was as plainly visible as in broad day. He glanced in every direction. No sign of Giovanni. Had the ardent young Viscount already crossed the Tiber?

He thought not, and waited patiently for a quarter of an hour. Still no sign. Then he began to grow anxious. Massetti had certainly passed over the bridge and he had missed him. He waited a few minutes longer, devoured by impatience and anxiety. At last he reached the conclusion that Giovanni had preceded him, had gone on alone, unprotected. He must have done so; otherwise he would certainly have appeared ere this. The thought was torture. To what unknown, what deadly perils was he exposing himself amid the marshes without the city walls? But perhaps he had not yet left the city walls behind him! A ray of hope came to Espérance. If Massetti were still within the limits of the Trastevere, he might by using due speed overtake him! He would make the attempt at any rate. As he formed this resolution, he emerged from the shadow of the abutment. At that instant a man came upon the bridge and passed him. He passed so closely that they almost touched, uttering a suppressed oath at finding an intruder in his path. His pace was rapid, so rapid that he was soon far away. He had not even looked at Espérance, and it seemed to the latter that he had endeavored to conceal his face. The man was of Giovanni's size and had

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Giovanni's bearing, but there the resemblance ended. He was certainly a peasant; his attire betokened it; besides, his countenance, of which Espérance had caught a glimpse, was rough and tanned. The son of Monte-Cristo felt a pang of keen disappointment; then he glanced at his own garments, thought of his own stained visage, and a revelation came to him like a flash of lightning—the man was Giovanni—Giovanni in disguise! He hurriedly looked after his retiring figure; it was now but a mere speck in the distance, scarcely discernible in the fading twilight. He started swiftly in pursuit, almost running across the bridge. After a hot and weary chase, he at length gained so much on the object of his solicitude that he was as near as he deemed it prudent to approach. He was now sure that the man ahead of him was the Viscount Massetti.

Espérance paused a second to recover his breath; then he went on at a slower pace. The pursued had not discovered the pursuit; he trudged along steadily and sturdily, never once looking back. Thus the two men crossed the Trastavere, and each in turn, emerging from a gate in the wall of the Leonine City, passed out into the marshy country beyond. They had not gone very far, when Espérance saw Giovanni suddenly give a start; at the same time he heard a loud, harsh voice cry out:

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"In the name of Luigi Vampa, halt!"

Straining his eyes, Espérance finally succeeded in piercing the semi-darkness of the surroundings, and perceived a gigantic ruffian, who wore a black mask, standing in the centre of the road and presenting a pistol at the head of the man he had every reason to believe was Giovanni Massetti.

CHAPTER VI.

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THE POWER OF A NAME.

The young Viscount, for it was, indeed, he whom the gigantic masked brigand had halted, was staggered for an instant by this unlooked for interruption of his journey in pursuit of the beautiful flower-girl. He gazed at the huge ruffian in front of him first in bewilderment and then in anger. The robber calmly continued to cover him with his pistol; as Giovanni made a movement with his hand towards a stiletto he wore at the belt of his peasant's dress, the man's quick eye detected his intention and he exclaimed, in a rough tone of command:

"Touch that stiletto and I will blow your brains out!"

The Viscount dropped his hand; he was as brave as a lion, but the bandit had the advantage of him and, courageous as he was, he instantly recognized the folly of disregarding his warning. His rage and indignation, however, were too great for him to control. He cried to his stalwart adversary:

"Why do you stop a poor peasant from whom you can obtain nothing?"

"You are not a poor peasant, signor!"

"I am not, eh? Well, search me and see!"

"You are neither a poor peasant, signor, nor any peasant at all! I have seen you too often in Rome to be deceived by the flimsy disguise you wear so unnaturally! I know you! You are the Viscount Giovanni Massetti!"

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"Well, what if I am?" retorted the young man, sharply. "The fact will not benefit you or any member of your accursed and cowardly band!"

"Have a care how you talk, signor!" exclaimed the bandit, threateningly. "Insolence to your captors may cost you more than you would be willing to pay!"

"Indeed?"

"Yes; I mean exactly what I say. It may cost you your life!"

Giovanni glared at the brigand with unflinching eyes. He returned threat for threat.

"Take my life, if you will," he said. "It would be the worst piece of work you have ever done!"

"May I ask why, signor?"

"It would raise my family against you and the result could not fail to be your extermination!"

The man laughed loudly, and caustically replied:

"You are joking! What can your family do against Luigi Vampa and his comrades, who have long been countenanced by the highest authority!"

This was the climax of insult, and Giovanni, driven to the highest pitch of fury, unable longer to control himself, tore his stiletto from its sheath and, raising it aloft, made a frantic dash at the gigantic brigand. Instantly the latter fired. Giovanni dropped his weapon; his right arm fell useless at his side.

Espérance meanwhile had not been idle. His excitement was intense, and with it was mingled terrible fear for the safety of his friend. Nevertheless, he eventually succeeded in sufficiently calming and collecting himself to form a plan of action and put it in execution. He had provided himself with a pistol, which he had freshly charged prior to his departure from the Palazzo Costi. He drew this weapon from its place of concealment at the first intimation of danger, noiselessly cocking it. The road was skirted with tall thick bushes from which projected a fringe of heavy shadows. Along this dark fringe Espérance stole with cautious tread towards the huge bandit, as soon as he perceived him standing in the centre of the highway and noted his threatening attitude. As he stealthily advanced, the moon suddenly rose, flooding the scene with its silvery light. Its rays, however, did not disturb the line of skirting shadows, and Espérance passed on unseen. When the brigand fired he was very near him. Seeing Giovanni's arm fall and realizing that he was wounded, the son of Monte-Cristo promptly raised his weapon and, covering the gigantic ruffian, discharged it directly at his heart. Blood gushed from the man's breast. He sank to the ground, where he lay quivering convulsively; in another instant he expired without even uttering a groan.

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Giovanni, whose arm was badly shattered and who was suffering frightful pain, stood speechless with amazement at this sudden, unexpected intervention in his favor. Espérance instantly sprang to his side. The young Italian stared at him as if he had been an apparition from the other world. He failed to recognize him in his peasant's dress, with his stained visage.

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"Who are you?" he gasped, as soon as he was able to find words.

"Do you not know me?" asked Espérance, astonished. In his excitement he had forgotten his disguise.

"You are a stranger to me," replied the Viscount, "but my gratitude is none the less on that account. You have rescued me from captivity, perhaps saved my life!"

"I am no stranger, Giovanni. I am your friend, Espérance."

"What! Espérance in that dress, with that sunburnt countenance! I thought your voice had a strangely familiar sound, but your disguise proved too complete for me to penetrate it!"

These words recalled to the mind of the son of Monte-Cristo the changes he had made in his appearance. No wonder that Viscount had failed to recognize him!

"Why did you disguise yourself, and how came you here at this critical juncture?" demanded Giovanni, after a pause.

"I disguised myself that I might follow you without fear of detection. You would not listen to reason, and I determined to protect you during your rash adventure so far as might lie in my power."

"From the bottom of my heart I thank you, Espérance. You are a brave as well as a devoted friend, fully worthy of your illustrious father! But how did you know me? I too, am disguised."

"The fact of my own disguise enabled me to penetrate yours. I recognized you almost immediately after you passed me on the Ponte St. Angelo."

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"What! Were you the peasant I nearly ran down as I crossed the bridge?"

"I was. But let us lose no more time; we have lost enough already. Besides, more of Luigi Vampa's band are probably prowling in the vicinity, and I imagine we both have had sufficient of the banditti for one night! Prudence dictates that we should return at once to Rome. With your shattered arm, you surely do not count upon continuing your search for the fair Annunziata at present?"

"No; that is impossible, I regret to say. I will return with you to Rome."

As the Viscount spoke a sudden tremor seized upon him, and he leaned on his friend's shoulder for support.

"You are faint from loss of blood!" exclaimed Espérance, much alarmed. "How thoughtless in me not to bind up your wound!"

Taking his handkerchief from his pocket, he wiped the blood from his friend's arm, carefully, tenderly bandaging the hurt; then he made a sling of Giovanni's handkerchief, placing the wounded member in it. The Viscount felt easier thus, though still somewhat faint.

"You are quite a physician, Espérance," said he.

"Not at all," replied the son of Monte-Cristo; "but my father taught me how to manage hurts; he said the knowledge would at some time be useful to me, and his words have proved true."

"Your father is a wonderful man; he seems to think of everything, to provide for all contingencies. Thanks to the skill he imparted to you, I am now in a condition to start on the homeward journey."

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The young men turned their faces towards Rome, but scarcely had they taken a dozen steps when the road in front of them literally swarmed with rough-looking armed men, who effectually barred their progress. In an instant they were surrounded. Resistance was impossible; the two friends

glanced at each other and about them in dismay. The new comers were evidently bandits, members of Luigi Vampa's desperate band.

One of the miscreants, who appeared to be the leader and was very picturesquely attired, confronted Giovanni and Espérance. He had a pistol in his belt, but did not draw it.

"You are my prisoners!" said he, in a tone of authority.

"Who are you, and by what right do you detain us?" demanded Espérance, haughtily.

"Who I am," replied the brigand, in a stern voice, "does not concern you. The right by which I detain you is the right of the strongest!"

"We cannot oppose your will, however unreasonable and unjust," returned Espérance; "my friend is wounded and my pistol is discharged. We can only throw ourselves upon your mercy; but we are gentlemen in spite of our dress, and demand to be treated as such!"

"How came your friend to be wounded and your pistol discharged?" asked the bandit, suspiciously.

"My friend was attacked and I went to his assistance," answered Espérance.

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"You were in a fight, then," resumed the leader. Turning suddenly to his men, he asked: "Where is Ludovico?"

"He went up the road half an hour since, and has not yet returned," answered a short, thick-set young fellow, who seemed to be the leader's lieutenant.

"Just like him," said the leader. "Always rash, always seeking adventures alone. I heard a pistol-shot some time back," he continued, looking menacingly at Espérance. "Perhaps Ludovico has been assassinated! If so, it shall go hard with his murderers! Let him be searched for."

The short, thick-set lieutenant, accompanied by several of the band, immediately departed to obey the order.

Espérance glanced anxiously at Giovanni. A new danger threatened them. The gigantic brigand who had been slain was, without doubt, this Ludovico. His body would be found and summary vengeance taken upon them. Giovanni also realized the additional peril; but neither of the young men gave the slightest evidence of fear; inwardly they resolved to face death stoically, to meet it without the quiver of a muscle.

In a brief space the lieutenant and his companions returned; two of the men bore the corpse of the huge robber; they placed it on the grass by the roadside where the full moonlight streamed upon it, showing the wound in the breast and the garments saturated with blood. A frown contracted the leader's visage; he glanced at Espérance and the Viscount with a look of hate and rage; then, turning to the lieutenant, he said:

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"Well?"

"We found Ludovico lying in the road a little distance from here," replied the short, thick-set man, with a trace of emotion in his rough voice. "He was shot in the heart and had been dead for some time."

The brigands had gathered about the prostrate form of their comrade; they seemed to be much affected by his fate; Ludovico was evidently a favorite.

As soon as the leader had received his subordinate's report, he turned to the prisoners, asking, sternly:

"Which of you murdered this man?"

"No murder was committed," returned Espérance, indignantly. "The huge ruffian shot my friend, shattering his arm, as you see; he was killed as a measure of defence."

"Your pistol is discharged," continued the leader, harshly; "that you have admitted; you killed Ludovico!"

"I defended my friend, whom he had basely attacked," said Espérance, sullenly.

"You killed this man? Yes or no!"

"I killed him!"

"Enough!" cried the leader, grinding his teeth. "You shall pay the penalty of your crime! Both of you shall die!"

He motioned to his lieutenant and in an instant Espérance and Giovanni were securely bound. The young men read desperate resolution and fierce vengeance upon all the rough countenances around them. There was not the faintest glimmer of hope; death would be dealt out to them at once and in the most summary fashion. Indeed, nooses were already dangling from a couple of trees by the roadside, waiting to do their fell work. The sight of these dread preparations roused Giovanni. With flashing eyes, he faced the leader of the band.

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"Beware!" he cried. "If you murder us, you will have all Rome to deal with! We have told you we

are gentlemen and not peasants. I am the Viscount Giovanni Massetti and my companion is the son of the famous Count of Monte-Cristo!"

As the young Italian uttered these words, a new comer suddenly appeared upon the scene for whom all the rest made way. He was an intellectual looking man, unostentatiously attired in a peasant's garb.

"Who spoke the name of the Count of Monte-Cristo?" demanded he.

The leader silently pointed to Massetti, who instantly replied:

"I spoke the name of the Count of Monte-Cristo, and he will surely take bitter vengeance upon you all for the murder of his son!"

"His son?"

"Yes, his son, who stands here at my side, ignobly bound and menaced with a shameful death!"

The stranger turned to Espérance and examined him closely.

"Are you the son of Monte-Cristo?" he asked, visibly agitated.

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"I am," answered Espérance, coldly.

"Give me some token."

"Wait and hope!"

"His maxim!"

"Ah! you recognize it. Do you also recognize this?"

As he spoke the young man held up his left hand, and a magnificent diamond ring he wore flashed in the moonlight. The new comer took his hand and glanced at the jewel, one that the Count of Monte-Cristo had worn for years and which he had but a few days before presented to his son.

"I am convinced," said the stranger. Then, turning to the leader, he said, in a tone of command: "Release these men!"

"But they have slain Ludovico!"

"Release them!" thundered the stranger. "Ludovico should have known better than to have interfered with *my* friends!"

He was instantly obeyed, and the two young men, greatly astonished, stood relieved of their bonds.

"You are at liberty," continued the stranger, "and can resume your route. Say to the Count of Monte-Cristo that Luigi Vampa remembers his compact and is faithful to it!"

As he spoke the notorious bandit chief gathered his men together, and the whole band vanished among the trees like so many spirits of the night.

CHAPTER VII.

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IN THE PEASANT'S HUT.

For a moment the two young men stood silent and astounded. So sudden had been the change from imminent peril to safety that they could hardly comprehend it. Luigi Vampa had come and gone like a flash, and both bandits and danger had been dispelled by the wonderful magic of Monte-Cristo's name. The brigand chief had styled Giovanni and Espérance his friends, and as such they knew the entire country in the vicinity of Rome was free to them; they could travel it by day or by night without fear of molestation. Espérance cared little for this, but Giovanni was elated by it, for it would enable him to seek out Annunziata Solara without risk of interruption or impediment. But what was the Count of Monte-Cristo's mysterious power? That was a question difficult, indeed, to answer. At any rate, even the fierce Luigi Vampa bowed to it, and it was as undisputed as it was strange.

The Viscount Massetti was the first to realize the necessity of a rapid push for Rome. He was faint from loss of blood and excitement; besides, his shattered arm throbbed violently and gave him twinges of excruciating pain. He felt himself sinking and urged his friend to hasten. Espérance acquiesced, and, supporting the young Italian as best he could, they resumed the homeward journey. Scarcely a mile had been traversed, however, when Giovanni threw himself upon the sword at the foot of a great tree, declaring that it was altogether impossible for him to advance another step. The throbbing in his arm had become unbearable, taking his breath away and filling him with a sickening sensation.

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They were yet far from Rome, and not a sign of a habitation could be discerned in any direction.

Waiting for daylight to come was not to be thought of; it would be some hours before dawn, and even when the sun had arisen it was by no means certain that assistance would be procurable. Meanwhile Giovanni would suffer torments, to say nothing of the danger of being exposed in his condition to the influence of the malaria from the surrounding marshes.

Espérance, though unwilling to leave his friend's side for an instant, decided at last that it was imperative for him to go in search of succor. Meanwhile a raging fever had set in and Giovanni was rapidly growing worse. As the son of Monte-Cristo was about to start on his tour of investigation, he heard a man's voice singing at some distance away, but gradually coming nearer. The sound was cheery and reassuring, for certainly the man who could sing so sweetly and joyously must have a good, kind heart. As the man approached Espérance recognized his song—it was that beautiful and expressive serenade, "Cara Nina," a melody dear to all youthful Italian lovers whether humble or of high degree.

The man at length came in sight; he was walking leisurely, but with a long, swinging gait. His voice was a clear, full tenor robusto, and the notes of his delicious love song trilled from his throat with wonderful effect in the still, balmy air of the tranquil, glorious night. He was not over twenty, was a stalwart peasant, and the moonlight showed that he possessed a manly, open countenance. So engrossed was he by his serenade that he failed to notice Giovanni lying at the foot of the huge tree and Espérance standing beside him. He was passing on when the latter hailed him. He paused, somewhat alarmed, and his hand instinctively grasped a weapon concealed in his bosom. Espérance hastened to reassure him.

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"Have no fear," he said. "We are merely travelers, and one of us is grievously wounded. In Heaven's name, render what assistance you can!"

The young peasant turned and came cautiously towards them.

"This is a dangerous neighborhood," said he; "it is infested by bandits of the most reckless and daring description."

"We have abundant reason to know it," answered Espérance, "for we have just had a very narrow escape from a horrible death at the hands of some of Luigi Vampa's men."

"Luigi Vampa's men!" echoed the peasant, in astonishment.

"Yes."

"And they released you of their own accord? I never heard of such a thing! It is not their custom to free their prey, at least without a heavy ransom. Did they rob you, or did you pay them for your liberty?"

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"Neither," replied Espérance.

The peasant's amazement was redoubled. He glanced inquiringly at the prostrate Viscount.

"How came your comrade to be wounded?" he asked.

"His arm was shattered by the pistol of a gigantic bandit."

"Ludovico?" demanded the peasant, glancing around him, as if he expected to see the huge assailant.

"I believe that was his name," returned Espérance. "But he will do no more injury!"

"You do not mean to say that you killed him?"

"I do."

"And yet you were allowed to go free! I cannot understand it!"

"Perhaps not, but you can understand that my friend is badly hurt and needs immediate aid and shelter. Is there not some hospitable cabin in the vicinity to which he can be conveyed, where he can be attended to until assistance arrives from Rome?"

The peasant hesitated for an instant; then he said:

"My father lives at a short distance from here; he could shelter you if he would, but he is in such terror of the bandits that, under the circumstances, he would probably close his door against you."

"He need have no fear of the brigands in this case, for Luigi Vampa has just given us a signal proof of his protection. Besides, he assured us that he was our friend."

"This is singular, indeed," said the peasant, again hesitating. "Luigi Vampa is a friend to but very few, and they are those with whom he is in league. You certainly are not in league with him, or you would not have killed Ludovico!"

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"This is no time for parley," replied Espérance. "My friend is suffering, and humanity alone should cause your father to receive him. I will engage to appease Luigi Vampa's anger, should it be aroused; at the worst, I pledge myself to surrender with my friend at the first summons to do so, and to assure the brigand chief that your father is altogether blameless. Come, can I not prevail upon you to be generous and humane?"

"Well," said the peasant, partially satisfied, "I will trust you, though I am taking a great risk. Should Vampa be offended, he will burn our hut over our heads and murder us all without pity. However, both your wounded friend and yourself shall have such poor shelter as our humble roof affords."

Giovanni was aided to arise, and, taking him between them, Espérance and the peasant began their walk. Fortunately they did not have far to go, otherwise the young Viscount's failing strength would have been unequal to the task. They quitted the highway, plunging into a narrow footpath closely wooded on either side; so thickly, in fact, did the tree branches interlace overhead that the moonbeams were effectually excluded and almost impenetrable darkness reigned. For an instant Espérance was apprehensive of treachery, but this fear was dispelled when he thought of the manly bearing of the youthful peasant and the dread of the brigands he had expressed. The three could scarcely walk abreast in the narrow pathway, and every now and then Giovanni stumbled against some protruding root or other obstacle invisible in the obscurity; but the peasant knew the road perfectly, and with no uncertain step hurried his companions on as rapidly as possible.

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Soon the path widened somewhat, the light commenced to sift through the dense foliage, and the gurgling of a noisy brook was heard at no great distance. Suddenly they made an abrupt turn, coming in sight of a small, neat-looking cabin, covered with clustering vines and embowered in verdure. The brook dashed along within a few yards of it, the fresh odor of the water mingling gratefully with the perfume of honeysuckles and the aromatic scent of the surrounding forest. It was, indeed, a beautiful and highly romantic spot, a cosy, sequestered nook, such as that in which King Henry hid away his love, the Fair Rosamond, from the prying glances of the inquisitive world. Espérance gazed at it with rapture, and even Giovanni, wounded and exhausted as he was, could not refrain from uttering an exclamation of astonishment and admiration. The cabin was closed and not a sign of life was visible.

"We have arrived," said the peasant, in a low voice. Quitting his companions, he went to a window, against which he gave three distinct raps.

The signal was almost immediately answered by three similar raps from within; then the window was thrown open and a woman's head appeared. The moonlight fell full upon her face, and both Espérance and Giovanni suddenly started as they recognized Annunziata Solara, the bewitching flower-girl of the Piazza del Popolo.

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"It is she—it is Annunziata!" whispered the young Viscount in his comrade's ear.

"Hush!" returned the latter, in a guarded undertone. "Do not betray yourself! She will never recognize us, disguised as we are! Besides, our guide's suspicions must not be aroused! He might yet refuse us shelter!"

"You are right, as you always are," answered Massetti. "We must maintain our incognito, at least until we are sure of our ground."

Meanwhile the peasant was speaking hastily with Annunziata.

"Sister," he said, "I am not alone; two travelers, peasants like ourselves, are with me. They were attacked by Luigi Vampa's men, and one of them is sorely wounded."

"Holy Virgin!" exclaimed the girl, evidently filled with terror.

"They claim our hospitality for the night and our assistance until aid can be procured from Rome. In my father's name I have accorded them shelter. Open the door and admit us."

The girl disappeared from the window and in another instant had flung the door open. As she stood there in the silver light, the state of her garments and hair indicating that she had hurriedly risen from her couch, her bright, picturesque beauty was vastly heightened. The young men thought they had never beheld a more entrancing vision of female loveliness.

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"Where is father?" asked the peasant, anxiously.

"He has not yet returned," replied the girl.

The guide uttered a sigh of relief.

"I am glad," said he, "for Pasquale Solara does not like strangers. Were he here he might refuse to exercise hospitality towards this wounded man and his companion, even though they are, as they assert, friends of Luigi Vampa."

"Friends of Luigi Vampa!" echoed the girl, becoming greatly alarmed. "The Blessed Virgin protect us!"

"They are not brigands, at any rate," said the peasant, "and I believe them honest men. If, however, they are deceiving me, I shall know how to act!"

There was an ominous flash in his eye as he spoke, and his hand again sought the weapon concealed within his bosom. Espérance, who had been intently listening to this conversation and had marked every motion of the young peasant, felt his suspicions revive; but there was no time for hesitation; shelter and aid for his friend were of the first necessity; they must be obtained at once and at any cost. He had refrained from offering the peasant money, not wishing to betray that he and his companion were other personages than they seemed, and now that Annunziata

had appeared upon the scene he congratulated himself on the wisdom of his course. He, nevertheless, feared Giovanni's impulsiveness in the presence of the girl he so much admired, and determined to watch him as closely as possible, in order to promptly check all damaging disclosures. If Giovanni remained in this attractive nook long enough to open and carry on a flirtation with the beautiful flower-girl, he must do so solely as a peasant and under the cover of his clever disguise. It was hardly likely that Annunziata would recognize in Massetti and himself the two youthful gallants she had encountered but for a moment amid the gay throng and crush of the brilliant Piazza del Popolo.

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While these thoughts went flashing through his mind, the young Viscount, leaning heavily upon his arm, had not taken his eyes from the handsome, tempting girl before him. Suffering as he was, he longed to be at her side, to clasp her lovely shape, to feel her warm, voluptuous breath stream over his face and imprint kiss after kiss on her ripe red lips. He had not forgotten Zuleika. Oh! no! But Annunziata Solara was an altogether different being, a girl to delight him, intoxicate him, for a moment as the other for life. For Monte-Cristo's daughter his feeling was love, for the fascinating flower-girl of the Piazza del Popolo it was a passion to be sated.

After a few more words to his sister, the peasant returned to the young men, aiding Espérance to transport Giovanni into the cabin. The interior of this humble abode was as neat and picturesque as the exterior. The room they entered was small and cheaply furnished, but feminine taste was everywhere displayed. A single candle was the only light, but the scanty illumination sufficed to show the refining touches of a woman's hand. In one corner stood a bed, the covers of which were turned down, and upon which was impressed the shape of its late occupant. At the head of the bed a brass crucifix was suspended from the wall, while over the back of a chair hung articles of a woman's apparel. Giovanni could not doubt that he was in Annunziata's chamber, and that the imprint on the bed was hers. He felt a thrill of joy at the idea that he was to occupy the bewitching flower-girl's couch, to occupy, perhaps, the very place where she had lain but a short time before.

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Annunziata, who had thrown a cloak over her shoulders and night clothes, but whose feet were still bare, had accompanied her brother and his companions to the apartment. She eyed the strangers timidly, but curiously, though it was quite plain she failed to penetrate their disguise. With deft hands she rearranged the bed and removed her garments from the chair. Then she retired to another room, and the wounded Viscount was aided to undress and assisted into the couch by the peasant and Espérance, where he eventually fell asleep in a delirium of bliss, after his hurt had been properly cared for.

Espérance was duly bestowed for the night, and soon unbroken silence brooded over the solitary cabin in the forest.

Thus was enacted the initial scene of a drama that was destined to be fruitful in disastrous results, results that clouded more than one happy life.

CHAPTER VIII.

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A SYLVAN IDYL.

In the morning the Viscount Massetti's arm was found to be so much swollen and his wound so painful that it was deemed advisable to send for a physician, who resided in a neighboring hamlet not more than a mile distant from the cabin of the Solaras. The man of medicine was soon at Giovanni's bedside. After examining and dressing his hurt, he declared that the patient ought not to be moved for at least a week, a piece of intelligence at which the young man inwardly rejoiced, notwithstanding all the torture he suffered, for his sojourn involved nursing at the hands of the beautiful Annunziata, who had already shown him that she possessed tenderness and a kind heart, as well as good looks.

Espérance held a conference with his friend after the physician's departure to decide upon what should be done. He proposed to go at once to Rome and acquaint the Viscount's family with what had happened and Giovanni's condition, but the young man firmly opposed this plan, declaring that he would be well in a few days at most and protesting that informing his relatives of his situation would involve explanations he had no desire to give. Giovanni also begged Espérance to remain with him and give no sign as to their place of retreat; so earnestly did he solicit these favors that the son of Monte-Cristo, much against his will and with many forebodings, finally consented to grant them.

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Pasquale Solara returned home late on the day following the arrival of the strangers at his hut. He was an old, but sturdy shepherd, whose rough, sunburned visage spoke of exposure to the weather and hard toil. He frequently was absent for days and nights in succession, absences that he never explained and about which his son and daughter did not dare to question him, for Pasquale was a harsh man, who grew angry at the slightest pretext and was inclined to be severe with all who sought to pry into his affairs. He expressed great fear of the bandits who infested the vicinity of Rome and especially of Luigi Vampa's band, but those who knew him best shook their heads doubtfully, and, though they did not say so, it was plainly to be seen that they deemed this fear merely assumed for purposes of his own. At any rate, it was a significant fact

that Pasquale was never disturbed in his wanderings, while the brigands always left his dwelling and its inmates unmolested.

The old shepherd frowned darkly when informed by his children that they had given shelter to a couple of travelers, one of whom had been wounded in a fight with a brigand, but he said nothing and appeared disposed to accept the situation without even a grumble. He did not, however, enter the chamber in which Giovanni lay and avoided coming in contact with Espérance, who caught but a passing glimpse of him ere he departed again on another expedition, which he did after a stay of only half an hour at his cabin.

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The young peasant and Espérance soon became quite friendly, indulging in many a ramble in the forest and beside the gurgling brook. The peasant's name was Lorenzo, and he appeared to lead a free life, totally unencumbered with avocation of any kind, save occasionally looking after a few sheep that never strayed far from the banks of the little stream.

Annunziata for the time abandoned her visits to Rome, installing herself as Giovanni's nurse. She was almost constantly beside him, and her presence and care were more potent medicines than any the physician administered. Her smile seemed to exercise a bewitching effect upon the young Viscount, while her voice sounded in his ravished ear like the sweetest music. The handsome girl was the very picture of perfect health, and her well-developed form had all the charm of early maturity, added to youthful freshness and grace. She wore short skirts, and her shapely limbs were never encumbered with stockings, while her feet were invariably bare. A low, loose body with short sleeves displayed her robust neck and shoulders, and plump, dimpled arms that would have been the envy of a duchess. Her hands as well as her feet were not small and the sun had given them a liberal coat of brown, but they were neatly turned and attractive, while her short, taper fingers were tipped with pink, carefully trimmed nails. Altogether she looked like the spirit of the place, a delicious wood nymph as enchanting as any a poet's fancy ever created and yet a substantial, mortal reality well calculated to fire a man's blood and set his brain in a whirl. If she had appeared beautiful in Rome, amid the aristocratic fashion queens of the Piazza del Popolo, she seemed a thousand-fold more delightful and fascinating in her humble forest home, where she shook off all restraint and showed herself as she really was, a bright, innocent child of nature, as pure as the breath of heaven and as free from guile as the honey-fed butterfly of the summer sunshine.

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The more Giovanni saw of her the more he came under the dominion of her irresistible charms, the empire of her physical attractiveness. Gradually he mended, and as his wound healed his strength returned. At length, towards the close of the week, he was able to quit his bed and sit in a large chair by the window of his room. It had been agreed upon between him and Espérance that, during their sojourn at the Solara cabin, they should be known respectively as Antonio Valpi and Guiseppe Sagasta, and already Annunziata had bestowed upon her patient the friendly and familiar diminutive of Tonio, a name to which he answered with wildly beating heart and eyes that spoke volumes.

By means of shrewdly managed questions the young Viscount had ascertained that the flower-girl had no lover, that her breast had never owned the tender passion, and this intelligence added fuel to the flame that was consuming him. It is not to be supposed that Annunziata was ignorant of the strong impression she had made upon her youthful and handsome patient. She was perfectly aware of it and secretly rejoiced at the manifest exhibition of the power of her charms. Perhaps she did not as yet love Giovanni, perhaps it was merely the general physical attraction of a woman towards a man, or it might have been that innate spice of coquetry common to every female, but the fact remained that she tacitly encouraged the young Viscount in his ardent attentions to her. She, moreover, lured and inflamed him in such a careless, innocent way that she acquired additional piquancy thereby. Had Annunziata been a designing woman of the world intent upon trapping a wealthy lover, instead of a pure and artless country maid totally unconscious of the harm she was working, she could not have played her game with more effect. Giovanni had become altogether her slave. He hung upon her smiles, drank her words and could hardly restrain himself in her presence. No shipwrecked mariner ever more greedily devoured with his dazzled eyes the fateful loreley of a rocky, deserted coast than he did her. Had she been his social equal, had her intelligence and education matched her personal beauty, he would have forgotten Zuleika, thrown himself impetuously at her feet and solicited her hand. As it was, while Monte-Cristo's daughter possessed his entire heart, Annunziata Solara enslaved his senses.

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She received his approaches as a matter-of-course, without diffidence, without a blush. His gallant speeches pleased her, she did not know why. So thoroughly unsuspecting was she, that she failed to notice his language was not that of the untutored peasant he claimed to be, that his bearing as well as his words indicated a degree of culture and refinement far above his assumed station. She was dazzled, charmed by him as the bird is by the glittering serpent with its wicked, fascinating eyes. She thought of nothing but the present and its novel joys. She had never heeded the future—she did not heed it now.

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One morning as she sat at his side by the open window, through which stole the balmy air of the forest laden with the intoxicating perfume of a thousand wild, intensely sweet flowers, Giovanni suddenly took her brown hand, covering it with passionate kisses. The girl did not resist, did not withdraw her hand from his; she did not even tremble, though a slight glow came into her cheeks, making her look like a very Circe.

"Annunziata," said Giovanni, in a low voice scarcely above a whisper, "do you care for me?"

"Care for you, Tonio?" replied the girl, gazing sweetly into his glowing and agitated countenance. "Oh! yes! I care a great deal for you!"

He threw his arm about her neck, and, as his hand lay upon her shapely shoulder, a magnetic thrill shot through him like a sudden shock from a powerful electric battery. Annunziata did not seek to withdraw herself from his warm embrace, and he drew her to him with tightening clasp until her full, palpitating bosom rested against his breast. Her tempting red lips, slightly parted, were upturned; he placed his upon them in a long, lingering, delirious kiss. Then the color deepened in her cheeks, and she gently disengaged herself. She did not, however, avert her eyes, but gazed into his with a look of mute inquiry. All this was new to her, and the more delicious because of its entire novelty.

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"Neither my father, nor my brother, nor my dead mother ever kissed me like that!" she said, artlessly.

Giovanni was enraptured; the girl's innocence was absolutely marvelous; he had never dreamed that such innocence existed upon earth. Was she really what she appeared?

"Annunziata," he said, abruptly, his heart beating furiously and his breath coming thick and fast, "you have never experienced love, or you would know the meaning of that kiss!"

"Love?" answered the girl, opening her large, lustrous eyes widely. "Oh! yes, I have felt love. I love my father and Lorenzo, I love—everybody!"

"But not as you would love a young man, who would throw himself at your pretty feet and pour out the treasures of his heart to you!"

"No young man has ever done that," said Annunziata, smiling and nestling closer to him.

"But some one will before long, perhaps before many minutes! How would you like me to be that one!" cried the Viscount, in his headlong fashion.

"I cannot tell," answered the girl, "I do not know!"

"Then let me try the experiment!" said Giovanni, rising from his chair and sinking on his knees in front of her. "Annunziata, I love you!"

The girl stroked his hair and then passed her taper fingers through his flowing locks. She was silent and seemed to be thinking. Her bosom heaved just a little more than usual, and the glow on her cheeks became a trifle more intense. Giovanni, yet kneeling, seized her hand, holding it in a crushing clasp.

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"Do you hear me?" he cried, impatiently. "Do you understand me? I love you!"

"You love me, Tonio?" replied the girl, slowly. "Well, it is only natural! Every young man must love some young girl some time or other, and I think—I think—I love you a little!"

"Think!" said Giovanni, amazed. "Do you not know it?"

"Perhaps!" answered Annunziata, still fondling his hair.

Giovanni threw his arms about her waist, an ample, healthful waist, free from the restraints of corsets and the cramping devices of fashion. As he did so the sound of footsteps was heard without, and he had scarcely time to leap to his feet when Espérance entered the room.

Massetti was confused and his friend noticed the fact. He also remarked that Annunziata was slightly flushed and seemed to have experienced some agreeable agitation. Espérance instantly leaped to a conclusion. Giovanni's flirtation with the fair flower-girl had gone a trifle too far, had assumed a serious aspect. He would interfere, he would remonstrate with him. It might not yet be too late after all. Annunziata was a pure and innocent creature, unused to the ways of the world and incapable of suspecting the wickedness of men. She was on the point of falling into a deadly snare, on the point of being wrecked upon the most dangerous shoal life presented. Her very purity and innocence would make her an easy victim. Giovanni was not wicked; he was merely young, the prey of the irresistible passion of youth. Annunziata's surpassing loveliness had fired his blood, had driven him to the verge of a reckless action, a crime against this beautiful girl that money could not repair. This crime should not be committed, if he could help it, and he would risk the Viscount's friendship to save him from himself. Giovanni could not marry the humble peasant girl; he should not mar her future.

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When Espérance came into the chamber, his presence recalled Annunziata to herself and also dampened Massetti's ardor. The girl arose and, smiling at Espérance, tripped blushing away. Giovanni was flushed and somewhat angry at the intrusion at the critical moment of his love making. Espérance's face was grave; he felt all the weight of the responsibility he was about to assume.

"Giovanni," said he, in a measured tone, "I do not blame you for being fascinated by a pretty, amiable girl like Annunziata Solara, far from it. She is certainly a paragon of beauty, a model of rustic grace, a very tempting morsel of rural virtue and innocence. She is well fitted to turn the head of almost any young man—I freely acknowledge that. It is pardonable to wish to enjoy her society—nay, a harmless flirtation with her is, perhaps, not censurable; but that is the utmost length to which a man of honor can go! Remember she has a reputation to lose, a heart to break!"

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"What do you mean by that long sermon?" demanded the Viscount, setting his teeth and frowning savagely.

"I mean that you have been making love to this poor girl, that you have been seeking to requite her care of you in a manner but little to your credit!"

"I owe you my life, Espérance," replied Massetti, "but even my gratitude will not shield you from my fury, if you step between me and Annunziata Solara!"

"You mean to pursue her then, to soil her name, to blast her future, for surely you are not courting her with marriage as your object?"

Giovanni flushed scarlet at this open accusation.

"I mean to pursue her—yes! What my object in the matter is concerns only myself; you have nothing whatever to do with it!" he exclaimed, hotly.

"But I have a great deal to do with it!" replied Espérance, firmly. "You shall not pursue Annunziata Solara to her destruction! Between her good name and your reckless intentions I will oppose a barrier you cannot surmount—myself!"

"Do you mean to champion her to the extent of challenging me?" demanded Massetti, fairly foaming with ire.

"If you persist in your nefarious designs, yes!" answered the son of Monte-Cristo, with equal warmth. "You are my friend, my friend of friends, Giovanni Massetti, but the instant you menace that innocent girl's honor my friendship for you crumbles to dust and you become my deadly foe! Take your choice. Either leave this hospitable cabin with me as soon as the state of your wound will permit you to do so, meanwhile respecting Annunziata Solara as you would your own sister, or meet me pistol in hand on the field of honor! Take your choice, I say! What is your decision?"

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"I will not give up Annunziata!"

"Then you must fight!"

"I shall not hesitate!"

"So be it! My life against yours! I will defend this poor girl's honor to the last drop of my blood!"

"When shall we fight?"

"To-morrow at dawn."

"Where?"

"In the clearing beyond the chestnut copse on the further side of the brook. There is no need of witnesses; this matter is between us and us alone!"

"So much the better, for it will be a duel to the death! I cannot as yet hold my right arm aloft long enough to fight with it, but I will make my left hand serve!" Then, as a sudden thought struck him, Massetti added: "Do you propose to betray me, to carry your story to Annunziata and her brother?"

Espérance surveyed his companion with intense scorn flashing from his eyes.

"I am no traitor!" he said, coldly, and, turning, quitted the apartment.

CHAPTER IX.

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THE ABDUCTION.

The remainder of that day Espérance and Giovanni did not meet again; they purposely avoided each other, the former because he did not wish to have a further quarrel with the Viscount, and the latter because he dreaded a repetition of the accusations of dishonorable conduct, which had stung him deeper than he would own even to himself.

Espérance disdained to play the spy upon Massetti, but, nevertheless, he determined not to quit the immediate vicinity of the cabin and to be as watchful as circumstances would permit. Nothing, however, occurred to arouse his suspicions as long as daylight lasted. Once or twice Giovanni quitted his chamber and walked back and forth excitedly on the sward in front of the hut, but his promenades were of very short duration, seeming to have no other object than to calm his seething brain. Annunziata did not go near him, though whether coquetry or fear caused her to pursue this course Espérance was unable to determine, but her action gratified him because it gave Giovanni no opportunity to follow up whatever advantage he might have gained with the flower-girl.

Lorenzo appeared to have no suspicion whatever that anything was amiss either with the young men or his sister. He was as light-hearted and cheerful as ever, going about his usual trifling occupations with gayety that was absolutely contagious, and displaying even more than his

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accustomed amiability. Espérance had grown to esteem this youthful peasant highly; he had found him manliness and generosity personified and had resolved, on his return to Rome, to interest the Count of Monte-Cristo in his welfare and advancement. With regard to Annunziata, Espérance was as yet altogether undecided; she was a problem he could not solve. Her innocence and virtue were apparent, but her childlike simplicity and utter lack of worldly experience, while so charming and delightful to behold, added to her wonderful beauty, exposed her to risks that were frightful to contemplate. Had she only possessed a lover in her own rank of life, all would have been well with her; but she possessed no lover, was absolutely alone; if she escaped Giovanni, and Espérance was determined she should escape him if he could effect it, the chances were that she would eventually fall into the clutches of some other admirer still more reckless and unscrupulous. The son of Monte-Cristo could not think of the lovely girl and her future without a pang that made his very heart ache. He, too, admired her beauty, her grace and her artlessness, but his admiration was confined within the proper bounds, and could he have seen her suitably and happily wedded, he would have rejoiced to the depths of his soul.

Late in the afternoon Pasquale Solara reappeared suddenly and without the least warning. The old man was covered with dust, as if he had been journeying far on foot. He plainly showed that he was greatly fatigued, also that something had occurred to irritate him. He entered the cabin unobserved, and was there for some moments before his presence was discovered. Annunziata was the first to see him, sitting upon a rude wooden bench with his stout oaken staff in his hand on which he leaned heavily. She threw her arms about his neck with a cry of joy, endeavoring to snatch a kiss from his tightly-closed lips, but he sternly and silently repulsed her. Lorenzo, in his turn, met with no warmer reception at his father's hands. But his children were used to Pasquale's moods and were, therefore, altogether unaffected by his present morose deportment; they speedily left him to himself, giving themselves no further trouble concerning him. Once when Espérance came into the room the old man stared at him inquiringly, as if he had utterly forgotten the fact that strangers were enjoying the shelter of his roof; then he appeared to recollect and scowled so savagely that the young man beat a hasty retreat, going to seek Lorenzo, whose cheery voice was heard singing beyond the brook.

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As Espérance came in sight of the little stream, he nearly stumbled over a peasant, lying at full length beneath the spreading branches of an aged willow. The stranger was reading a book, and Espérance was amazed to notice that it was "Cæsar's Commentaries." He uttered an apology for his awkwardness, but the peasant only smiled and, in a gentle voice, begged pardon for being in the way. That voice! Espérance was certain he had heard it before, but where or when he could not recall, though it thrilled him to the very marrow of his bones, filling him with vague apprehensions. The man's face, too, was familiar, as also was his attire; but there was great similarity between the Italian peasants in the vicinity of Rome in general looks and dress; it was quite likely that he had not seen this man before, but some other resembling him; still, the voice and face troubled Espérance, and he decided to question the peasant; the rarity of strangers' visits to this sequestered locality would be a sufficient pretext for his curiosity.

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"My friend," said he, addressing the recumbent reader, who had resumed his book, "are you a relative or acquaintance of the Solaras?"

"I am neither," replied the man, carelessly, glancing up from his volume and allowing his penetrating eyes to rest on his questioner, "I strolled here by chance, and this cosy nook was so inviting that I took possession of it without a thought as to the intrusion I was committing."

The peasant's language was refined; Espérance noted this fact and was not a little surprised thereby; in addition, he could not understand why the stranger should be reading "Cæsar's Commentaries," a work far beyond the range of the usual peasant intellect.

"You are committing no intrusion," said he. "Lorenzo and Annunziata, I am sure, would be glad to welcome you. Old Pasquale is somewhat of a savage, it is true, but luckily he does not bother himself much about anything or anybody."

"Pasquale has arrived then?" said the man, dropping his book and evincing a sudden interest.

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"Yes; he is in the cabin now," answered Espérance, his astonishment increasing. "Do you want to speak with him?"

"No," said the peasant, lightly springing to his feet. He hastily closed his book, thrust it into his belt, and, bowing to Espérance, disappeared in the forest.

The young man looked after him for an instant; then he joined Lorenzo and informed him of the meeting. At his first words Annunziata's brother ceased singing; a cloud overspread his brow, and he asked, in an eager tone, for a description of the curiously behaved stranger. Espérance gave it to him, remarking as he did so that his companion turned slightly pale and seemed frightened.

"Who is this man?" he asked, as he concluded. "Do you know him? He appeared strangely familiar to me."

"Do I know him?" repeated Lorenzo, with a shudder. "Yes—that is no!"

Espérance stared at his comrade in surprise and uneasiness; the youthful peasant evidently had more knowledge of the singular intruder than he was willing to admit. There was surely some mystery here. What was it? Did the presence of this stranger menace the peace, the tranquillity,

the safety of the Solara family? Was he in some dark way associated with the movements and actions of old Pasquale? Espérance attempted to question Lorenzo further, but he only shook his head and declined to make any disclosures. He, however, stipulated that his sister should not be informed of what had occurred, urging that there was no necessity of uselessly alarming her. Alarming her? What could he mean? Espérance grew more and more perplexed, and his conviction that he had met the stranger previously, increasing in strength, added to his anxiety and discomfort.

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For some hours Giovanni had kept his room and given no sign. What was he meditating? Was it possible that he was concocting some cunning plan by which to circumvent intervention and gain undisturbed possession of the girl who had so powerfully influenced his passions? Could it be that he was in some mysterious way associated with the strange peasant, whose sudden advent seemed of such ill omen? Espérance thought of all these things and was infinitely tortured by them, but, one by one, he succeeded in dismissing them from his mind. Giovanni was certainly under a potent spell that might lead him to the commission of any indiscretion, but he was at bottom a man of honor, and there was some chance that his better feelings might obtain the mastery of his mere physical inclinations. At any rate, Espérance felt that he could trust him for one night more at least. Perhaps in the morning he would awaken to a true sense of his position and acknowledge his error; he might even implore his friend's pardon, admit that he was right and consent to return to Rome, leaving the bewitching Annunziata in all her innocence and purity. Upon reflection Espérance decided that the stranger could be in nowise the associate or accomplice of the Viscount, for the latter had communicated with no one, had not even gone a dozen steps from the Solara cabin during his entire period of convalescence. The idea of collusion was untenable. Espérance resolved to watch and wait. There was no telling what a few hours might bring forth; but at the worst he would fight; if he fell he would not regret it, and, if Giovanni perished at his hands, his death would be due to his own headlong impulses and his blood, under the circumstances, could not be a disgraceful, dishonorable stain.

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Towards nightfall old Pasquale Solara began to display unwonted activity, showing, at the same time, signs of considerable agitation. He was yet uncommunicative and morose, spoke only at rare intervals; often he did not reply at all to the questions addressed to him, and when he did answer it was only in gruff, snappish monosyllables. He went from place to place uneasily, frequently leaving the cabin and gazing peeringly and stealthily into the forest as if he expected some one or was looking for some secret signal known only to himself. He glanced at Lorenzo and Espérance suspiciously, seeking, as it were, to penetrate their very thoughts. When he encountered Annunziata, he examined her from head to foot with a strange mixture of satisfaction, anxiety and tremulousness. At such times there was a greedy, wolfish expression in his glittering eyes, and his hands worked nervously.

When twilight had given place to darkness, he suddenly left the hut and did not return. His unusual conduct had occasioned somewhat of a commotion in the little household, but quiet reigned after his departure and his singular behavior was speedily forgotten by his children. Not so, however, with Espérance. The young man, agitated as he was with the turmoil of his own feelings, could not get old Pasquale and his behavior out of his mind. It filled him with sinister forebodings and made him look forward to the night with an indefinable dread, not unmingled with absolute fear. It seemed to him that the old shepherd was meditating some dark and desperate deed that would be put into execution with disastrous results ere dawn.

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The evening, nevertheless, passed without incident, and in due course sleep brooded over the Solara cabin, wrapping all its inmates in silence and repose. All its inmates? All save the son of Monte-Cristo, who tossed restlessly upon his couch and could not close his eyes. At length, however, he managed to calm himself somewhat and was just sinking into a sort of half slumber when he was suddenly roused by a wild, far echoing cry that caused him to leap instantly from his bed. The cry was a woman's, and he thought he recognized the voice, of Annunziata Solara. A second's thought seemed to satisfy him on this point, for the flower-girl was the only female in the vicinity and the voice was certainly hers; but it sounded from a distance, without the cabin, and this fact bewildered him. Promptly old Solara's conduct returned to his mind, and instinctively he connected the morose shepherd with the cry and whatever was happening. The young man had not removed his garments; it was, therefore, only the work of an instant for him to grasp his pistol, which he kept loaded beneath his pillow, and rush from the hut in the direction of the cry, which had been repeated, but was growing fainter and fainter.

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As he emerged from the cabin, he heard a shot echo through the forest, and almost immediately a man rushed into his arms, bleeding profusely from a gaping wound in the temple. The night was moonless and dark, but in the feeble and uncertain light Espérance recognized Lorenzo.

"My sister—my sister—poor Annunziata!" the young peasant gasped, painfully. "Your friend—abducted—gone! Oh! my God!" and he sank to the ground an unconscious mass, quivering in the final agonies of dissolution.

Espérance was horror-stricken. Annunziata abducted by Giovanni! He could draw no other conclusion from the young peasant's broken exclamations! Lorenzo slain, too, and doubtlessly also by the impetuous Viscount's hand! Oh! it was horrible!—it was almost beyond belief! He bent over Lorenzo's prostrate form, straightened it out and felt in the region of the heart; there was no beat; it was as he had divined—Annunziata's manly and generous brother was dead—the victim of a cowardly, treacherous assassin—and that assassin!—oh! he could not think of it and retain his faith in men!

Espérance left Lorenzo's corpse lying upon the sward, and, pistol in hand, started forward to go to Annunziata's aid, to rescue her from her dastardly abductor, if it lay within his power to do so. He reached the forest and plunged into its sombre depths. Scarcely had he gone twenty feet when a man carrying a flaming torch rushed wildly by him, in his shirt sleeves, hatless, his short, thick gray hair standing almost erect upon his head. In the sudden flash of light his haggard eyes blazed like those of a maniac. In his left hand he held a long, keen-bladed knife. He glanced neither to the right nor the left, but kept straight on, as if he were a ferocious bloodhound in pursuit of human prey. Espérance came to an abrupt pause, and stared with wide-open eyes at the startling apparition. It was old Pasquale Solara! The son of Monte-Cristo shuddered as he thought that the father, with all his Italian ferocity thoroughly aroused, was in pursuit of the man who had abducted his daughter and murdered his son. In that event the Viscount's death was sure, for he could not escape the vengeance of the distracted and remorseless shepherd! Should he raise his voice and warn him? No, a thousand times no! Giovanni deserved death, and did the furious old man inflict it, he would be only advancing the just punishment of the outraged law!

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Quickly resolving to follow in the footsteps of Pasquale Solara, Espérance dashed on, utterly regardless of the bushes and briars that impeded his progress and tore great rents in his garments. Soon excited voices reached him, then the noise of a violent struggle. He pushed rapidly forward, intent upon reaching the scene of conflict, where he did not doubt the hapless Annunziata would be found. Soon he indistinctly saw two men engaged in a hand to hand strife. One was evidently Pasquale Solara, for a torch was smouldering on the ground half-extinguished by the damp moss, and the young man caught an occasional flash of a knife such as the shepherd had carried when he passed him, but beyond these circumstances all was supposition, for the identity of the contending men could not be made out in the obscurity.

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Grasping his pistol tightly, Espérance was about declaring his presence when the figure of a man sprang up before him with the suddenness of a flash of lightning, seeming to emerge from the very ground at his feet. At that instant the torch gave a brilliant gleam and went out, but in that gleam Espérance recognized the man who opposed his progress as the strange peasant he had seen reading "Cæsar's Commentaries" the previous afternoon by the brook in the vicinity of the Solara cabin. Was he, too, mixed up in the abduction, and how? Again the suspicion returned to Espérance that he was the confederate, the accomplice of the Viscount Massetti.

"Remain where you are!" commanded the intruder, sternly. "If you advance another step, the consequences be upon your own head!"

"Stand aside and let me pass!" thundered the young man, presenting his pistol at his opponent's head. The other gave a low laugh, made a quick movement and Espérance's weapon went whirling swiftly through the air. Meanwhile the sounds of strife had ceased, and the almost impenetrable darkness of the forest effectually prevented the young man from distinguishing anything a yard distant. As his pistol was hurled from his grasp he closed his fists tightly, set his teeth firmly together and made a frantic dash at the peasant. The latter leaped aside with surprising agility, vanishing instantaneously among the clustering trees. So sudden was his leap that Espérance, carried on by the strong impetus he had given himself, plunged wildly into a clump of bushes and fell headlong upon a thick growth of moss, the softness of which prevented him from sustaining even the slightest bruise. As he came in contact with the moss, his hand touched something cold that sent an icy shiver through him from head to foot. Instinctively he recognized the object as a human face, and passing his hand along he felt the body and limbs. Great heavens! who was this? Had another murder been done? Would there ever be an end to the horrors and mysteries of this dreadful night? The body was that of a man. Espérance arose to his knees and drawing a match-safe from his pocket struck a light. As the flame flashed upon the countenance of the unconscious man, the features of Giovanni Massetti appeared! Espérance was stunned. How was this? The Viscount there, beneath his hand, cold and motionless! Who then could have been the individual with whom old Pasquale Solara had been struggling but a moment since? Truly the mysteries of this night were becoming too complicated for solution! And where was the unfortunate Annunziata? Had she escaped from her captor or captors, had she been rescued, had she perished like her ill-fated brother, or had the abduction been successfully accomplished? None of these questions could Espérance answer. One thing, however, was plain—there was no trace of her now; no clue that he could follow; therefore, further pursuit for the present was useless. Sadly he determined to wait for day and then resolve upon some plan to put into immediate execution to retrieve, as far as possible the great wrong that had been done.

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But Giovanni must be attended to. Guilty or innocent, dead or alive, he could not be abandoned where he was. Humanity demanded that some effort be made in his behalf. Perhaps, too, if he were in a condition to speak, some key to the strange, bewildering and terrible transactions of the night might be obtained. Espérance raised him in his arms and carried him to the brook near the Solara cabin. By this time the moon had arisen and in its silvery rays he examined him thoroughly. There was no trace of blood, no wound; only a large bruise on his forehead, as if he had been struck with some heavy object and knocked down unconscious. He was alive, for his heart was beating, and once or twice he had moved on the sward where Espérance had placed him. The young man made a cup of his hands, and, dipping some cool water from the stream, dashed it in the Viscount's face. Instantly he opened his eyes, gazing about him in bewilderment. He sat up and stared wildly at Espérance.

"What is the matter? How came I here?" he asked, in astonishment. Then suddenly putting his hand to the bruise on his forehead, as if it pained him, he continued: "Ah! yes! I remember it all now! Luigi Vampa struck me!"

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"Luigi Vampa struck you?" cried Espérance, more amazed than ever.

"Yes, after he had forced me to take a fearful oath to remain silent!"

"Silent about what? The abduction of Annunziata Solara?"

"Hush! hush! Do not mention that girl's name! Vampa or some of his men may be lurking in the vicinity and hear!"

"What has become of her? At least tell me that! You know!"

"As God is my judge, I do not!"

"Were you not with her to-night? Did you not forcibly take her from the cabin?"

"No! no!"

"Who did then?"

"Alas! my oath compels silence on that point!"

"Your oath! That is a very convenient excuse! Giovanni, Luigi Vampa was not here to-night."

"He was. He lurked around the cabin all day, that when darkness came he might commit the blackest deed that ever sullied the record of mankind!"

Instantly Espérance recollected the peasant he had met that afternoon beside the brook, the man who, but a short while before, had opposed his passage and disarmed him in the forest. His vague familiarity with his voice, face and dress was now accounted for. The man was Luigi Vampa. There could be no doubt of it. But why had he abducted Annunziata Solara, as Giovanni's words would seem to infer? Why, save as the confederate and accomplice of the Viscount Massetti? But then how had Giovanni communicated with him, and in what manner had they contrived to arrange the details of their dishonorable plot? Was it possible that old Pasquale had been the medium of correspondence between the two men. Had he been base enough to sell his child? In that case, with whom had he fought so fiercely and desperately in the forest? Why also had the brigand chief sworn Giovanni to silence? Vain questions, admitting of no satisfactory replies. The Viscount's story was incredible; it was, without doubt, a mere fabrication intended to cover and conceal his own guilt in the premises. Still Espérance could not reconcile this theory with the fact of finding Giovanni senseless in the forest.

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The young Italian had by this time fully recovered from the effects of the shock he had received. He arose to his feet, and, approaching Espérance, said, earnestly:

"My friend, let the past be forgotten. I was wrong and you were right. I ask your pardon. As to the abduction of this unfortunate girl, I assure you that I am entirely innocent of it!"

"But who fired the shot that killed Lorenzo?" asked Espérance, sternly.

"Killed Lorenzo!" cried Giovanni, with unmistakable horror. "Was Lorenzo killed?"

"He was shot to-night and died in my arms!"

"Oh! this is terrible!" exclaimed the Viscount, beads of cold perspiration breaking out upon his forehead. "I assure you, Espérance, I had no hand in this foul murder—I knew nothing of it! I did hear the report of a pistol, but who discharged the weapon or at whom it was fired I could not tell. Everything seemed like a disordered dream!"

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As Espérance said not a word in reply, the Viscount continued:

"Again I assert my innocence of the dark crimes that have been committed to-night! Do you not believe my protestation?"

"I know not what to believe," answered the young man. "But I will not consider you guilty until you are proved so."

"Then," cried Giovanni, joyously, "I have a proposition to make to you. Swear that you will be silent about everything that has occurred since we met Annunziata Solara in the Piazza del Popolo, including the terrible events of to-night, and I will start with you for Rome this very instant!"

"And you will renounce your pursuit of the flower-girl?"

"I will renounce it!"

"Do you swear to do so?"

"I swear it!"

"Then, on my side, I here take the oath of silence you require!"

"You forgive me for having quarreled with you?"

"I forgive you!"

"Then let us leave this accursed spot without another moment's delay!"

They hastily quitted the bank of the little stream and went to the cabin to prepare for their immediate departure. As they passed the spot where Lorenzo's body had lain, Espérance noticed with a start that it was no longer there. They entered the cabin. It was dark and deserted. Espérance lighted a candle and, as he did so, perceived a scrap of paper upon the floor. He stooped mechanically and picked it up. It was crumpled as if it had been crushed in the hand and cast away. The young man straightened it out. It was a brief letter. He held it to the candle and, with a sickening sensation at his heart, read as follows:

DEAREST ANNUNZIATA: All is prepared. We will fly to-night. Be ready.

TONIO.

The note was in Massetti's handwriting. Espérance silently passed it to him. The Viscount read it with eyes bulging from their sockets, his fingers trembling so he could scarcely hold the paper.

"The evidence is conclusive!" said Espérance, icily, as Massetti finished reading. "It is a confession! You abducted Annunziata Solara!"

"What can I say to justify myself?" cried Giovanni, bitterly. "Oh! that accursed oath!"

"And you have sworn me to silence, also, wretched man!" said Espérance. "Why was I so weak!"

He looked scornfully at the Viscount, who stood with bowed head. Then he added:

"I understand you now! You did not wish me to betray you, to set the hounds of Justice on your track, to cause you to be punished, branded and disgraced! You were shrewd and imposed upon me. But my oath is sacred—I will keep it! Let us return to Rome at once as we originally proposed. There I will challenge you in due form for an alleged insult, and we will settle this matter at the pistol's mouth!" [Pg 129]

In a few moments more they were on their road to the Eternal City, leaving behind them the cabin into which they had brought ruin and death!

CHAPTER X.

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THE COUNTESS OF MONTE-CRISTO.

Rome was agitated by a vague scandal, so vague, in fact, that nobody seemed to know the precise details. It had arisen from a newspaper account, given in the indefinite, unsatisfactory way characteristic of Roman journalism. One of the city journals had published the statement that a young and very handsome peasant girl, living with her father in the country beyond the Trastevere, had recently been abducted, report said, by a youthful member of the Roman aristocracy; that the reckless scion of nobility had courted and won her in the guise of a peasant, had carried her off to a bandit fastness and there had eventually deserted her. No names were given. Inquiry at the office of the journal elicited the fact that the proprietors had undoubted authority for the publication of the statement, but no further information could be gained from them. A few days later, however, the same newspaper gave the further particulars that the nobleman had been assisted in effecting the abduction by a young foreigner residing in Rome, and that the brother of the unfortunate girl had been killed in attempting to rescue her. That completed all the intelligence ever vouchsafed to the public in regard to the mysterious affair, and thereafter the journal maintained an unbroken silence respecting the matter. The rumor ran that its proprietors had been bribed by interested parties to say nothing further, but this rumor could not be traced to any reliable source and was, therefore, by many considered a fabrication. No steps were taken by the authorities in the premises, and it was evident that the affair was to be allowed to die out. Still Roman society was considerably excited, conjectures as to the identity of the guilty party and his accomplice being rife in all the fashionable and aristocratic quarters of the city. These conjectures, however, did not grow to positive statements, though insidious hints were thrown out that those who guessed the Viscount Giovanni Massetti to be the culprit were not far out of the way. Massetti, it was known, had been absent from Rome for several days about the period the abduction was supposed to have taken place, but he did not deign to notice the hints current in regard to himself and no one was hardy enough to question him. Nevertheless some color was given to the rumors concerning him by the fact that, immediately on his return to the city, after the absence above referred to, he became involved in a violent quarrel with a young Frenchman, generally supposed to be Espérance, the son of Monte-Cristo, who at once challenged him to a duel, but the duel was not fought for some reason not made public, the difference between the two fiery youths having been arranged through the mediation of mutual friends. It was observed, however, and widely commented upon that, although the twain had previously been almost inseparable companions, Espérance after this quarrel studiously avoided the Viscount Massetti, refraining from even mentioning his name. [Pg 131]

Meanwhile at Civita Vecchia another act in the drama of Annunziata Solara's clouded life had been played. In that city was located a famous asylum for unfortunate women, founded and managed by a French lady of enormous wealth and corresponding benevolence, Madame Helena [Pg 132]

de Rancogne, the Countess of Monte-Cristo.^[6] This lady was untiring in her efforts to reclaim and rehabilitate the fallen of her sex. She was the Superior of the Order of Sisters of Refuge, the members of which were scattered throughout Europe, but made their headquarters at the asylum in Civita Vecchia, where a sufficient number of them constantly aided Madame de Rancogne in carrying out her good and philanthropic work.

The Refuge, as the asylum was called, was a vast edifice of gray stone with a sombre and cloister-like look. Over the huge entrance door on a tablet of polished metal this sentence was incrustured in conspicuous letters of black: "Be Not Led to Consider Any Unworthy!" It was an utterance of the Countess of Monte-Cristo in the past and had been adopted as the guiding rule and maxim of the Order of Sisters of Refuge. The interior of the building in no way corresponded with its gloomy, forbidding outside. Tall, wide windows freely admitted the ardent rays of the glowing Italian sun, flooding the corridors and apartments with cheerful light and warmth. Crimson hangings and magnificently wrought tapestry of fabulous price adorned the walls, while costly and beautiful statues and paintings, the work of old masters and contemporaneous artists, added to the attractiveness of the numerous salons and drawing-rooms. The great refectory and the dormitories possessed charms of their own, bright colors everywhere greeting the eye and nothing being allowed that could inspire or promote melancholy moods or painful thoughts. There was an immense library, to which all the inmates of the Refuge had free access. It was sumptuously furnished, and the floor was covered with a gorgeous Turkey carpet, so thick and soft that footsteps made no sound upon it, while the brilliant figures of tropical flowers profusely studding it gave the impression of eternal summer. Desks abundantly supplied with writing materials, tables loaded with the latest newspapers and periodicals in all the languages of Europe, luxurious sofas and inviting fauteuils allured those succored by the Countess of Monte-Cristo and her vigilant aids. On every side the library was surrounded with book-cases, containing absorbing romances, volumes of travel, the productions of the celebrated poets, histories and essays, with a liberal sprinkling of religious works, mostly non-sectarian and invariably of a consolatory character. In addition elegantly and thoroughly equipped work-rooms were provided, in which those who were so inclined could practice embroidery, sew or manufacture the thousand and one little fancy knick-knacks at which female fingers are so skilful. Nothing, however, was compulsory, the main object being to afford the inmates of the Refuge agreeable occupation, to elevate them and to prevent them from looking back regretfully to the agitated lives they had led and the vices that had held empire over them in the past. Truly a more generous, unselfish lover of her sex than the noble Countess of Monte-Cristo did not exist.

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The protégées of the Sisters of the Order of Refuge embraced women of all ages, all nationalities and all conditions in life. They included Parisian grisettes and lorettes, recruited by Nini Moustache in her coquettish apartment of the Chaussée d' Antin, for Nini had proved a most effective missionary; young girls, who had fallen a prey to designing roués and been abandoned to the whirl of that gulf of destruction, the streets of Paris; Spanish señoritas, who had listened too credulously to the false vows of faithless lovers; Italian peasant girls, whose pretty faces and charms of person had been their ruin; unfortunate German, English, Dutch and Scandinavian maidens; and even brands snatched from the burning in Russia, Turkey and Greece. This somewhat diverse community dwelt together in perfect sisterly accord, chastened by their individual misfortunes, encouraged and upheld in the path of reform by the Countess of Monte-Cristo, who was to all the unfortunates as a tender, thoughtful and considerate mother.

One quiet night, just as darkness had settled down over the streets of Civita Vecchia, a timid knock at the entrance door of the Refuge aroused the portress on duty there. Such knocks were often heard and well understood. The portress arose from her bench, partly opened the door and admitted a trembling young girl, whose crouching and shrunken form was clad in a mass of tattered rags. A thin red cloak was thrown over her shoulders, and her pale, emaciated face spoke plainly of poverty, hardship and suffering. Even Giovanni Massetti would have with difficulty recognized in this wretched outcast the once shapely and beautiful flower-girl of the Piazza del Popolo, for the applicant at the Refuge door was no other than the ill-fated Annunziata Solara. Her beauty had faded away like a summer dream, vanished as the perfume from a withered hyacinth. She stood before the portress silently, with clasped hands, the incarnation of misery, distress and desertion.

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"What do you require, my poor child?" asked the portress, tenderly and sympathetically.

"Shelter, only shelter!" replied the girl, beseechingly, in a hollow, broken voice, the ghost of her former full and joyous tones.

"The Superior must decide upon your case," said the portress. "You shall go to her at once."

The woman touched a bell, directing the Sister of the Order of Refuge who answered it to conduct the applicant to the apartment of Madame de Rancogne. The trembling Annunziata was led through a long corridor and ushered into a small, but cosy office in which sat an elderly lady of commanding and aristocratic presence, whose head was covered with curls of silver hair, and whose still handsome countenance wore an expressive look in which compassion and benevolence predominated. This lady was the celebrated Madame Helena de Rancogne, whose adventures and exploits as the Countess of Monte-Cristo had in the past electrified every European nation. She arose as Annunziata entered, welcoming her with a cordial, comforting smile.

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"Sit down, my child," she said, in a rich, melodious voice. "You are fatigued. Are you also hungry?"

Annunziata sank into the chair offered her, covering her face with her thin hands.

"Alas! signora," she replied, faintly, "I have walked many weary miles and have not tasted a morsel of food since dawn!"

"Take the poor child to the refectory," said the Countess to the Sister, who had remained standing near the door. "After her hunger has been appeased, I will see her again and question her."

Half an hour later, Annunziata, refreshed and strengthened by her meal, once more sat in the office with the Countess of Monte-Cristo.

"My child," said the latter, "what is your name?"

"Annunziata Solara."

"You have applied for shelter here the portress informs me. Do you know that this is an asylum for the fallen of your sex?"

"I know it, signora; that is the reason I came."

"Have you repented of your sin and do you desire to lead a better life?"

"I have repented bitterly," answered the girl, bursting into a flood of tears, "oh! how bitterly God alone knows! I wish to hide myself from the world; I wish to atone for my shame by whatever good action my hands can find to do." [Pg 137]

"It is well," said the Countess, her eyes lighting up with enthusiasm. "The field is wide, and the Order of Sisters of Refuge, although large, is always open for new additions. Much good has already been done, but more remains to be accomplished, infinitely more. You shall be received and given an opportunity to share in the great work."

"From the depths of my soul I thank you!" sobbed the girl. "I will try earnestly to be worthy of your benevolence!"

"Tell me your story now," said the Superior. "I cannot believe that the guilt was altogether yours."

"I am grateful, signora, for those words. I was thoughtless and indiscreet, but not criminal. Happy and contented in my humble peasant home, I was pure and innocent. I knew nothing of the wickedness of men, of the snares set to entrap unwary young girls. I lived with my father and brother in the vicinity of Rome, selling flowers in that city from time to time. I had never had a suitor, never had a lover. My heart was free, filled with the joyousness of youth. I had been told that I possessed a fair share of beauty, but that neither made me vain nor inclined me to coquetry. Oh! signora, I shall never be so happy again!"

Emotion overcame her and her tears started afresh. The Countess soothed her and she continued:

"One fatal night, my brother brought two strange young men to our cabin. They appeared to be peasants like ourselves, and one of them had been wounded in a fight with a brigand. They remained with us for some days. I nursed the wounded man, who, when he grew convalescent, made love to me. I listened to his ardent declarations, submitted to his endearments. I grew to love him in my turn, and, oh! signora, I believed in him, trusted him. At that period I had nothing to reproach myself with, and Tonio, that was my admirer's name, seemed sincerity itself. One day he asked me to fly with him, but our conversation was interrupted and I gave him no answer. I was confused, I did not know what to do. That evening I received a letter from him—I found it on the table in the room I occupied, concealed beneath my work-box—telling me that everything was prepared for our flight that night, and asking me to be in readiness. I was terrified. I could not understand why he wished me to fly with him if everything was as it should be, as my father and brother would not have objected to any proper suitor for my hand on whom I had bestowed my heart. For the first time I was suspicious of Tonio, and I resolved to pay no attention to his letter. On the morrow I would see him and tell him to speak to my father and brother. Alas! that opportunity was not given me. Oh! that horrible, horrible night!" [Pg 138]

She covered her face with her hands and shuddered. When she looked up she was ghastly pale, and her voice quivered as she resumed:

"That dreadful night, as I lay upon my bed, wrapped in slumber, I was suddenly aroused by hearing some one in my chamber. It was very dark and I could not see the intruder. I started up in terror, but a hand was placed firmly over my mouth. I was torn from my bed and borne in a man's arms from the cabin. I struggled to release myself, but in vain. My abductor appeared to possess the strength of a giant. There was no moon, but in the dim starlight I could see that the man was masked. He hastened with me into the neighboring forest. There he accidentally struck his right arm against the trunk of a tree and his hand dropped from my mouth. Instantly I uttered a loud, piercing cry, but the hand went back to its place again almost immediately, and I was unable to give vent to another sound. My cry, however, had been heard by my brother, who hastened to my assistance. He overtook my abductor in the forest, and, though unarmed, at once attacked him. The man dropped me and turned upon my brother. A fierce struggle ensued, during which the mask was struck from my abductor's face and, to my horror, I thought I [Pg 139]

recognized Tonio. Suddenly there was a report of a pistol. I had watched the conflict, unable to move. I saw my brother stagger; blood was gushing from him. I could endure no more; I fell to the ground in a swoon.

"When I recovered my senses, I was in a strange hut. Savage looking men, whom I took to be bandits, were guarding me. How long I remained in the hut I do not know, but it must have been several days. At times a masked man came to me, telling me that he was Tonio and pressing his suit upon me. I refused to listen to him, upbraiding him for tearing me from my home and wounding my brother. I told him his conduct was not that of a lover, but of a villain. I implored him, if he possessed a spark of manhood, to set me free, to send me to my father. He informed me that I was his captive and should so remain until I yielded to his wishes. I repulsed him with scorn, with the energy of desperation. Ultimately he overpowered me by sheer force, and compelled me to yield. Then I saw him no more. I wandered about the hut like one demented. My cup of sorrow was full to overflowing. I was in despair. Shame and degradation were henceforth my portion.

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"After my abductor's departure, a new comer appeared among the brigands. He seemed to be their chief. He expressed pity for me, and told me that my abductor was not a peasant, but a young Roman nobleman, the Viscount Giovanni Massetti. I cared nothing for this revelation. I had no thought of vengeance; my sole desire was to hide myself from the gaze of the world, to avoid the pitiless finger of scorn. Eventually the bandit chief took me back to my home. There I found my father, learning from his lips that my brother was dead. This intelligence made my sorrow utterly unbearable. My father was moody and morose. For days at a time he did not speak to me. He appeared to have lost all paternal affection. Finally I left the cabin. I had heard of the Refuge and determined to seek its shelter. I walked to Civita Vecchia, and to-night found myself at your door. Such, signora, is my sad history. I have told you the whole truth. You see I am not altogether to blame."

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As Annunziata concluded, the Countess of Monte-Cristo drew her upon her bosom.

"My poor girl," said she, in tender, pitying tones, "you have, indeed, tasted the bitterness of life and have been more sinned against than sinning. But you are my daughter now. The Sisterhood of the Order of Refuge has covered you with its protecting shield."

FOOTNOTE:

[6] For a full account of the life and career of "The Countess of Monte-Cristo," see that powerful, romantic and absorbing novel, "The Countess of Monte-Cristo," published by T. B. Peterson & Brothers, Philadelphia.

CHAPTER XI.

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THE BEGGAR AND HIS MATES.

A year had elapsed since the events already recorded. Zuleika, having finished her studies at the convent school of the Sisterhood of the Sacred Heart, the Count of Monte-Cristo had quitted Rome and, with his family, was established in Paris in the palatial mansion, No. 27 Rue du Helder, formerly occupied by the Count de Morcerf. He was a member of the Chamber of Deputies, representing Marseilles, and was wedded to his first love, Mercédès, who had mysteriously reappeared and nursed him through a severe illness, which was immediately followed by their marriage. The revolution of 1848, which had placed M. Lamartine at the head of the Provisional Government, had put power and office within his grasp, but he had declined both, preferring to work in the wider field of universal human freedom. His eminent services during the revolution had rendered him immensely popular with the masses, and the fame of his matchless eloquence added to the vast influence he so modestly wielded. His colossal wealth, which he lavishly used to promote the great cause he championed, also tended to make him a conspicuous figure in the political and high social circles of the capital, though he strove to court retirement.

Zuleika and Espérance fairly adored their mild, kindly stepmother, who, on her side, was as devotedly attached to them as if they had been her own children. The Count noted this mutual attachment, which time only served to strengthen, and it filled his heart with joy and gratification. The family was, indeed, a happy one, and even the servants shared the general felicity.

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Mlle. d' Armilly's influence over Captain Joliette great as it undoubtedly was, had been insufficient to induce that gallant and honorable young soldier to seek a rupture with the wonderful man to whom he was so vastly indebted and whom he so highly revered. This had at first caused a coldness between the revengeful prima donna and her admirer, but a reconciliation had ultimately taken place between them and they were now man and wife. Prior to their marriage Mlle. d' Armilly had acknowledged herself to be Eugénie Danglars, and thus the motive of her bitter hostility to the Count of Monte-Cristo was revealed. She had retired from the operatic stage, and had received a large sum of money, stated to be a legacy from her father, but

generally believed to be a gift from the Count, intended by him in some degree to make amends to her for the sufferings she had endured by reason of his vengeance on the banker Danglars. The prima donna's brother Léon had turned out to be a woman masquerading in male attire, no other than Mlle. d' Armilly herself, Eugénie's former music-teacher, who had loaned her name to her friend when the latter started on her operatic career. These transformations had been immediately followed by another, Captain Joliette discarding his pseudonym and appearing as Albert de Morcerf. Paris had talked over and wondered at all this for a week, and then had completely forgotten it, turning its fickle attention to newer and more engrossing sensations. Albert's marriage and the legacy healed the breach between Eugénie and the Count of Monte-Cristo, and the young couple, together with the real Mlle. d' Armilly, had been added to the happy family in the mansion of the Rue du Helder.

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The Viscount Giovanni Massetti had appeared in Paris. Immediately after his reckless visit to Zuleika in the convent garden and his wild interview with her there, he had gone to the Count of Monte-Cristo, avowed his love for Haydée's child and solicited her hand in marriage. He had been told to wait a year, a period he had passed he scarcely knew how, but it had been an eternity to him, an eternity fraught with restless anxiety, with alternations between ardent hope and the depths of despair. The expiration of his probation found him in the mansion of the Rue du Helder, renewing his earnest suit with the Count, who had granted him permission to win his daughter if he could. The young Italian had at once sought Zuleika, who had welcomed him as her lover and betrothed. Then a clash had suddenly arisen; Espérance had expressed his abhorrence of his sister's suitor, had given mysterious hints that had recalled the half-forgotten Roman scandal, and a separation between Giovanni and Zuleika had ensued, the former refusing to speak out and clear himself, pleading his terrible oath of silence. In the course of his vague, unsatisfactory disclosures, Espérance had unguardedly mentioned the name of Luigi Vampa, and the Count of Monte-Cristo had written to the brigand chief, requesting such information as he possessed in regard to the impenetrable mystery. Vampa's reply had been a fearful arraignment of the youthful Viscount, but Zuleika could not believe her lover the depraved and guilty wretch the brigand chief represented him to be, asserting that there was something yet unexplained, something that would effectually exculpate him could it be reached. The Count of Monte-Cristo had at first inclined to the belief that Massetti was merely the victim of circumstances, of some remarkable coincidence, but Vampa's letter scattered this belief to the winds and he demanded that the Viscount should conclusively prove his innocence. Zuleika had meanwhile banished her lover from her presence, but her heart yearned for him and defended him in spite of everything. She therefore sent him Vampa's letter, assuring him of her belief in his innocence and commanding him to prove it to her and to the world. Thereupon Giovanni had instantly quitted Paris. His sudden disappearance seemed like a flight; it caused scandal's thousand tongues to wag remorselessly; but, although he left no word for her, Zuleika knew her command had sent him to Italy to clear his name and record in her eyes; she was firmly convinced that she would see him again, that he would return to Paris rehabilitated.

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Such was the general condition of affairs, as affecting the Monte-Cristo family, at the time the thread of this narrative is resumed.

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It was the month of July. The heat in Paris was intense, absolutely stifling; a white glow seemed to fall from the breezeless, yellow atmosphere, scorching the very pavements; for weeks there had been no rain, not the slightest sign of a cloud in the pitiless heavens. The streets were almost deserted; even that favored thoroughfare of fashion, the Rue de la Paix, boasted of but few promenaders; the only spot in request was the Bois de Boulogne, with its magnificent trees and deliciously shaded avenues; the Champs-Élysées, throughout its entire extent, from the Place de la Concorde to the Arc de l' Étoile, was like a sun-swept desert, and its picturesque marchands de coco, with their shining mugs, snow-white aprons and tinkling bells, found only a limited demand for their liquorice water and lemon juice, while even the Théâtres de Guignol failed to arrest the rare passers.

In the vast garden of the Monte-Cristo mansion, notwithstanding its power elsewhere, the sun seemed to have been successfully defied; there the trees, shrubs and plants were not parched, but preserved all their freshness and beauty, suggesting the coolness of early spring rather than the sweltering heat of midsummer, while the parterres were brilliant with gorgeous bloom and penetrating perfumes loaded the air. Near a little gate opening upon the Rue du Helder, early one morning, Zuleika and Mlle. d' Armilly were sitting on a rustic bench beneath an ample honeysuckle-covered arbor. They had come to the garden from the breakfast-room to rest and chat after their meal. The former music-teacher was telling her companion of her stage experience and of the many adventures she had met with during her operatic career. In the midst of a most interesting recital, she suddenly paused, fixing her eyes upon the little gate, with a cry of surprise and terror. Zuleika followed the direction of her glance and gave a start as she saw, leaning against the bars of the gate, a sinister-looking man, clad in dusty, tattered garments, who was peering at her companion and herself with eyes that glittered like those of some venomous serpent. When he noticed that he was observed, the man pulled a greasy, weather-stained cap from his head, disclosing a profusion of matted, whitened locks, and, stretching a grimy hand, with hooked fingers that resembled the claws of an enormous bird, through the bars, said, in the hoarse tones peculiar to the outcasts of the streets:

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"Charity, for the love of God!"

The man seemed more like a thief than a beggar. Nevertheless, Mlle. d' Armilly, who was the first to recover her self-possession, drew a few sous from her pocket and advanced to place them in

his palm. As she came closer to him, the mendicant acted very strangely. Instead of taking the money, he suddenly withdrew his hand, staring at Mlle. d' Armilly with an expression of mingled terror and amazement upon his evil countenance. Then he quickly turned from the gate, thrust on his cap and started off at a rapid pace. Mlle. d' Armilly also was singularly affected; she dropped the sous, became ashy pale and would have fallen to the ground had not Zuleika sprung to her side and caught her in her arms.

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"What is the matter, Louise?" cried the girl, astonished at the beggar's behavior and still more so at the effect he had produced upon her companion.

"I have seen a ghost!" replied Mlle. d' Armilly, in a startling whisper.

"A ghost?"

"Yes! Oh! let us quit the garden at once!"

"The ghost of whom?"

"I dare not say! Come, come, I cannot remain here another second! How fortunate that young Madame de Morcerf was not with us! She would have been driven mad!"

"Albert's wife? You talk wildly, Louise. What interest could she feel in that wretched outcast?"

"What interest? Do not ask me. I cannot, I must not tell you! Oh! it is terrible!"

"Will you tell Albert's wife of what you have seen?"

"No! a thousand times no! She must not even suspect that man's return from the grave! I entreat you to say nothing to her or any one else!"

"I shall be silent upon the subject; but that beggar was not a ghost; he was a most substantial reality. Something frightened him away, something, doubtless, that he saw in the street, perhaps a sergent de ville. Your recognition of him was fancied."

"It was not fancied. But we must not stay here; I would not see that face, those eyes again for worlds!"

Zuleika took her friend's arm and walked with her towards the mansion, endeavoring as they went along to reassure her, to reason her out of her fright. Her efforts, however, proved altogether futile. Mlle. d' Armilly was utterly unnerved and at once retired to her room.

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Notwithstanding her willingness to believe that Mlle. d' Armilly had been deceived with regard to the identity of the beggar and, in her confusion, had confounded him with some one else, Zuleika could not altogether shake off a feeling of vague apprehension, of ill-defined terror when she thought over the singular conduct and wild agitation of the former music-teacher in the quiet and solitude of her own chamber. Why had Mlle. d' Armilly been so stricken at the sight of the mendicant? Why had she so earnestly entreated her to say nothing of what had occurred to any one, and, especially, to avoid all mention of the matter to Albert de Morcerf's wife? Mlle. d' Armilly had seen too much of the world to be frightened by a mere trifle. Was it possible that the ragged outcast had been in some way identified with young Madame de Morcerf's operatic career, that he had been her lover? The latter supposition would furnish a plausible cause for the former music-teacher's terror, as the reappearance of a lover might lead to disclosures well-calculated to seriously disturb the happiness and tranquillity of the newly-made husband and wife. Zuleika had heard that Eugénie had been much courted during the period she was on the stage, that she had numbered her ardent admirers by scores, but this man seemed too old, too forlorn, to have recently been in a position to scatter wealth at the feet of a prima donna. Besides, Mlle. d' Armilly had spoken of him as a ghost and had appeared to refer him to a period more remote. Zuleika had also heard of Mlle. Danglars' broken marriage-contract away back in the past. Could this beggar be the scoundrel who had masqueraded under the assumed title of Prince Cavalcanti and had so nearly become her husband? Perhaps; but even if he were that unscrupulous wretch, what harm could his reappearance do at this late day, now that the old story had been thoroughly sifted and almost forgotten? Albert was well aware of all the details of the Cavalcanti episode, and it was hardly likely that anything further could be exposed that would disturb either him or his wife. No, the grimy, white-haired, sinister-looking stranger could not be the quondam Prince; he was some one else, some one more to be feared. But who was he, if not the miserable son of Villefort? Zuleika was more perplexed and disturbed than she was willing to admit, even to herself. If she could only speak with the Count of Monte-Cristo, tell him all, some explanation of the mystery might, doubtless, be obtained, an explanation that would, at least, calm her vague fears; but that was impossible; her promise to Mlle. d' Armilly to be silent sealed her lips as effectually with her father as with young Madame de Morcerf. Whatever might be her fears, she would have to bear them alone, or, at the best, share them with Mlle. d' Armilly, who, evidently, would give her no further satisfaction.

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Meanwhile the man who had caused all this trouble after having almost run quite a distance along the Rue du Helder, utterly oblivious of the attention he drew to himself from the rare passers, turned into the Rue Taitbout, thence reached the Rue de Provence and finally found himself in the Cité d' Antin. There he made his way into a small drinking-shop or caboulot, patronized by some of the worst prowlers about that section of Paris. The room he entered was unoccupied save by a slatternly young woman, who sat behind the counter reading a greasy copy of the Gazette des Tribunaux. The man went to the counter and, throwing down the price,

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demanded a glass of brandy, which he swallowed at a gulp. Then he addressed the slatternly young woman, who, with her paper still in one hand, was half-smiling, half-scowling at him.

"Is Waldmann here?" he asked, with the air of a man who feels himself thoroughly at home.

"Yes," answered the young woman, resuming her seat and her reading; "he is in the back room, playing piquet with Peppino, Beppo and Siebecker."

"Good!" said the man. "I am in luck. I scarcely expected to find them all in at this hour."

With this he opened a glazed door, and, stepping into the back room, closed it behind him. The players, who were seated at a table, with mugs of beer beside them, glanced up quickly from their game as he came in, and one of them, a heavy-framed, beetle-browed German, called out to him, speaking French:

"How now, Bouche-de-Miel, what is the matter? You are out of breath and as pale as if you had been shadowed by an Agent de la Sureté!"

"I have not been shadowed, Waldmann," answered the beggar or Bouche-de-Miel, "but I have made a startling discovery." [Pg 152]

The players at once put down their cards and leaned forward to hear. They were a rough, desperate-looking set; on their ill-omened and sunburnt visages thief could be read as plainly as if it were written there, and perhaps, also, the still more significant word, assassin! Two of the men were Italians, evidently the Peppino and Beppo referred to by the slatternly young woman at the counter in the outer room. Besides Waldmann there was another German. This was Siebecker. Tall, slim, with yellow hair and moustache, he had some claim to good looks; his attire was quite respectable compared to that of the rest; had he not possessed a pair of restless, demoniac eyes, he might have passed for a person of tolerably fair repute, but those glaring, tiger-like orbs betrayed his true character and stamped him as a very dangerous member of the criminal fraternity. Waldmann appeared to be the leader of the coterie. The Italians wore blue blouses, but the distinctive garment of the Parisian workman could not conceal a certain brigandish air that was second nature to them.

"Let's hear about your startling discovery, Bouche-de-Miel," said Waldmann. "Take a seat and tell us."

The beggar dropped upon a wooden chest, saying, in a tone of deep dejection, as he did so:

"Much as I long to take a hand in to-night's little job, I'm afraid you'll have to let me off!"

"Stuff!" cried Waldmann. "You are afraid of meeting that terrible fellow, the Count of Monte-Cristo! But the startling discovery—out with it, man!" [Pg 153]

"Yes; the discovery, the discovery!" demanded the others, impatiently.

"Well," said Bouche-de-Miel, "I went to the Rue du Helder this morning, as agreed upon, and made a survey of Monte-Cristo's mansion. Nothing easier than to get in, as no watch is kept at night, and the Count is not in the least suspicious although he has millions of francs in his safe, to say not a word of jewels and other valuables. As I was about leaving the premises, I stopped at a little gate giving access to the garden from the street, having noticed that the key had been carelessly left in the lock on the outside. I was leaning against the gate, taking a wax impression of this key, which would assure us entrance without trouble, when, happening to glance through the grating into the garden, I saw two women; they had noticed me and seemed greatly frightened. Instantly I thrust my hand through the bars and asked for charity. One of the women summoned up sufficient courage to arise and approach me; she was about to give me some money, when suddenly she recognized me in spite of all the changes in my appearance. I also recognized her and hastened away as rapidly as I could."

"Well, what of all this?" said Waldmann, calmly. "It amounts to nothing whatever."

"It amounts to so much that I cannot go with you to Monte-Cristo's house and run the risk of meeting that woman!"

Waldmann gave vent to a loud laugh; the others smiled. [Pg 154]

"I never before heard of a Frenchman who was afraid to meet a woman!" said Siebecker, much amused.

"I tell you I cannot go; you must let me off," said Bouche-de-Miel, obstinately.

"What!" cried Peppino. "Do you allow a woman to stand between you and your vengeance against the Count of Monte-Cristo? Remember Luigi Vampa's bill of fare!"

Bouche-de-Miel glared at the Italian savagely.

"There is no need for me to remember it," returned he, bitterly. "I have never forgotten it. Neither have I forgotten your share in that infamous business!" he added, between his teeth.

"It was my duty to do as I was bidden!" retorted Peppino.

"I will have my revenge on you yet!" muttered Bouche-de-Miel, menacingly.

"We shall see!" answered the Italian, defiantly.

Waldmann interposed and said, sternly:

"No quarreling! We are brothers and are united for mutual gain. Bouche-de-Miel, you must go with us to-night. I order you to go and will take no excuse! Besides, if, as Peppino says, you have vengeance to gratify against the Count of Monte-Cristo, the opportunity is too precious for you to neglect it! At any rate, go you shall! Where is the wax impression of the key?"

Bouche-de-Miel handed the German a small package which, he took from his pocket. Waldmann gave it to Siebecker, directing him to fashion a key in accordance with it. In the meantime the beggar had been thinking. His face showed that a fierce struggle was taking place in his mind, a struggle between fear and a burning desire for revenge. The latter ultimately triumphed, and the beggar, rising from the chest, went to the table, bringing his fist down upon it with a resounding blow.

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"I will accompany you, mates!" he said, with wildly flashing eyes and in an excited voice. "Monte-Cristo robbed me, ruined me and drove me into the world a penniless vagrant! I will have my revenge!"

"Spoken like a hero!" said Waldmann, enthusiastically. "We will meet at the little gate on the Rue du Helder at midnight. Siebecker will give you the key, Bouche-de-Miel, and you will open the gate. You need not fear recognition, even if you should meet the woman you have spoken of face to face, for you will be masked like the rest of us. If you are anxious about her safety, I will tell you now that we only want Monte-Cristo's millions; we do not mean murder."

"But what if murder should be necessary, if it cannot be avoided?"

Waldmann shrugged his shoulders.

"Then we must protect ourselves," he answered, phlegmatically.

Thereupon the coterie of miscreants separated, to pass away the hours as best they might, until the time for the brilliant stroke they meditated arrived.

CHAPTER XII.

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FATHER AND DAUGHTER.

The Count of Monte-Cristo was in his study, pacing to and fro; he was plunged in thought, and an expression indicative of deep concern was upon his pale, but resolute countenance. Ever and anon he would pause in front of a small table on which was a telegraphic outfit for the sending and receiving of messages, listening with close attention to the sounds given forth, for, although sound reading was not much practiced by the telegraphers of that period, Monte-Cristo, who seemed to have all the accomplishments of his own age and those of ages to come, was a proficient at it, as well as a remarkably rapid and correct operator.

It was nearly midnight. The entire family in the mansion of the Rue du Helder had retired to rest, with the exception of its head, who had remained up in response to a summons from Berlin to be ready to receive the details of a secret meeting of a vast society of Prussian patriots, which would be sent to him in cipher by one of his most enthusiastic and active agents for the promotion of the cause of universal human liberty. The intense heat that had prevailed all day had been but slightly moderated by the advent of a close, sultry night; there was not the faintest breeze in the heavy, oppressive air, and the blue sky, full of stars and flooded with brilliant moonlight, was without a cloud. The silvery brightness poured in through the open windows of the study, so illuminating the apartment that the Count had extinguished his lamp. Fantastic shadows were projected on the floor by the book-cases and various articles of furniture, looking like gigantic and dwarfed shapes of demons and elves and lending the scene a weird, supernatural aspect. Monte-Cristo walked amid these distorted shadows like some master magician communing with the dark, mysterious spirits that received his commands in silence and then vanished to execute them without question or debate.

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The Count's thoughts were of a sombre nature; he was pondering over the problem of French freedom, wondering how long the volatile, changeable nation with which he had cast his lot would retain the liberty acquired by the revolution that had overturned Louis Philippe's throne and given the people power. He distrusted the events of the near future. Already the Bonapartists were active and Louis Napoleon was looming up as a formidable figure. The nephew of the great conqueror of Europe professed republican sentiments, but Monte-Cristo doubted his sincerity as well as his ability to govern the restless population of Paris. He foresaw imitation of the famous Emperor; his prophetic eye pierced through Louis Napoleon's presidential aspirations and saw beyond them a second Empire not less brilliant but not more substantial than the first. The policy of the Bonapartes was to dazzle the masses, the men of the barricades, by a show of grandeur and amuse rather than force them into submission. The Count had held aloof from Louis Napoleon, had even opposed him to the full extent of his mighty influence; he had done so not from any personal considerations, but for the good of the entire French people, for the

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preservation intact of the fabric of freedom, the fruit of the revolution of 1848.

Meanwhile, as these thoughts coursed through Monte-Cristo's active brain, the telegraphic instrument went ticking steadily on, but the information he expected was not conveyed. News flashed to him from every centre of political agitation save Berlin; there an obstinate, ominous silence prevailed. Several times he sought to open communication with his confederate in the Prussian capital, but his signals were unanswered. At last he paused wearily in his walk, throwing himself in a huge arm-chair; fatigue weighed upon his eyelids and he speedily sank into an uneasy, broken sleep, from which he started at intervals, disturbed by some vague, disquieting dream. Ever and anon, as he dozed, that smile that made him so handsome would steal over his manly countenance, bringing out into bold relief all his wonderful nobility and benevolence of expression.

As midnight struck in every clock-tower in Paris, the usual solitude of the Rue du Helder at that dead hour was broken by the appearance of a sinister figure at the little gate of Monte-Cristo's garden. This figure was almost instantly followed by another hardly less forbidding. Both wore masks and moved as stealthily as cats. The second figure addressed the first, speaking in a cautious whisper:

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"Bouche-de-Miel, is that you?"

"Yes. Siebecker, have you the key?" muttered the other, scarcely above his breath.

"Here it is, old man. Now to work. The others will be on hand in a moment. Open the gate and let us get in."

Bouche-de-Miel took the key, which was covered with oil to prevent grating, and inserted it in the lock. It fitted to a charm and turned noiselessly. Bouche-de-Miel gave the gate a gentle push; it yielded, swinging open without a sound. The two men passed inside, partially closing it after them. The moonlight fell upon the seat that Zuleika and Mlle. d' Armilly had occupied beneath the honey-suckle-covered arbor that morning; Bouche-de-Miel gave a sudden start as he glanced at it, half-repenting of having yielded to Waldmann's command under the impulse of his hatred for Monte-Cristo and his desire for revenge; he trembled violently in spite of all his efforts to maintain composure and his face became one mass of sweat beneath his protecting mask. Siebecker noticed his agitation and gave vent to a smothered curse.

"Sacré nom d' un chien!" he muttered, between his teeth, "if you go on like that, old man, it would have been better had Waldmann let you off. You can't do this job with an unsteady hand. Brace up, brace up, Bouche-de-Miel! What's that?"

There was a slight noise at the gate. Grasping his tremulous companion by the arm, Siebecker hurriedly drew him behind a clump of small chestnut trees. No sooner were they hidden than three masked men cautiously opened the gate and came on tip-toe into the garden. Waldmann, Peppino and Beppo had arrived and were ready to do their share of the nefarious work. Siebecker and Bouche-de-Miel silently emerged from their hiding-place and joined them.

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Waldmann glanced about him, evidently satisfied.

"So far so good," said he, in an undertone. "We are all here on time. Do not let us waste an instant. Have you steadied your nerves with plenty of brandy, Bouche-de-Miel?"

"I'm all right," replied the latter, doggedly, though there was a perceptible quiver in his voice as he spoke.

"He has just had another fit of fear," said Siebecker, disdainfully. "I think we would do well to leave him with Peppino and Beppo to keep watch in the garden! It won't be safe to take him with us into the house, Waldmann!"

The leader went up to Bouche-de-Miel and gave him a rough shake.

"You are a coward!" said he, savagely. "That woman story you told us was all bosh. You are afraid of meeting Monte-Cristo, as I saw very plainly this morning!"

This taunt stung Bouche-de-Miel to the quick and restored to him all his courage. He faced Waldmann unflinchingly and retorted:

"I am no coward and I am not afraid of Monte-Cristo!"

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"Then what is the matter with, you?"

"That is my business, but it shan't damage this night's work. I will go with you to the house and do my part as well as you or Siebecker. You said not to waste an instant. What are you waiting for? Go on!"

"Do you swear to stand by us to the last whatever happens?"

"I swear it!"

"I will trust you."

"And you will have no reason to repent of your trust. If I meet Monte-Cristo I will kill him as I would a mongrel cur! Does that satisfy you?"

"How about your mysterious woman?"

Bouche-de-Miel could not repress a start, but he clenched his fists firmly and replied, with an effort:

"Never mind her! She must take care of herself!"

"Who is she?"

"Never mind her, I say! If harm comes to her it will be her own fault!"

Waldmann appeared reassured; nevertheless he whispered in Bouche-de-Miel's ear with a terrible earnestness that plainly showed he meant what he said:

"I told you I would trust you, and I will. But if you weaken, if you seek to act the traitor to save that woman, I will blow your brains out where you stand!"

Bouche-de-Miel shrugged his shoulders.

"If I weaken, if I seek to betray you, shoot me on the spot! I give you leave! But if you use your pistol, it will be on other game than me! Let us to work!" [Pg 162]

Leaving the two Italians on guard at the gate, Waldmann and Siebecker, with Bouche-de-Miel between them, went stealthily towards the house, walking on the grass that the sound of their footsteps might be muffled. They kept well in the shadows of the trees, reaching the rear of the mansion unobserved and without incident. Waldmann removed his shoes and the others followed his example.

"Everything is silent," he whispered. "No doubt all the members of the household, including the redoubtable Count himself, are fast asleep. We shall have an easy thing of it."

He went upon the back porch and tried the door of the servants' quarters. It had been carelessly left unlocked. He opened it and peered within. Only darkness and silence there. He beckoned to his comrades; they also came on the porch. Waldmann produced a dark lantern from under his coat; the three robbers entered Monte-Cristo's house.

"The Count's study where he keeps his money is on the second floor," whispered Bouche-de-Miel. "We can reach it by going up the servants' stairway over there."

He pointed across the small corridor in which they stood. Waldmann cautiously opened his lantern and the narrow thread of light that came from it revealed the stairway. The miscreants mounted it and, guided by Bouche-de-Miel, who seemed to be thoroughly familiar with the topography of the mansion, were soon in front of Monte-Cristo's study. The door was ajar. Bouche-de-Miel glanced in, but instantly withdrew his head, motioning Waldmann and Siebecker to look. They did so, and saw a man asleep in an arm-chair; simultaneously a sharp click in the room alarmed them; they clenched their teeth, set their lips firmly together and drew their pistols. The sharp click was repeated, followed in rapid succession by several others. It was the telegraphic instrument—the news from Berlin had come! [Pg 163]

Instantly the Count was wide awake. He leaped from his chair and ran to the instrument, to the clicking of which he eagerly and intently listened. The vast society of Prussian patriots had met. The delegates had been long in arriving, for, although the utmost secrecy had been used, the royal police had got wind of their presence in the capital and of the proposed assemblage. Still, it was hoped that the meeting would not be disturbed, as the rendezvous was in a secluded locality, of which, it was thought, the authorities were not suspicious. Scarcely, however, had the president taken his seat when the police poured in through every door and window. All the patriots were arrested, save Monte-Cristo's confederate, who by a lucky chance succeeded in deceiving the myrmidons of the law.

The Count's brow clouded as he heard this startling intelligence ticked off by the telegraphic instrument. He put his hand to his forehead at the conclusion of the ominous message and staggered like a drunken man back to his arm-chair, into which he sank. As he did so, Waldmann, Siebecker and Bouche-de-Miel, who immediately rushed forward, seized him and held him there with the strength of iron. Waldmann slipped a gag into his mouth and Siebecker bound him firmly to the chair with a stout cord he took from his pocket. The binding accomplished, the robbers quitted their hold of the Count and turned in search of the plunder they had come for—the millions of Monte-Cristo! [Pg 164]

Suddenly there was a loud cry. It came from Bouche-de-Miel. The others turned and looked at him, their pistols in their hands. He was staring at a white-robed woman, who stood like a ghost in the open doorway of the study. At that juncture another door opened and Ali, the faithful Nubian, followed by all the valets of the household, sprang into the room, falling upon the bewildered scoundrels ere they had recovered from their surprise. There was a brief struggle, but the servants were unarmed, and the robbers, disengaging themselves from the clutches of their adversaries, kept them at bay with their pistols and slowly backed from the apartment. In the conflict, however, Bouche-de-Miel's mask was torn from his face, and his countenance was no sooner visible than the white-robed woman ran towards him with outstretched arms, breathlessly exclaiming:

"My father! my father!"

Bouche-de-Miel motioned her from him; then he moved as if to approach her, urged on by a feeling he was altogether unable to master; but Waldmann, still keeping his pistol pointed at Ali and his companions, seized him by the arm with a grip of iron and drew him away. The foiled robbers succeeded in making their escape from the house, and the garden.

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The Count of Monte-Cristo had been unbound and ungagged by Ali when the robbers had left the study. Alarmed by the unwonted noise and commotion, Captain de Morcerf, Zuleika and Mlle. d' Armilly had appeared upon the scene, but too late to witness the conflict with the miscreants. In a few words the Count explained to them what had happened. Zuleika glanced at Mlle. d' Armilly as if she suspected that the strange beggar of that morning had something to do with this midnight invasion of their home; Louise looked uneasy and agitated, but preserved a stony silence.

The white-robed woman still stood as if stupefied. Mlle. d' Armilly went to her and asked, solicitously:

"Eugénie, what is the matter?"

This question aroused young Madame de Morcerf, for it was she, from her stupor. She threw herself into a chair and covered her face with her hands, moaning piteously:

"Oh! Louise! Louise! I have seen my father! He was one of the robbers! It is terrible, terrible!"

Captain de Morcerf, who had gone to his wife's side and tenderly taken her hand, gazed inquiringly at the Count.

"I saw the man she speaks of perfectly," said Monte-Cristo, in reply to his look, "and he was certainly the Baron Danglars!"

CHAPTER XIII.

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MORCERF'S ADVENTURE.

The Count of Monte-Cristo took no steps to have the miscreants who had invaded the sanctity of his home tracked and apprehended; he did not even instruct the Commissary of Police of the quarter in regard to what had happened. He was entirely satisfied that the sole aim of the wretches had been robbery, and, as that aim had been defeated, he did not desire to court further publicity by putting the matter in the hands of the authorities. One thing, however, gave the Count considerable uneasiness, namely, the fact that Danglars had been one of the robbers. He did not doubt that the former banker, whom he had financially wrecked and forced to fly ignominiously from Paris in the past in pursuit of his scheme of wholesale vengeance against the enemies of his youth, had planned the robbery in order to gratify his burning thirst for revenge; he also felt equally certain that Danglars meant further mischief, if he could accomplish it, and that his presence in the city would be a constant menace to his tranquillity and prosperity, nay, even to his domestic happiness; but his feelings had undergone a radical change since the old days of restless, inexorable retribution, and he now pitied the man he had so ruthlessly overthrown as much as he had formerly hated him. Danglars had fallen very low, indeed, to be the companion and accomplice of midnight marauders, and the Count's very soul ached as he thought to what depths of poverty and ignominy he had been the means of reducing him. He would have sought him out amid the dangerous criminal population of Paris, traced him to his den of depravity and wretchedness, and offered him money and the means of social rehabilitation had there been the slightest reason to hope that he could thereby rescue the miserable man from the slough of iniquity into which he was plunged, but he knew too well Danglars' implacable character and deep-seated hatred against himself to attempt anything of the kind. Should he penetrate into his haunts and meet him the result could only be disastrous, for Danglars would take a fiendish delight in betraying him to his desperate associates, who would not hesitate even to murder him at his bidding, and the former banker was fully capable of compassing his assassination in the most horrible fashion as a crowning stroke of diabolical revenge. There was a time when Monte-Cristo valued life very little, when he would gladly have accepted death as a welcome avenue to endless rest and peace, but that time had passed; since then he had contracted ties that bound him to existence with insurmountable strength; he had now a family, was surrounded by beings he tenderly loved and cherished, beings for whom he must live and over whose destinies he must closely watch. He was wedded to Mercédès, who lavished upon him in her maturity all the wealth of overwhelming affection she had showered upon him before the fateful conspiracy that had consigned him as the sailor Dantès to the dark, noisome dungeon of the Château d' If and given her to the arms of Fernand, the Catalan. Haydée had fluttered over the page of his stormy, agitated history, leaving him Espérance and Zuleika as reminders of a happy, but all too brief dream, an elfin vision of enchantment that had vanished as swiftly as it had come. But his son and daughter had twined themselves about the fibres of his heart as the clinging ivy twines about the shattered fragments of some grand and imposing ruin, and each day, each moment, as it sped by, only served the more to reveal to him the longings and the devotion of a father's soul. Besides, Albert de Morcerf and his young wife Eugénie were now thoroughly endeared to him, and he felt that by doing everything in his power to augment their happiness he was gradually paying off the heavy debt he owed to Danglars' so long abandoned

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child. Yes, the Count of Monte-Cristo wished to live, first for his family, then for the great cause of human liberty with which he had become so thoroughly identified. If Danglars came in his way he would endeavor to reclaim and propitiate him, but he could not seek him out.

Mercédès at the period of the attempted robbery was absent on a visit to some friends in Marseilles, and by common consent it was resolved not to inform her of Danglars' reappearance, as the intelligence could not fail to be a prostrating shock to her.

Ever since that memorable midnight scene in Monte-Cristo's study young Madame de Morcerf had acted like one overwhelmed. She said nothing, even to her husband or Louise d' Armilly, concerning her wretched father, but it was plain that intense grief and shame were preying upon her. This greatly distressed Albert and, seeing his beloved wife droop day by day, he, without saying a word to any one, formed a startling and perilous resolution. He determined to find Danglars' abode, to see his father-in-law and endeavor to persuade him to relinquish his career of crime. In this he was actuated by two powerful motives—the desire to relieve Eugénie's distress and suspense and the wish to avoid the scandal that would be sure to come should the former banker be caught red-handed in the commission of some fearful crime and a legal investigation reveal his identity.

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Zuleika studiously avoided referring to the attempted robbery and the recognition of Danglars by her father and Eugénie. She was aware of the part Monte-Cristo had played in his enemy's fall and disgrace, and did not deem it prudent to awaken the bitter recollections of the lurid and dreadful past.

Mlle. d' Armilly also said nothing in reference to the reappearance of Danglars, but it was very clear to the observant Zuleika that she expected and dreaded further harm from Monte-Cristo's revengeful enemy. At night she locked herself in her chamber, and, notwithstanding the almost unbearable heat of the weather, securely closed and fastened all her windows.

The Count himself was as reserved as ever, never once mentioning either the midnight invasion of his mansion or the unexpected advent of his most deadly foe. To everybody in the household he seemed either to have forgotten or to have succeeded in dismissing from his mind those events so fraught with excitement and possibilities of future disaster. But Monte-Cristo, though he preserved an impassible exterior, had neither forgotten nor dismissed them. He had simply applied to himself his own famous maxim, "Wait and Hope." He was waiting and hoping for the best, for God in His inscrutable wisdom to bring mysterious good out of apparent evil.

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Meanwhile Captain de Morcerf had been busily engaged in making thorough but cautious investigations. He had formed the acquaintance of a former Agent de la Sureté, who had been of great use to him in describing the various outlaws and prowlers of Paris, and in pointing out to him their secret dens and the secluded places of rendezvous where they met, drank vile liquors, and, under the maddening influence of absinthe and alcohol, plotted their crimes and atrocities of every description. This man, another Quasimodo in point of hideous aspect, had been dismissed from the detective service because of his inability to keep sober, but he had not forgotten the resources of his profession, and money lavishly bestowed upon him made him Captain de Morcerf's most obedient and faithful slave. Cash in hand rendered him indefatigable and the prospect of obtaining more kept him discreet. He had taught his employer the art of effectually disguising himself, of passing for a veritable zigue, and, as he was well-known to the desperadoes he had formerly shadowed and was welcomed by them as a sterling good fellow, he was enabled to take the Captain with impunity among scoundrels who would not have hesitated to cut his throat had they known who he was.

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As Albert did not know what name Danglars had assumed and was unwilling to give the ex-detective his true cognomen, the latter had nothing to guide him in this respect. Neither was the Captain cognizant of the changes that time and his mode of life had wrought in the former banker's personal appearance, so he could only describe him as he had looked in the years gone by. This afforded Mange, such was the name of the dismissed policeman, no indication whatever by which he could profit. He, nevertheless, was not disconcerted by the paucity of information. He knew that young Morcerf was searching for a man who had been one of the party engaged in the attempt to rob the Monte-Cristo mansion on the Rue du Helder, and that knowledge was sufficient for him. He very soon discovered that Waldmann, Siebecker, Bouche-de-Miel and two Italians had formed that party, and Bouche-de-Miel being the only Frenchman in the coterie he had no difficulty whatever in fixing upon him as the individual wanted. He imparted his discovery and conclusion to his employer, together with the intelligence that the men were in the habit of congregating in the little caboulot of the Cité d' Antin. Albert rewarded Mange liberally for his zeal and promised him a very much larger sum should Bouche-de-Miel turn out to be his man. It was immediately arranged that Mange should conduct the Captain to the caboulot that very night and, if possible, bring him face to face with the Frenchman supposed to be Danglars.

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In accordance with this agreement, as soon as night had fallen, Mange was waiting for his employer at the corner of the Rue Taitbout and the Rue de Provence. He was not kept long at his post, for Albert speedily made his appearance, dressed in a blouse like a workman; his rough trousers were tucked in the tops of his dusty boots and on his head he wore a battered slouch hat that looked as if it might have seen service behind the revolutionary barricades. Mange surveyed him with a long glance of admiration; then taking him to a neighboring street lamp, he critically examined his face, which was stained to represent the bronzing effect of the sun and smeared with dirt.

"Capital!" exclaimed the ex-detective, as he finished his scrutiny. "You are a zigue out and out! Not a trace of the boulevardier to be seen! The most keen-scented vache in the caboulot would be completely deceived!"

Albert smiled at his companion's enthusiasm.

"Well, as I pass examination," he said, "let us go on at once. Do you think our man will be at the caboulot?"

"Do I think water will run down hill!" cried Mange, with a laugh that resembled nothing so much as the discordant croak of a crow. "He never misses a night, and this is the hour when the brandy begins to flow!"

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Albert shuddered at this remark, suggesting as it did the certainty that he would find Eugénie's father a sot as well as a thief. He, however, took Mange's arm and together they strolled leisurely into the Cité d' Antin, making their way to the caboulot without meeting a single suspicious prowler.

They entered the front room where Bouche-de-Miel had found the slatternly young woman reading her greasy copy of the Gazette des Tribunaux on the morning preceding the attempted robbery. She was at her accustomed place behind the counter, but was not reading; eight or ten stalwart ruffians monopolized her attention and, as she furnished her thirsty customers with the various fiery beverages they demanded, she showered her most captivating glances right and left among them. She was as slatternly as ever, but her hair was shining with bear's grease and a strong odor of musk pervaded her garments; a paste diamond of enormous size but of doubtful brilliancy ornamented her breastpin and on her stumpy, grimy fingers were numerous brass rings containing dull imitations of rubies, amethysts and topazes.

As the new comers came in, Waldmann, standing in front of the counter with a bottle in one hand and a glass in the other, was chaffing her.

"See here, Beurre-Sans-Sel," he said, with a well-counterfeited air of intense admiration, "you are looking like a real beauty to-night. I will wager anything you expect a lover. I never saw you put on such style before. I declare you far outshine the demoiselles of the public balls!"

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"Oh! Monsieur Waldmann, how you talk!" returned the girl, with an affected simper and an unsuccessful attempt to blush.

Just then the German looked around and caught sight of Mange, who was looking his ugliest. The spirit of mischief was strong upon him and he instantly cried out:

"I knew it; I knew you were expecting a lover and here he is promptly on time! Come now own up, my little Beurre-Sans-Sel, did you not put on all your pretty fixings for Mange?"

"For that ugly old gorilla!" exclaimed the girl, unceremoniously and disdainfully. "I can get better-looking lovers than either a monkey or a Swab, I'd have you to know, Monsieur Waldmann!"

There was a general laugh at this sally, and none laughed louder than Mange, who had a taste for coarse jokes and sharp retorts.

"So!" said Waldmann, after the merriment had subsided. Then he perceived Mange's companion for the first time. He examined him closely and suspiciously. Albert did not shrink from his scrutiny, but the ex-detective deemed it prudent to set matters right at the start by a formal introduction of his employer; he, therefore, motioned to Albert to follow him and walked up to the German, offering him his hand, which the latter shook cordially.

The Captain now stood beside Waldmann in front of the counter and Mange presented him without delay.

"Monsieur Waldmann," said he, "permit me to make you acquainted with my friend Fouquier, from Dijon, a bon zigue."

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"Monsieur Fouquier," said the German, taking Albert's outstretched hand, "I am glad to know you, especially as you come so well recommended."

Mange bowed in acknowledgment of this little tribute to himself.

Morcerf replied that the pleasure was mutual.

Waldmann's suspicions seemed to be allayed.

"Take something," he said. "Here, Siebecker and Bouche-de-Miel, join us in drinking the health of Monsieur Fouquier from Dijon!"

Albert was instantly on the alert and Mange watched him attentively as the two individuals named emerged from a corner of the room and lounged up to the counter. There was another presentation, a double one this time, Waldmann doing the honors. Mange required no introduction. Everybody appeared to know him. Beurre-Sans-Sel put forth brandy and glasses, and the health of Monsieur Fouquier was drunk enthusiastically. When this ceremony ended Morcerf called for cigarettes and distributed them among the coterie; then he had leisure to examine Bouche-de-Miel; the latter had turned his back to the counter and leaned his elbows

upon it; in this position, with his cigarette between his teeth, he looked the perfect picture of vagabondish idleness. Mange was still watching Morcerf, but saw no sign that he had recognized in Bouche-de-Miel the man for whom he was seeking. This made him uneasy, for it was an indication that the reward his employer had promised him would not be earned.

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Presently Waldmann and Siebecker were called to another part of the room. Bouche-de-Miel remained, continuing to smoke his cigarette, with his elbows on the counter where he had placed them after the health-drinking. The Captain's thoughts were of a conflicting nature. Everything pointed to the fact that the man before him was his father-in-law, but, unlike Mlle. d' Armilly, he saw nothing in him suggestive of the Baron Danglars of other days. Could this vagabond, this wretch, be Danglars? If so, how was it to be proved to his satisfaction? How, above all, in this place, in this den of thieves and cutthroats? The man was certainly the party Eugénie had recognized on the night of the attempted burglary as her father, the party Monte-Cristo himself had so positively pronounced to be the former banker. But was it not probable that his wife and the Count had been mistaken? Was it not probable that they had been deceived by some fancied resemblance when excitement had possessed them to such a degree that it had deprived them of the full use of their mental faculties? At any rate he had come to the caboulot to experiment with Bouche-de-Miel and he would not shrink from cautiously applying the test.

Their cigarettes were now consumed. Albert, in pursuance of his scheme, invited Bouche-de-Miel and Mange to take seats at a table and have some more brandy. They accepted the invitation with alacrity, and the three were soon drinking and chatting. Repeated potations finally opened Bouche-de-Miel's lips; he began to be confidential.

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"You may not believe me, messieurs," said he, "but I was not always as you see me now!"

Mange winked triumphantly at his employer. Revelations which might be important were coming. Perhaps he would yet earn the promised reward. Morcerf was listening attentively.

"No, sacré nom d' un chien, I was not always a zigue! Once I had immense wealth, I counted my money by millions! I had position, too, and I may say without egotism that I was honored by the best people of Paris!"

He paused and drained another glass of brandy.

"What were you?" asked Mange.

Albert waited breathlessly for the answer to this question.

"What was I?" repeated Bouche-de-Miel. "You may laugh, but I was a banker!"

Morcerf could not avoid giving a start. The vagabond, half-drunk as he was, noticed it and asked:

"What is the matter with you, Fouquier? Do you think the lie so tremendous that you can't keep still?"

The young man was glad to accept this interpretation of his behavior; he touched his glass to his lips and said, with a forced smile:

"Well, I do think you are going it rather strong!"

"Not half strong enough, mon Dieu!" cried Bouche-de-Miel, bringing his fist down on the table with such force that the glasses were nearly knocked off. "Not half strong enough, I tell you, messieurs, for I was a Baron as well as a banker!"

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Albert groaned. Mange looked at him with sparkling eyes; he was now sure that the promised money was within his reach, that his clutch would soon close on it. His enforced sobriety since he had been in the Captain's employ made him anxious for a prolonged, reckless spree, frightfully anxious, and his guarded potations since he entered the caboulot had whetted his devouring appetite for alcohol to such an extent that he could scarcely keep it in subjection with the plentiful supply of brandy on the table, almost at his very lips.

Bouche-de-Miel did not hear Morcerf's groan; his misty eyes were fixed upon space, seemed to be peering into the depths and recesses of the distant past. The Captain judged that the time had come to draw the final, the crowning admission from his lips. He touched him lightly on the arm. The man turned and glanced at him inquiringly. Morcerf's heart beat wildly; it was with great difficulty that he kept his agitation under control. He hurriedly scanned the other occupants of the room—some were very drunk and stupid, others noisy and demonstrative, but all were too busy with their own concerns and pleasures to pay even the slightest attention to the little party at the table; Waldmann and Siebecker were asleep on opposite ends of a bench in a corner. Bouche-de-Miel had meanwhile relapsed into his misty reverie. Albert touched his arm again.

"Don't bother me!" said the man, impatiently, without removing his eyes from space. "Can't you let a fellow dream!"

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"Baron Danglars!" whispered Morcerf in his ear.

"Eh? What?" cried Bouche-de-Miel, coming back to reality with a start, half-sobered by hearing this name.

"Baron Danglars," repeated the Captain, in a guarded undertone, "I know you!"

The man got upon his feet lumberingly and unsteadily; he clutched Albert's shoulder convulsively.

"You are an Agent de la Sureté!" he hissed. "You have come here to arrest me!"

The attention of some of the less intoxicated ruffians was being excited by Bouche-de-Miel's behavior, but their ears had failed to seize his words amid the prevailing din. Mange, with his usual keenness and quickness, saw that something must instantly be done to quiet Albert's companion or all the miscreants who could stir would be aroused and come thronging about them to throttle the supposed Agent de la Sureté. He, therefore, gave a loud laugh and said to Bouche-de-Miel:

"Don't be a fool, old man! Monsieur Fouquier belong to la rousse! That's a good joke! ha! ha! Why he is as much in danger of the violon as you are! ha! ha!"

He arose, still laughing, and, playfully taking Bouche-de-Miel by the collar, gently forced him back into his chair. As he did so, he glanced at Beurre-Sans-Sel. The slatternly young woman had her hand on the screw of the huge lamp suspended above the counter, by which alone the room was lighted, ready to turn it out and leave the whole place in darkness at the first alarm. She was evidently accustomed to police descents and knew how to act in such cases. Mange's words and merriment, however, reassured her and she withdrew her fingers from the screw.

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But Bouche-de-Miel was not altogether satisfied. He sat uneasily in his chair, facing Morcerf and anxiously scanning his countenance.

"What did you mean by calling me Baron Danglars and saying that you knew me?" he asked, in a low, somewhat tremulous voice.

Instead of replying directly to this question, the young man said, slowly and in a half-whisper:

"I am Albert de Morcerf, the husband of your daughter Eugénie!"

"What!" exclaimed Bouche-de-Miel. "Eugénie married—and to you!"

"Yes," said the Captain, "Fate has again brought us together after a long and painful separation."

"I saw Eugénie in the house of the Count of Monte-Cristo, no matter how, no matter when. What was she doing there?"

"Monte-Cristo is married to my mother, Mercédès, and we are living with him."

"Living with him—Eugénie, my daughter, living beneath the roof of the man who ruined her father and made him what he is!"

Bouche-de-Miel grew absolutely livid with rage; he was entirely sobered now and all his evil instincts had full possession of him.

"I will never forgive her—or you!" he hissed.

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"Listen to me," said Albert, with comparative calmness. "I have come here to-night at the risk of my life to offer you money, the means of rehabilitation. Be advised. Leave these miscreants with whom you are associated and become a man again!"

"I reject both your offer and advice!" said Bouche-de-Miel, excitedly. "They are insults, coming as they do from the stepson of Monte-Cristo, my relentless enemy! But I will have vengeance upon you for them and through you on Edmond Dantès! Ho, Waldmann Siebecker!"

The two Germans awoke, sprang from their bench and advanced towards the table.

Mange uttered a groan of despair. He could do nothing now to avert the impending danger.

Bouche-de-Miel had leaped to his feet and grappled with Albert de Morcerf. Waldmann and Siebecker, realizing that something was wrong and at once connecting the alleged Monsieur Fouquier with it, drew long, keen-bladed knives as they rushed forward.

All the thieves and marauders who were sober enough to stand were now on their feet, ready to hurl themselves upon the suspected man. Weapons flashed in every direction—daggers, knives and pistols. Loud oaths and abusive epithets were heard on all sides; it was a perfect pandemonium, a babel of evil sounds.

Amid all the confusion and danger Mange's self-possession did not desert him. Seeing that it was useless to attempt to pacify the surging pack of desperadoes, he determined upon a bold measure, one that would enable him to save Captain de Morcerf and, at the same time, keep up his reputation with the criminal frequenters of the caboulot, with whom he desired for reasons of his own to be on good terms. He ran to the counter, where Beurre-Sans-Sel already had her hand on the screw of the hanging lamp, waiting for events to decide what action she should take. He leaned over the counter and whispered to the girl:

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"Beurre-Sans-Sel, I was deceived in Monsieur Fouquier. He imposed upon me. He told me he was from Dijon. He turns out to be a Parisian and an Agent de la Sureté. He has betrayed himself. More Agents are coming! They will be here in a moment! Put off the light!"

The girl did not hesitate a second; she gave the screw a quick twist and the caboulot was

instantly as dark as a tomb.

Having executed this manœuvre, Mange sprang to Albert de Morcerf's side, striking Bouche-de-Miel a crushing blow in the face that caused him to lose his grip of the young man. Then, seizing his employer in his brawny arms, he lifted him as if he had been a child and ran with him to the front door; this he opened, leaping into the street with his burden.

"Now run for your life!" he exclaimed, depositing the young man on the sidewalk.

With this he started off at a tearing pace, closely followed by Morcerf. They did not pause until they had reached the Rue de Provence, where, in the blaze of the lights, amid the throngs of honest citizens, they were safe.

CHAPTER XIV.

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ZULEIKA AND MME. MORREL.

Quite a long time had elapsed since the sudden departure of the Viscount Massetti from Paris, but Zuleika was still in complete ignorance as to his whereabouts and actions. He was in Rome, of that she had not the slightest doubt. She was equally convinced that his errand there was to establish his innocence of the terrible crime imputed to him by Luigi Vampa, to obtain proofs that would clear him in the eyes of her father and herself, if not of all the world. Why, therefore, did he not write, why did he not give her some sign that she would understand? His silence discouraged the young girl, filled her with uneasiness. It seemed to indicate that he had not succeeded, had not been able to wipe the stain from his record. If so she would never see him again, for Giovanni was too proud to reappear in her presence with a dishonored name, a sullied reputation. This thought was torture, and Monte-Cristo's daughter felt that should her lover desert her she could not live.

As the days rolled by without a word of intelligence from the Viscount, Zuleika's fears assumed greater consistency and weight. She grew sad, inexpressibly sad; her look lost its brightness, her voice its cheery tone and her step its elasticity. The bloom faded from her youthful cheeks, giving place to an ashen pallor. She was no longer interested in her accustomed occupations and amusements, and would sit for hours together with her hands crossed in her lap, dominated by sorrowful and dismal forebodings.

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Mercédès noticed her condition, and, ascribing it to its proper cause, strove in a motherly way to rouse and console her, but without effect. She spoke to the Count about it, begging him to use his influence to cheer his child, but Monte-Cristo only shook his head, saying that they must trust to the soothing power of time which could not fail ultimately to do its work. Espérance pitied his sister sincerely, but refrained from interfering, well knowing that nothing he could say would be productive of good. Albert de Morcerf, his wife and Mlle. d' Armilly, who had learned of Zuleika's love affair and the dark shadow that had fallen upon it, felt a delicacy about alluding to the matter and, therefore, held aloof; besides, they were too much depressed by the circumstances under which Danglars had reappeared to be able to exert a cheering influence.

When Mercédès returned from Marseilles she was accompanied by Maximilian and Valentine Morrel, who immediately went to the mansion on the Rue du Helder and paid their respects to the Count of Monte-Cristo, their benefactor. It was their intention to make only a brief call, taking up their residence during their sojourn in Paris at that famous stopping-place for strangers, the Grand Hôtel du Louvre on the Rue de Rivoli adjoining the Palais Royal, but Monte-Cristo would not hear of such a thing, insisting that the young soldier and his wife should be his guests and partake of his hospitality. They were not reluctant to consent to this agreeable arrangement, as it would enable them to enjoy uninterruptedly the society of their dearest friends.

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Mme. Morrel at once took a deep interest in Zuleika. She saw that some sorrow was heavily weighing on the young girl, and, rightly divining that the tender passion had much to do with it, immediately endeavored to inspire her with a degree of confidence sufficient to bring about revelations. In this Mme. Morrel was not actuated by curiosity. Her motive was altogether laudable; she desired to serve the Count of Monte-Cristo, to do something to show her gratitude for the overwhelming benefits he had in the past showered upon her husband and herself, and could conceive no better or more effectual way than by striving to relieve Zuleika. She, therefore, promptly set about her praiseworthy but difficult task, resolved to bring back the roses to the young girl's cheeks and restore hope to her sad and dejected heart.

She began by using every womanly art to induce Zuleika to love her and look upon her as a friend of friends. In this initial step she succeeded even beyond her most ardent anticipations. From the first Monte-Cristo's daughter was attracted towards her, and it required very little effort on Mme. Morrel's part to win her completely. Valentine's disposition was so sweet and her sympathy so sincere that Zuleika could not help loving her; besides, the romantic story of her love for Maximilian and the terrible trials she had undergone before being united to him through Monte-Cristo's potent influence, with which she was thoroughly acquainted, predisposed Giovanni's betrothed to regard her as a woman to whom she could open her heart and from whom she might

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derive supreme solace, if not consolation. Valentine's quick and penetrating eyes read the young girl like the pages of an open book, and she was not slow in utilizing the advantages she acquired.

Things had been going on in this way for several days, when one evening Mme. Morrel proposed a promenade in the garden to Zuleika with a view of bringing matters to a crisis. She gladly acquiesced in the proposition and soon they were strolling in the moonlight amid the fragrant flowers and centenarian trees. It was a sultry night, but there was a pleasant breeze that agreeably fanned the cheeks of Valentine and her youthful companion. Mme. Morrel had matured her plan, but Zuleika herself unexpectedly came to her aid, assisting her to put it into immediate and practical execution.

After walking for a short space, they seated themselves in a magnificent pavilion or summer-house situated at the extremity of the garden. It was built of white stone, the walls being perforated by several tall archways that supplied the place of both windows and doors. Ivy and other clustering vines clambered about the exterior, creeping through the archways and furnishing the ceiling with a verdant canopy exceedingly inviting and refreshing to the eye weary of contemplating the dust and dryness of the streets parched by the summer sun. Without were several great silver maple trees and numerous ornamental shrubs. Mme. Morrel drew close to Zuleika on the rustic bench they occupied and, taking the young girl's hand, said to her, in a soft voice:

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"This is a delicious spot, my child."

"Yes," replied Monte-Cristo's daughter, "it is, indeed, delicious. When here, I always feel as if I could pour out my whole heart into the bosom of some faithful friend."

"Do so in this instance, my dear," said Mme. Morrel, persuasively. "I trust I am a faithful friend, as well as a discreet one."

"I believe you," rejoined Zuleika. "Ever since you have been in our house I have felt so and longed to make you my confidante, but I have hesitated to take such a step, fearing to burden you with troubles that might distress you."

"Have no further fears on that score then, but speak freely and with the certainty that in your sorrows, whatever they may be, you will find me a sincere sympathizer and comforter."

Zuleika took Valentine's hand, and, gazing into her face with tearful eyes, said:

"You have noticed that I had sorrows, Mme. Morrel?"

"Yes; how could I help it? But I have done more; I have divined their cause!"

Zuleika gave a slight start.

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"Divined their cause, Mme. Morrel?"

"Yes," answered Valentine. "You are in love!"

The young girl blushed, but appeared relieved. Mme. Morrel had divined her love, had divined that her sorrows arose from it, but she had not divined the nature of the shadow that clouded her budding life and filled her with grief and apprehension.

"Zuleika," continued Valentine, with the utmost tenderness and consideration, "I, too, have loved, deeply and desperately; I, too, have felt all the bitter pangs that arise from separation; but I have realized my dream at last, and the shadows that surrounded me have been swept away by the blessed sunshine of union and happiness. Confide in me, my child. If I cannot drive your shadows from you, I can at least give you true sympathy and the consolation that it affords."

"They will be welcome to me, unspeakably welcome, madame," replied Zuleika, tremulously.

"Then tell me all."

"I cannot, madame; I have no right to; but I can tell you enough to wring your heart, to show you how unfortunate I am."

"My poor girl, I understand and appreciate your scruples. You do not wish to compromise your lover, and you are right. Your decision does you honor. Is the man you love in Paris?"

"Alas! no. I believe he is in Rome."

"Then you do not know his whereabouts with certainty?"

"No, madame."

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"Does your father disapprove of his suit?"

"He did not at the outset, but very painful circumstances have since arisen, causing him to alter his determination, or, at least, hold his consent in abeyance. Still, I think, he believes Giovanni can and will refute the dreadful charge that has been made against him."

"Giovanni? Your lover is then an Italian?"

"Yes, the Viscount Giovanni Massetti."

"You became acquainted with him here in Paris?"

"No, madame; in Rome."

"And you think he has gone thither to clear himself of the charge you mention?"

"Yes, madame. He came to Paris to solicit my hand, but suddenly disappeared after the terrible charge was made. I have not heard from him since and his silence weighs upon me like lead."

"I do not wonder at it; but, perhaps, after all, he is only waiting for a complete vindication and does not wish to write until he has everything satisfactorily arranged. I do not ask you the nature of the charge, Zuleika, and would not allow you to state it to me even if you were so disposed. But answer me one question. You have entire faith in Giovanni's innocence, have you not?"

"I have, madame."

"You are sure he loves you, that he has not trifled with your affections?"

"I am sure, madame."

"He is young, is he not?"

"Yes, madame, he is young."

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"Doubtlessly his fault, whatever it may have been, was simply an indiscretion due to his years that has been magnified and made to assume unwarranted proportions by the tongues of envy and scandal. If so, he will repair it and return to you. If he is altogether innocent, as you feel convinced, he will move heaven and earth to justify himself in your father's eyes and yours. Love is potent, Zuleika, and will accomplish miracles. Trust Giovanni and trust Heaven! All will yet be made right between your lover and yourself!"

"Would that I could feel so, madame, but I cannot!"

"And why, pray?"

"Because Giovanni evidently has powerful enemies in Rome and its vicinity who, no doubt, are at this moment operating against him and using all their efforts to prevent him from succeeding in his mission."

"What makes you think he has such remorseless enemies?"

"A letter my father received from Rome in response to inquiries he made and the illusion—it must be an illusion—under which my brother Espérance labors in regard to Giovanni."

"Your brother Espérance! Then he believes in young Massetti's guilt?"

"Alas! yes; he firmly believes in it and stigmatizes the Viscount as the worst of scoundrels."

"Has he given you the reasons for his belief, has he stated them to your father?"

"He has dealt only in vague, mysterious allusions; an oath of silence, it appears, prevents him from speaking out." [Pg 191]

"An oath of silence?"

"Yes, and Giovanni is also likewise bound."

"Indeed! What is your lover's reputation in Rome?"

"Of the very best; he is there regarded as the soul of honor."

"Save by his enemies. So far so good. Do you know the standing of his family?"

"It is one of the oldest, most respected, most aristocratic and wealthiest in the Eternal City."

"Another strong point in the young man's favor. Zuleika, I am satisfied that the mystery surrounding your lover can be cleared away; but I am also satisfied that he needs assistance, the assistance of persons deeply interested in you, who have your welfare at heart and cherish your happiness as their own."

"But such persons cannot be found, madame. Of course my father and brother are deeply interested in me, have my welfare at heart and desire to see me happy. They, however, are not disposed to aid Giovanni, my brother for reasons of his own and my father because he thinks that the Viscount should work his own rehabilitation. No, madame, such persons as you mention cannot be found."

"They can be found, Zuleika, and you will not have far to look for them either!"

Mme. Morrel gazed at Monte-Cristo's daughter with enthusiasm in her fine eyes. The girl was at a loss to understand her.

"Surely you do not mean Albert de Morcerf and Eugénie?" she said.

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"No," replied Valentine. "They love you, undoubtedly, but the needful assistance is not to be obtained from them."

"Certainly you cannot allude to Mlle. d' Armilly or Ali, my father's devoted Nubian servant?"

"No, I do not allude to them!"

"Whom then do you mean?"

"Cannot you guess, Zuleika?"

A sudden thought came to Zuleika, filling her with intense amazement.

"You cannot mean yourself and your husband, Mme. Morrel?" she gasped.

"And why not, my child?" answered Valentine, sweetly. "All the assistance we can render you will be but a weak, inadequate return for what your father has done for us. He saved me from death, withdrew the suicidal pistol from Maximilian's hand, comforted us in our time of darkest despair, and finally brought us together after a separation that even M. Morrel deemed eternal, simultaneously placing in our hands wealth sufficient to make us altogether independent of the accidents and disasters of this world. Besides, before that he was the benefactor of M. Morrel's father, saving him also from suicide, suicide that he had determined upon as the only means of avoiding terrible disgrace. You see, Zuleika, that we have abundant motives for aiding you."

"Oh! madame—Valentine—you utterly overwhelm me! How can I show my gratitude to you?"

"By accepting my offer!"

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These words were accompanied by a look of ineffable tenderness and sincerity. They instantly brought hope to Zuleika's heart. She burst into a flood of tears, but they were tears of joy. Still, she hesitated. What would her father say if she accepted Mme. Morrel's generous proposition?

"Do you accept, Zuleika?" pursued Mme. Morrel.

"I thank you from the depths of my soul, madame; but I cannot accept the sacrifice you and your kind, manly husband would make for me! My father would censure me, would never forgive me for adopting such a selfish course!"

"Trust your father to me, my child."

"Oh! madame! Accept your offer without consulting him?"

"There is no need to consult him, there is no need for him to know anything whatever about the matter, for the present at least. It will be time enough to tell him what we have done when success has crowned our efforts. Should we unhappily fail, a thought that I cannot for an instant entertain, there will be no occasion to tell him anything at all."

At that moment a man's voice was heard calling at a distance:

"Valentine, Valentine, where are you?"

"It is Maximilian," said Mme. Morrel to Zuleika. "He comes very opportunely!" Then raising her voice she answered him: "Here, Maximilian, here, in the summer pavilion at the extremity of the garden!"

The husband hastened to the spot, and Valentine, making him seat himself beside her and Monte-Cristo's daughter, told him all she had just learned. She also communicated to him the offer she had made to Zuleika, adding:

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"You will consent to it, I know, Maximilian!"

"Gladly," answered the young soldier. "Had you not made the proposal, I should have made it myself!"

"Then we have but to induce Zuleika to authorize us to act. The poor child, however, hesitates, fearing the Count's displeasure."

"She need not authorize us," said Maximilian quickly. "We will assume the entire responsibility on the step! But it will be necessary for her to confide in us more fully, to give us the data upon which to build our plans. I will get letters of introduction to the Viscount Massetti and, once acquainted with him, the rest will be easy."

Later that night Zuleika told Mme. Morrel everything without reserve, even giving her a little note to Giovanni which stated that Valentine and Maximilian were her dearest friends and had come to Rome expressly to aid him in his troubles.

A week after the momentous interview in the pavilion M. and Mme. Morrel set out for Italy, informing their friends in the mansion on the Rue du Helder that they intended being absent some time, but refraining from giving even the slightest hint of the object of their journey.

CHAPTER XV.

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AN UNEXPECTED MEETING.

One morning shortly after the departure of the Morrels for Rome, the Count of Monte-Cristo was driving along the Champs-Élysées in his elegant barouche drawn by a pair of spirited, blooded bays, when, near the Rond-point, his progress was suddenly checked by a great, tumultuous concourse of people. Leaning from his carriage, he asked a workman the cause of the unwonted commotion and was informed that two Italians had been arrested for theft and were being taken to the poste of the quarter by a couple of gardiens de la paix. He thought nothing of the circumstance and was calmly waiting for an opportunity to proceed when the crowd about the barouche opened and the officers appeared with their captives. The Count was not much interested, but, nevertheless, bestowed a passing glance upon the malefactors, who were loudly protesting their innocence in broken, almost unintelligible French, and offering a stout resistance. They were roughly attired in blue blouses, wearing felt hats that were pulled down and obscured their countenances. One of the men in custody caught hold of a spoke of a wheel of Monte-Cristo's vehicle, grasping it with such iron firmness that all the efforts of the policeman in charge of him failed to shake off his clutch. The Count ordered Ali, who was acting as coachman, to hand him the reins, dismount and assist the gardien.

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At the sound of his voice, the man who had grasped the spoke looked up with a start and, without relaxing his hold, cried out in Italian:

"Say a word for me, your Excellency! The Count of Monte-Cristo should have as much power over the myrmidons of the French law as over Luigi Vampa and his band!"

This exclamation amazed and startled the Count, so strange and unlooked for was it. He gazed penetratingly at the malefactor who had uttered it, but his scrutiny was unrewarded by recognition.

"Who are you?" he asked, as soon as his amazement permitted him to speak, also making use of the Italian language. "You are a perfect stranger to me, yet you know my name and seem acquainted with some of my actions in the past. Who are you?"

"I am Peppino," answered the man, without taking his eyes from the Count. "My companion who is being dragged away yonder is Beppo."

"Peppino?—Beppo?" said the Count, musingly. "Surely I have heard those names before, but they are common in Italy, especially in Rome, and I have been there frequently. Be more explicit, man."

"I will," replied the Italian. "I am the Peppino who served you so well when Luigi Vampa held the French banker, Danglars, in captivity at your behest. As for Beppo, you cannot have forgotten him; he also was a member of Vampa's band at that period."

"Yes," said Monte-Cristo, "I remember both of you now, but what can I do for you? Paris is vastly different from Rome, and my influence with the French police is not by any means equal to that I wielded over Vampa and his brigands at the time you speak of."

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"The Count of Monte-Cristo's power is unbounded anywhere in the entire world," rejoined the man, his brightened visage showing clearly the extent of his faith. "A word from him will release both Beppo and myself. Speak that word, your Excellency, and set us free!"

Ali had refrained from interfering when he heard this singular conversation, which he fully understood. He was waiting for further orders from his master.

The policeman grew impatient and, giving the Italian a rough shake, said to him:

"Come now, let go that spoke and submit. Don't you see that you are disturbing the Count of Monte-Cristo? His Excellency will do nothing for such a scoundrel as you. Come, let go that spoke, I say!"

Peppino, however, would not obey and continued to supplicate the Count to interfere in behalf of Beppo and himself. At last, driven to desperation by Monte-Cristo's inaction, he cried out to him:

"If your Excellency will do nothing for us without recompense, I will give that recompense; I will tell you in exchange for your efforts in our behalf all I know concerning the black conspiracy against the Viscount Giovanni Massetti!"

The Count was visibly moved by this speech. He stared at Peppino as if he thought that he had not heard aright.

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"The Viscount Giovanni Massetti! A black conspiracy against him! What do you mean?" he inquired, quickly.

"Just what I say, your Excellency," answered the Italian. "I know that the Viscount visited the Palazzo Costi in Rome when you inhabited it with your family, and that he fell in love with your daughter. I also know the details of a plot by which a network of crushing circumstances has been woven about him with the view of burying him beneath a weight of shame, dishonor and even of crime! I can reveal those details and will do so if you aid my companion and myself in our present difficulty. Do I interest you, Signor Count?"

"Vastly," answered Monte-Cristo, his face assuming a serious look. "Go quietly with the gardien to the poste. I will follow immediately and see what can be done."

"Yes, your Excellency," said Peppino, submissively, and abandoning his grasp of the spoke he

allowed the policeman to bear him away without further trouble. Meanwhile Beppo and the officer in whose custody he was had disappeared in the distance.

Those who had been near enough to the Count's barouche to witness this extraordinary scene were greatly astonished that such a famous character as the eloquent Deputy from Marseilles should stoop to converse with a malefactor in the public street, but their astonishment was immeasurably augmented when they saw the influence the celebrated orator exercised over the depraved Italian. They had not been able to understand the conversation, but the effect of Monte-Cristo's last words seemed little less than miraculous to them and they rent the air with loud and enthusiastic cheers.

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"Long live the noble Count of Monte-Cristo! Long live the Deputy from Marseilles, the people's friend!" was shouted on every side.

Further on the cry was taken up and repeated, ringing forth far along the broad and beautiful Champs-Élysées!

Monte-Cristo arose in his barouche and, removing his hat, stood bareheaded, bowing to the excited populace.

This was the signal for new and heartier cheers. But the criminals having been removed, the crowd soon began to disperse. At length the thoroughfare was cleared and the Count's vehicle could proceed. Ali had impassibly resumed the driver's seat and, at a nod from his adored master, started the spirited horses down the immense avenue. As the blooded bays went prancing along with proudly arched necks, the Count bent over and said to Ali:

"Drive at once to the poste of the quarter."

The Nubian skilfully wheeled the animals about and in a few minutes Monte-Cristo had reached his destination.

At the door of the poste a gardien received him and, at the mention of his name, obsequiously conducted him to the officer in charge. The latter, a short, determined-looking man with a bristling gray moustache and gray hair that stood almost on end upon his little round head, recognized his illustrious visitor at a glance. He hastily arose from the desk at which he was seated, engaged in examining the reports of his subordinates, and politely offered him a chair. Then he asked, deferentially:

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"To what am I indebted for so distinguished an honor as a call from the Count of Monte-Cristo?"

"Monsieur," replied the Count, taking the proffered seat, "two Italians were arrested a short time ago on the Champs-Élysées and brought hither."

"Yes," said the chief of the poste, "and great scoundrels they are, too! We have been shadowing them for some time, but could never detect them in any overt act until to-day. They belong to a very dangerous gang of prowlers, led by a shrewd German named Waldmann, whose headquarters are in a wretched caboulot of the Cité d' Antin."

"Of what are these Italians accused, that is what is the present specific charge against them?"

"They were caught picking pockets in the crowd thronging about a marionette show."

"Is the evidence against them conclusive?"

"It is."

"That is unfortunate," said the Count, "as one of them is in possession of information of the utmost importance to me. He has made partial revelations, but sets as the price of a full disclosure my interference in behalf of himself and his comrade in crime. What can be done?"

"I do not see," replied the chief, in perplexity. "It is impossible for me to let the men off."

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"But is there not some way in which I could obtain a mitigation of their punishment?"

"Oh! as for that, yes," said the officer, brightening. "If you would speak to the Procureur de la République, I am sure he would grant you the minimum sentence in such cases. Perhaps," added he, as a sudden thought struck him, "he might even be induced not to press the prosecution, in which event the men would be discharged."

"Thank you, monsieur," said the Count, rising. "I will act upon your wise suggestion without delay. But can you grant me a small favor? Can you allow me a brief interview with the man calling himself Peppino?"

"Undoubtedly," answered the chief, in a cordial voice, "and I shall be very glad to do so if it will assist you any."

"It will enable me to assure the man that I am at work and have some hope of success."

"Then follow me."

The chief, who had remained standing out of compliment to the Count, took a large key from a rack behind his desk and opened a door leading into a long, dimly-lighted corridor. Monte-Cristo followed him through this gloomy passage until they came to a cell before which the chief

stopped. The large key grated in the lock, the door of the cell swung open with an ominous sound and the Count found himself face to face with the former Roman bandit.

Peppino was sitting on the edge of an iron bedstead, the very picture of despair. He thought that Monte-Cristo had deserted him, that he would not interfere even with the prospect of obtaining the details of the plot against young Massetti. As the Count entered the cell his countenance brightened instantly and hope was renewed in his bosom. The chief discreetly withdrew, saying as he did so:

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"I will wait without, in the corridor."

With these words he closed the door of the cell and Monte-Cristo found himself alone with Peppino.

All the light that made its way into the gloomy cell came through a small grated window high up in the wall, placed at such a distance from the floor that no prisoner could reach it even by climbing upon his bedstead. The walls and ceiling were of stone.

"Well," asked Peppino, "how has your Excellency succeeded?"

"I have made but little progress as yet, though I hope to be able to do something for you and Beppo in a very short time," answered the Count, in a reassuring voice.

"I am satisfied," said Peppino, cheerily. "If your Excellency only determines upon it, Beppo and myself will shortly be free!"

"I cannot go that far, my good fellow, but I can and do promise you all my aid and influence can effect."

"They will effect everything necessary, Signor Count," replied the Italian, confidently.

"Do not hope for too much, Peppino. I have told you that Paris is different from Rome."

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"I have occasion now to know that," rejoined the outlaw, bitterly. "But the power of the Count of Monte-Cristo is the same here as in the campagna!"

"Keep up a stout heart, at all events, my good fellow. We shall soon know what can be done."

"I will keep up a stout heart, Signor Count, for I have perfect faith in you!"

"So be it. Now, my man, what do you know about the plot against the Viscount Massetti?"

"Pardon me, Signor Count," said the Italian, shrewdly, "but I will tell you that when Beppo and myself are at liberty!"

Monte-Cristo smiled at the man's cunning.

"At least," he said, "tell me if you have seen the Viscount recently."

"I will do that, your Excellency. I saw him a very short time ago in Rome and afterwards with Luigi Vampa and Pasquale Solara in the marshy country beyond the Trastavere."

"What brought you and your companion to Paris?"

"We had a disagreement with old Solara, whom Luigi Vampa insisted we should obey implicitly. Solara was a tyrant; besides, he was as greedy and avaricious as a miser; he wanted everything for himself and would allow us nothing; he demanded that all the booty we acquired should be brought directly to him without division, stating that he would parcel out our shares; this he invariably failed to do and naturally we rebelled. Vampa, who has become, if he was not always so, old Pasquale's fast friend, decided against us whenever we carried our complaints to him. Finally we could stand it no longer; we were absolutely starving while Solara was heaping up riches, so we determined to quit the band. We did so and came to Paris, where we have been ever since."

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"I will not ask you what you have been doing in Paris," said Monte-Cristo, smiling faintly; "in fact, I need not ask you, for I know; the chief of the poste has told me; but will you promise me to lead a better life in future and to try to induce Beppo to do the same, if I should succeed in effecting your release?"

"I cannot promise you that," replied the Italian, with averted eyes, "but I will promise you to return to Rome and take Beppo with me."

"That will do as well, or almost as well," said the Count. "Armed with such a promise, I think I can obtain your freedom. But you must swear to me to leave France immediately after you have been set at liberty, and I shall consider your oath as binding upon Beppo also."

"I swear to leave France the very moment I am free! I swear, too, that Beppo shall accompany me!"

"It is well," said the Count. "I shall be here again this afternoon or to-morrow at the furthest; but remember that before you leave this cell you must give me the full details of the conspiracy against young Massetti!"

"I shall remember it, Signor Count; have no fear of that! When I have spoken old Solara must

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look out for himself!"

"What do you mean by that?" asked Monte-Cristo, sharply.

"Never mind at present, Signor Count! I will make everything clear to you on your return."

The Deputy from Marseilles quitted the cell and the poste, after having thanked the chief for his courtesy. He drove without delay to the office of the Procureur de la République in the Palais de Justice, and it was not long before he had matters satisfactorily arranged. The Procureur cheerfully agreed not to push the charge against the Italians on condition that Monte-Cristo pledged himself they should leave Paris immediately after the Juge d' Instruction had discharged them. This pledge the Count made without the slightest hesitation, and it was decided that the Juge d' Instruction should hold his formal examination at the poste that afternoon, when the Procureur would appear through his Deputy and order the cessation of the proceedings for full and sufficient reasons. The Procureur agreed to notify the Count of the exact hour of the examination that he might be present and ready to execute his share of the compact.

As Monte-Cristo drove back to the mansion of the Rue du Helder he could not help feeling considerably agitated. What was he about to learn from Peppino, and how would the Italian's disclosures affect Massetti? These were problems that the next few hours were destined to solve.

CHAPTER XVI.

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AMID THE COLOSSEUM'S RUINS.

One of the first things Maximilian Morrel did, after he and his wife were comfortably installed at the Hôtel de France in Rome, was to make a formal call at the Palazzo Massetti and present his letters of introduction to the aged Count, Giovanni's father.

The old nobleman, who was at least seventy and very patriarchal in appearance because of his flowing white locks and long snowy beard, received the young Frenchman with great urbanity and condescension in a sumptuously furnished salon full of rare art treasures and dazzling with gold and satin. He met him with outstretched hand and said, warmly, at the same time glancing at the Captain's card as if to refresh his memory:

"I am delighted to have the honor of welcoming so distinguished a visitor as Captain Maximilian Morrel to the Palazzo Massetti. Pray be seated, Captain, and consider my residence as yours."

The Count spoke French fluently, without even the faintest trace of a foreign accent, and this fact as well as his charmingly cordial manner caused the young soldier immediately to feel at ease in his presence.

"I assure you, Count," returned Maximilian, bowing and then seating himself, "that the pleasure is mutual." [Pg 207]

The aged nobleman also took a chair, and for a time they conversed agreeably on various subjects. The Count had been a brave, active soldier in his day and was much interested in French military affairs. The visitor, who was thoroughly posted on this topic and devotedly attached to his profession, gave his inquisitive host every detail he demanded and was particularly enthusiastic when he spoke of the Parisian workmen, who, as he asserted, could leave their accustomed toil at a moment's notice and encounter the perils of the battlefield with the endurance of trained veterans.

At length Maximilian thought he could venture to feel the ground in regard to his mission. It was certainly a very delicate matter, but the Count's politeness and bonhomie encouraged him to proceed. Looking the old nobleman straight in the face he said:

"I believe, Count, you have a son named Giovanni, who was recently in Paris."

Instantly the aged Roman's brow clouded and he cast a scrutinizing glance at his guest. Then he said, coldly:

"I have no son!"

Maximilian in his turn gazed searchingly at the Count, but the latter's visage had already assumed a stony and defiant look that seemed to oppose an insurmountable barrier to further conversation on this subject. There was an awkward pause, during which the two men continued to gaze at each other. M. Morrel, though much embarrassed and disconcerted by the prompt check he had received, was the first to break the ominous silence. [Pg 208]

"I ask your pardon, Count," said he, "but the young man of whom I spoke represented himself to be the Viscount Giovanni Massetti. Is it possible that he was an impostor?"

The Count's aspect became more frigid; he replied, icily:

"I repeat that I have no son!"

Maximilian was sorely puzzled. He knew not what to think or say. The old nobleman arose as if to

terminate the interview. He showed no trace of excitement, but M. Morrel felt certain that he was a prey to an internal agitation that he with difficulty controlled. There could be no doubt that Giovanni was what he had represented himself to be, for had he not passed as the Viscount Massetti in Rome as well as in Paris? But one solution to the mystery offered itself—the Count had disowned his son, disowned him because of the terrible crime with which he was charged, from which he had been apparently unable to clear himself. M. Morrel also arose, but he was unwilling to depart thus, to be summarily dismissed as it were. He determined to make one more effort to get at the truth.

"Count," he said, "I do not wish you to misunderstand me, to impute to mere idle curiosity my desire to be informed concerning this unfortunate and unhappy young man. I know that a black cloud hangs over him, that at present he is branded and disgraced. I was not aware, however, that his family had cast him off."

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"Monsieur," returned the Count, impatiently, "you are strangely persistent."

"I am persistent, Count," said Maximilian, earnestly, "because the Viscount Massetti is not alone in his misfortune. Another, an estimable young lady, is now languishing in Paris on his account."

"I pity her!" said the old nobleman, impressively.

"So do I," rejoined Maximilian; "from the bottom of my heart I pity them both and that is the reason I am here."

"May I ask the name of this estimable young lady?"

"Certainly. Her name is Zuleika; she is the daughter of the world-famous Count of Monte-Cristo."

Old Massetti gave a start and the muscles of his face twitched nervously, but he managed to control himself and said:

"Indeed! Permit me to inquire what relations the young man sustained towards the daughter of the Count of Monte-Cristo."

"She is or rather was betrothed to him."

"My God! Another victim! Does the girl love him?"

"She does, with all her soul!"

"Did he betray her, did he lead her astray?"

"No; his conduct towards her was in all respects that of a man of the strictest honor."

"Heaven be praised for that! Then no damage has been done! Let her forget him!"

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"I fear, I know, she cannot!"

"She is young, isn't she?"

"Very young."

"Then time will heal her wounds. She must forget him, for he is unworthy of her love!"

"But do you feel no affection, no pity, for your son?"

"I tell you I have no son! How many times must I repeat it!"

The Count's look was harder than ever; all the pride and haughtiness of the Massettis seemed concentrated in the expression of his venerable countenance. Maximilian opened his lips to speak again, but the old nobleman stopped him and said, sternly:

"We have had enough of this! Captain Morrel, let what has passed between us on this wretched subject be forgotten. I shall be glad to receive you at any hour as a friend, but, if you value my acquaintance, my friendship, never mention that young man to me again! Farewell, Monsieur!"

The Count touched a bell and a valet appeared. Maximilian bowed to his host and, guided by the servant, quitted the palazzo. In the street he stood for a moment like one utterly bewildered. It was plain that the elder Massetti had fully made up his mind as to Giovanni's guilt, and if the father deserted his son what hope was there that the cold, heartless world would not follow his example? Maximilian was in despair. At the very first step in his mission he had been unceremoniously and firmly halted. What was he to do? Should he acknowledge himself finally defeated because his initial attempt had failed so disastrously? No; that would be miserable cowardice! He would persist, he would make further investigations. He had undertaken this work for Zuleika, to restore happiness to her heart and light to her eyes, and he would not abandon the task, no matter how arduous it might be, until he had cleared Giovanni or obtained tangible, incontrovertible proof of his guilt!

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Fortified by this resolution M. Morrel returned to the Hôtel de France. Valentine met him with a look of anxious inquiry. He endeavoured to seem cheerful, to make the best of the situation, but the effort was a pitiful failure. He sank into a chair and said to his wife in a dejected tone:

"I have seen the Count Massetti. He believes his son guilty and has disowned him!"

Valentine seated herself beside her husband and tenderly took his hand.

"Maximilian," she said, "it is a bad beginning, I confess, but you know the proverb and, I trust, the good ending will yet come!"

"It will not be our fault if it does not," replied her husband, heroically. "At all events, we will do our best."

"And we shall succeed! I feel confident of that!"

"Thank you for those words, Valentine! You are a perfect enchantress and have brought my dead hope to life!"

That evening the Morrels' decided to visit the Colosseum. They desired to see the gigantic remains of that vast fabric of the Cassars by moonlight, to inspect amid the silvery rays the crumbling courts and galleries that ages ago had echoed with the proud tread of the élite of barbaric old Rome! Conducted by a guide belonging to the Hôtel de France, they set out and were soon standing among the ruins of the great amphitheatre. There they were seized upon by a special cicerone, who seemed to consider the huge wreck of Flavius Vespasian's monument as his particular property and who could not be shaken off. He joined forces with the hôtel guide and the twain, jabbering away industriously in an almost unintelligible jargon, led the helpless visitors from one point of interest to another, showing them in turn broken columns, the seats of the Vestals, dilapidated stone staircases, the "Fosse des Lions" and the "Podium des Césars." Maximilian and Valentine were filled with unspeakable awe and admiration as they contemplated the remnants of ancient grandeur, and mentally peopled the wondrous Colosseum with contending gladiators, stately Patricians and the applauding herd of sanguinary Plebeians, Mme. Morrel shuddering as she thought of the thousands of high-bred dames and beautiful maidens who in the old days had pitilessly turned down their thumbs as a signal for the taking of human life! Although the moon was brilliant and flooded the antique amphitheatre with argentine light, the guides carried torches, which served to spread a flickering and wan illumination through the dark recesses of the cavernous vomitoriums, now the refuge of bats, owls, goats and serpents. [Pg 212]

As they were passing through a long and unusually sombre gallery, the guides suddenly paused with a simultaneous cry and began making the sign of the cross. Maximilian and Valentine halted in affright, the former hurriedly drawing a small pistol to defend his wife and himself against the unknown and mysterious danger. They glanced about them but could see nothing, the torches revealing only huge stones and dust-covered vaults. M. Morrel demanded of the guides what was the cause of their terror, but for some moments could glean no intelligence from their vague, unintelligible replies. At last one of the cicerones managed to explain that they had seen the maniac! This was comforting information to the visitors! A maniac at large and ranging at night about amid the Colosseum's ruins! Valentine, trembling with fear, clung to her husband for protection. [Pg 213]

"Is it a man or a woman?" asked Maximilian of one of the guides.

"A man, signor."

"Is he violent, dangerous?"

"No, signor, neither; but his appearance gives one a terrible shock, he is so wild-looking, and, besides, he mutters fearful curses! Holy Virgin, protect us!"

Maximilian felt his curiosity aroused; a strange desire took possession of him to see and speak with this singular madman, who frequented the gladiators' courts and muttered fearful curses to the broken columns of the Colosseum.

"Where is the maniac now?" he demanded of the guides. "Do you see him?" [Pg 214]

"Heaven forbid!" replied one of the men, glancing about him uneasily.

"But where is he? Can you take us to him?" persisted Maximilian.

The cicerones looked at each other in amazement; the young soldier's questions startled them. Valentine was not less amazed and startled than the guides; she stared at her husband, speechless at the strange interest he displayed in this miserable outcast.

"Can you take us to him?" repeated Maximilian.

"Signor," said the guide belonging to the hôtel, "you are jesting!"

"I am not jesting, I am in earnest," said M. Morrel. "Answer my question."

"Of course, we can take you to him, signor," answered the guide; "but you had best avoid him; the sight of the wretched Massetti will drive your lady out of her wits!"

At the name Massetti both Maximilian and Valentine started; they glanced at each other and at the man who had spoken, thinking that they had not heard aright.

"Massetti!" cried M. Morrel, when his astonishment permitted him to find words. "Did you say Massetti?"

"Yes, signor, I said Massetti. The maniac is old Count Massetti's disowned and disinherited son!"

"What! The Viscount Giovanni?"

"The same, signor!"

"Oh! this is dreadful, dreadful, Maximilian!" whispered Valentine, clinging still closer to her husband. [Pg 215]

"It is, indeed, dreadful; doubly so because entirely unexpected," said M. Morrel. "But I must see young Massetti—it was, no doubt, some mysterious influence, some indescribable magnetic power, operating between us, that made me wish to see this man, this maniac, as soon as he was mentioned!—I must see him and at once!"

As the guides possessed but a very slight knowledge of the French language, in which the dialogue between the husband and wife had been carried on, they failed to grasp the full import of the brief conversation; they, however, understood that their patrons were in some inexplicable way interested in the maniac of the Colosseum and appalled by the sudden discovery of his identity. The situation puzzled and dissatisfied them.

After thinking for an instant, Maximilian said to his wife:

"I will instruct the guide from the hôtel to conduct you back to our apartments. It is best that I should meet poor Massetti alone; seeing the wretched man in his present terrible condition would certainly shock and unnerve you."

Valentine gazed pleadingly into her husband's face. All her fear had left her. She was calm now and resolved. She had proposed the trip to Rome, the project of aiding the Viscount, and she did not wish to recoil from taking a single step that might be beneficial to Giovanni and Zuleika. She said, bravely:

"Do not send me from you, Maximilian! I will be stout-hearted and courageous! I am not afraid of this poor young man now, maniac though he be! Perhaps I may be able to help you in dealing with him, for a woman's wit and tenderness, they say, can sometimes subdue and pacify those whose minds are disordered when all a man's efforts have failed." [Pg 216]

Maximilian looked at her lovingly and admiringly.

"So be it, Valentine," he replied, much affected. "You shall remain with me and we will face the trial together!"

His wife's eyes expressed her satisfaction at this display of confidence; she simply grasped her husband's hand, but though she uttered not a word the warm pressure she gave it spoke volumes.

M. Morrel turned to the cicerones, who were waiting in silent bewilderment.

"Take us to this maniac without an instant's delay!" he said.

The guides exchanged glances, shook their heads as if in protest and again began making the sign of the cross. Maximilian was compelled to repeat his command somewhat sternly and imperatively before they made a movement to obey it; then very reluctantly they motioned their patrons to follow them and took the lead, muttering prayers to the Blessed Virgin.

The little party quitted the sombre gallery and made their way into the open air. After they had gone about twenty yards the guides came to an abrupt halt and one of them pointed to the centre of the vast gladiatorial arena.

"Look, signor!" he said to M. Morrel. "There stands the maniac of the Colosseum!" [Pg 217]

Maximilian and Valentine peered quickly and anxiously in the direction indicated but saw nothing.

"There, signor!" repeated the cicerone, still pointing.

Then, all of a sudden, Maximilian and Valentine beheld the figure of a man standing as motionless as a statue beside a vast fragment of stone. The moonlight fell full upon a manly, noble form, revealing a handsome countenance that might have belonged to one of the old Roman gods. The man's dress was in picturesque disorder and on his bare head was a crown of ivy leaves. In one hand he held a tall staff, while the other was lifted menacingly.

"Hark!" said one of the guides, with a shudder. "He is cursing!"

M. and Mme. Morrel listened, horror-stricken, filled with a nameless dread. A faint, but distinct murmur reached them, gradually swelling in volume. It was a fierce, bitter malediction, full of intense, burning hatred, seeming to embrace God, man and the entire universe in its scope.

The guides fell upon their knees, uncovered their heads and prayed to the Virgin in low tones.

Maximilian took Valentine by the hand.

"Come," said he, "let us go to him!"

Mme. Morrel trembled slightly, but answered, firmly:

"I am ready!"

Then, hand in hand, slowly, cautiously, not knowing what might happen, they advanced towards

CHAPTER XVII.

PEPPINO'S STORY.

At the appointed hour, of which he had been duly notified by the Procureur de la République, the Count of Monte-Cristo entered the room set apart for the use of the Juge d' Instruction at the police poste where Peppino and Beppo were confined. The magistrate was already on the judicial bench and by his side stood the Deputy Procureur, who was explaining to him the wishes of his superior. As Monte-Cristo came in he bowed to the Juge and the Deputy, who returned his salute with all the respect due to so exalted a personage.

"Messieurs," said the Count, after this exchange of civilities, "you are, of course, aware of the reason of my presence here this afternoon, so we can proceed to business at once, but before the Italians are brought in I have a slight favor to ask."

"Name it, M. the Count," said the Juge d' Instruction, blandly. "We shall be happy to grant it if it lies within our power to do so."

"Well, messieurs," said the Count of Monte-Cristo, stepping upon the platform and leaning on the Juge's desk, "it is simply this. The prisoner calling himself Peppino is in possession of certain details to which I attach considerable importance. He has promised to reveal them to me as the price of his liberty and that of his companion. It is needless to say that the sole motive of my interference in this matter is to obtain these details. Now, from long experience I know all the trickery and treachery of the Italian nature. Once free, this man might snap his fingers in my face and refuse to speak. After the formalities of the law have been duly complied with, I wish the prisoners remanded to their cells and informed that their liberation will take place only when Peppino has given me the promised intelligence."

"That will be but a trifling stretch of my authority," replied the Juge d' Instruction, smiling, "if it is any stretch whatever, for, as I understand the case, the prisoners are to remain virtually in your custody until their departure from France, for which you have pledged your word to the Procureur de la République. Hence the favor you ask shall be cheerfully granted."

As he concluded the Juge d' Instruction glanced at the Deputy Procureur, who nodded assent.

The magistrate touched a bell that stood on his desk and said to the gardien de la paix who answered the summons:

"Bring in the prisoners."

Monte-Cristo and the Deputy retired from the platform, seating themselves in a couple of fauteuils placed at a table immediately in front of the Juge's desk.

As the two Italians were brought in Peppino glanced first at the magistrate on the bench and then at the Deputy. Finally his eyes rested on the Count, when his countenance instantly lighted up; he instinctively felt that Monte-Cristo's mysterious influence had been fully as potent with the authorities of Paris as with Luigi Vampa and his band, that the wonderful man had succeeded in effecting the liberation of himself and Beppo.

"Place the prisoners at the bar," said the Juge d' Instruction, addressing the gardien.

This order was instantly complied with and the two Italians stood facing the magistrate.

"Remove your hats."

The prisoners obeyed, Peppino with a confident smile, Beppo with a sullen scowl.

"Prisoners at the bar," said the Juge d' Instruction severely, "you are charged with the offense of picking pockets upon the public street. What have you to say?"

This formal and rather menacing beginning was both a surprise and a disappointment to Peppino. He glanced inquiringly at Monte-Cristo, but could read nothing in his pale, handsome face; then with a dark frown he made answer to the Juge, in a harsh, defiant tone:

"I am not guilty!"

The magistrate glanced at Beppo who in his turn repeated his comrade's words.

Here the Deputy Procureur arose and said to the Juge d' Instruction, in a full, clear voice:

"May it please you, honored Juge, as the representative of the Procureur de la République I desire to state that it is not my intention to push the charge against the prisoners at the bar. For this course I have a good and sufficient reason. I, therefore, in my official capacity demand that the persons calling themselves Peppino and Beppo be discharged."

This demand was another surprise to Peppino, but he instantly divined that Monte-Cristo counted for a great deal in it and gazed at him with a look of gratitude. Beppo was absolutely astounded,

for he could not understand the sudden, favorable turn in the situation.

The Juge d' Instruction, in pursuance of the form prescribed by law, said to the Deputy:

"May I ask the worthy representative of the Procureur de la République what are his good and sufficient reasons?"

"Certainly, honored Juge," replied the functionary. "His Excellency the Count of Monte-Cristo, here present, has entered into a compact with the Procureur, pledging himself in the event of the prisoners' discharge to induce them to quit France immediately."

At this Monte-Cristo arose and facing the judicial bench said, in that impressive manner which always marked his public speeches:

"Honored Juge, what the Deputy Procureur has just said is perfectly true in every respect. In the event of the prisoners' discharge I stand pledged to his superior in office to see that they return to Italy without delay."

The Deputy and the Count resumed their seats. The Juge d' Instruction appeared to think for a moment; then he said:

"My duty in the premises is plain. No evidence is presented against the prisoners and the official statement and demand of the Procureur de la République, expressed through his worthy and esteemed representative, preclude the necessity of a formal interrogation of the accused. I shall, therefore, discharge them, subject, however, to the control of his Excellency, the Count of Monte-Cristo. Prisoners at the bar," he added, addressing Peppino and Beppo, "I remand you to your cells, your liberation to take place at such time as his Excellency, the Count of Monte-Cristo may determine."

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He resumed his seat upon the judicial bench, motioning to the gardien to remove the prisoners.

Ten minutes later Monte-Cristo was in Peppino's cell. The Italian was radiant with delight and very effusive in the expression of his thanks to his powerful and mysterious benefactor.

The Count waved his hand impatiently.

"A truce to thanks," he said. "Time presses, and the sooner you give me the details of the conspiracy against the Viscount Massetti the sooner you and your companion will be free."

Peppino threw himself half down upon his bed and Monte-Cristo seated himself on a rickety stool, his usually impassible countenance plainly showing the absorbing interest he felt in what was to follow.

The Italian cleared his throat and began.

"Signor Count," said he, "in the first place I must tell you that young Massetti has been disowned and disinherited by his proud, stern father, who believes him one of the guiltiest and most depraved scoundrels on earth!"

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Monte-Cristo gave a start; his face grew a shade paler than was habitual with him, but he said nothing; he was eagerly awaiting further developments.

"That is not all, however," continued Peppino, after a slight pause to note the effect of his communication upon his auditor, "nor is it the worst! The unfortunate Viscount, upon being ignominiously expelled from the Palazzo Massetti by the old Count's orders, immediately lost his senses; he is now a raving maniac!"

"Mon Dieu! Mon Dieu!" exclaimed Monte-Cristo, springing to his feet and pacing the cell, a prey to intense agitation he did not endeavour to control. "A raving maniac!—Giovanni a raving maniac! Oh! my daughter, my daughter!"

"All I say is the truth," resumed the Italian. "As I hope for Heaven I swear it!"

"But what has become of Massetti? Where is he?" demanded the Count, abruptly pausing in his walk. "Has he been consigned to some asylum?"

"He is an outcast and a wanderer," replied Peppino. "All Rome frowns upon him, avoids him as a pestilence is avoided. When I left Italy he had sought refuge amid the ruins of the Colosseum, where he was the terror alike of visitors and the superstitious guides. I saw him there with my own eyes the day before my departure. He was in rags, carried a tall staff, wore a crown of ivy leaves and spent his time cursing God and man. They say he never leaves the ruins, save to beg a few scraps upon which to subsist, and that he sleeps at night in the depths of a dark vomitorium in company with bats, spiders and other unclean things."

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"This is incredible!" cried Monte-Cristo, gazing piercingly at his companion and half suspecting that he was drawing upon his vivid Italian imagination for some of his graphic details.

"But it is true, Signor Count," protested Peppino, earnestly; "every word of it is true!"

"Go on," said Monte-Cristo, hoarsely, again seating himself on the stool. "Tell me about the conspiracy."

"I am coming to it, Signor Count," said the former bandit, assuming a sitting posture upon the

edge of the bed. "You know, of course, that the cause of all the Viscount Massetti's trouble was a certain handsome young peasant girl named Annunziata Solara?"

"I have heard it was some woman, but that does not matter; proceed."

"This girl sold flowers in the Piazza del Popolo and on the Corso; there she attracted the attention of Massetti and your son Espérance."

"Espérance!" exclaimed Monte-Cristo, his hands working nervously. "Oh! mon Dieu! the light is commencing to break!"

Peppino smiled reassuringly.

"Have no fear, Signor Count," said he; "in all the unhappy occurrences that brought the poor Viscount under suspicion your son bore a part as noble as it was honorable; you have abundant reason to be proud of him!"

Monte-Cristo uttered a sigh of relief.

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"Can you prove this?"

"I can. Luigi Vampa and his whole band know your son to be entirely innocent so far as the flower-girl is concerned and will so express themselves. Even old Solara himself, hardened and despicable wretch as he is, will not seek to inculpate him. Rest assured that the proof of your son's innocence is ample."

"Luigi Vampa has already written to me that no guilt attaches to Espérance, but I must have more reliable vouchers than the letter or even the oath of a notorious brigand."

"Such vouchers can be procured without much difficulty. The unfortunate girl herself, who is now in the Refuge at Civita Vecchia, will exculpate him."

"But the details of the plot, the details of the plot!"

"Well, the Viscount learned from Annunziata that she dwelt in the country beyond the Trastavere and that evening set out to find her. Your son, who knew his object, followed him to protect him against the bandits. Massetti was halted by one of Vampa's men, who wounded him in the struggle that ensued, your son appearing in time to kill the brigand and rescue his friend. Shortly afterwards they encountered a large number of Vampa's band and narrowly escaped being hung to the nearest trees in revenge for the death of the man slain by your son. They were set free by Vampa himself as soon as he learned that Espérance was your son, Massetti having disclosed both his own identity and that of his comrade. The young men, it seems, had determined to return to Rome immediately after the Viscount received his wound, but Massetti grew faint from pain and loss of blood and it was resolved to seek for shelter. A peasant appeared at this juncture and, after some hesitation, agreed to conduct them to his father's cabin where they could pass the night. He was as good as his word. To be brief, the young men, who were disguised as peasants, soon found themselves in Pasquale Solara's hut and in the presence of the fair Annunziata herself."

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Peppino paused for an instant and then continued:

"These preliminary details, Signor Count, are necessary to enable you to understand the conspiracy which was speedily to be hatched. The peasant, who had conducted Massetti and your son to the very spot the former had left Rome to seek, was Annunziata's brother. Old Pasquale Solara was absent from home at the time of the arrival of the strangers, but returned shortly afterwards. I have no doubt that he had long been in league with Luigi Vampa and had been secretly acting as his agent and confederate. At any rate, when he arrived he was well aware that the young men were at his cabin and was also thoroughly informed as to their identity, though, with his habitual cunning, he concealed both facts, feigning surprise and dissatisfaction when it was announced to him by his children that he had guests. Secretly he was delighted, for the presence of young Massetti gave him an opportunity at once to take a signal revenge on the old Count, whom he had long bitterly hated, and to divert the crashing stigma of a fiendish act he meditated from himself to the name and fame of another."

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"Do you mean to assert that this wretched old man had base designs against his own daughter?" said the Count, his visage expressing all the horror he felt.

"Exactly," answered Peppino, coolly. "Old Solara, miserable miser as he is, had for a very large sum of the gold he so ardently coveted sold his own child, his beautiful daughter Annunziata, to the bandit chief Luigi Vampa!"

"The black-hearted demon!" exclaimed Monte-Cristo. "He is unworthy of the name of man! In Paris the indignant populace would crush him to death beneath their feet!"

"So, you see," resumed the Italian, "the arrival of Massetti was opportune, and Pasquale Solara, after having seen that the Viscount was safely housed beneath the roof of his cabin, hastened back to Luigi Vampa and together they laid the foul plot that succeeded but too well. A more shrewdly devised and thoroughly concealed piece of diabolical villainy has never stained the annals of the civilized world!"

MORE OF PEPPINO'S STORY.

Monte-Cristo was horrified by what he had heard. His whole soul revolted at the idea of a father who could deliberately and in cold blood sell his daughter, at the idea of a wretch who with equal deliberation could cast the blame of a villainy committed by himself upon an innocent man. It had seemed very strange to the Count, at the time Luigi Vampa had written to him, that the brigand chief should be so thoroughly posted in regard to the innocence of Espérance and the guilt of the Viscount Massetti, but in the light of the astounding revelations just made by Peppino it became abundantly clear that Vampa in the young Italian's case had been actuated by the strongest possible motive, namely, the desire to shield himself, and that in order to do so effectually he had not shrunk from the vilest and most complete falsehood. Of course, Vampa had not wished to inculpate Espérance because of the old-time compact, the relations that had subsisted between him and Monte-Cristo in the past; that was equally plain; besides one victim was sufficient, and in selecting Massetti as that victim the brigand chief had evidently acted at the instigation of old Pasquale Solara.

Peppino proceeded with his disclosures.

"Signor Count," said he, "I had long suspected that something was on the carpet between Vampa and old Solara. The moody and morose shepherd did not at first come to the bandits' haunt, but in response to a signal he used, a peculiar vibrating whistle, the chief would go out alone and meet him. This signal and Vampa's actions aroused my curiosity; more than once I followed the chief and, securely hidden behind a tree or a rock, witnessed the secret meetings, overhearing portions of the conversation. Annunziata Solara was frequently mentioned, and the father seemed to be endeavouring to drive a hard bargain with Vampa. At last one night they came to an understanding. I heard the chief agree to pay old Pasquale an enormous sum of money upon the delivery of Annunziata into his hands, and then I realized that the nefarious sale had been concluded. It was decided that the ill-fated girl should be passed over to Vampa at the first opportunity, and that opportunity came when the Viscount Massetti and your son Espérance were domiciled at the isolated cabin in the forest.

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"I was on the alert and when, after assuring himself of the arrival of the two young men at his hut, old Pasquale sought the bandits' rendezvous and sounded his vibrating signal, I heard it. Stealthily following Vampa, I concealed myself as I had done on previous occasions. I was now thoroughly familiar with the details of the base transaction in progress between the precious pair and could readily comprehend even their most obscure and guarded allusions. Old Solara informed the chief that the young men had arrived, proposing that Vampa should abduct Annunziata at the earliest possible moment, so arranging matters that suspicion would fall upon the Viscount Massetti. This the chief agreed to do. The shepherd was to keep him posted, and the abduction was to take place when circumstances were best calculated to promote the success of all the phases of the villainous plot. With this understanding the conspirators separated.

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"Fate sided with old Pasquale and Vampa. His wound kept the Viscount at the cabin and the fair Annunziata nursed him. He had become smitten with her beauty the day he met her in the Piazza del Popolo. Intimate association with her intensified her influence over him, and when he had been in the cabin nearly a week and convalescence had begun he made violent love to her, even going so far as to ask her to fly with him. Espérance divined his friend's intentions and, knowing that Massetti could not marry the girl, interposed to save her. The result was a quarrel and your son challenged the Viscount to fight him. The challenge was instantly accepted and it was arranged that the duel should occur on the following morning.

"Faithful to his promise to Vampa, old Solara, while pretending to be absent from home, lurked in the vicinity and kept track of all that was going on. He was hidden beneath the open window when Massetti or Tonio, as he called himself, for both the Viscount and Espérance were passing under assumed names, proposed flight to his daughter. Instantly he hastened to the brigand chief, who had been prowling in the neighborhood of the hut all day, and gleefully communicated to him what he had heard. It was immediately decided that the time for the abduction had come and preparations were made to carry off Annunziata that very night. Vampa wrote a criminating letter to the girl purporting to come from Massetti, and old Solara, stealing unobserved into the hut, placed it beneath his daughter's work-box on her table where she afterwards found it. It was not for a moment supposed that the girl would consent to fly with the Viscount, for though gay and light-hearted she was pure and innocent; the note was simply intended to fill Annunziata's mind, after the abduction, with the idea that Massetti was her abductor."

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"What shrewd, far-seeing villainy!" muttered Monte-Cristo, between his teeth.

"That night there was no moon," continued Peppino, "and, after all the inmates of the cabin had retired to rest, old Pasquale waited outside with a torch while Vampa made his way to Annunziata's chamber, tore her from her couch and carried her to the forest, preventing her from giving the alarm by placing his hand over her mouth. He was masked and the shepherd kept at such a distance that it was utterly impossible for his daughter to recognize him. As Vampa ran through the forest with his burden, he struck his arm against a tree and the pain caused him to take his hand for a second from Annunziata's mouth. The poor girl profited by this opportunity to scream and her cry brought first her brother, then the Viscount and then Espérance to her aid.

"The brother on reaching Vampa attacked him fiercely. Dropping the girl, who stood rooted to the spot, the chief drew a pistol and fired at his assailant. The latter was hit and staggered back, the blood gushing from his wound. Somehow during the struggle Vampa became unmasked and, in the prevailing obscurity, Annunziata naturally imagined that the face suddenly uncovered and as quickly masked again was that of her suitor, the so-called Tonio. Having disposed of the brother, who afterwards ran back towards the cabin, met Espérance, rushed into his arms and then fell to the ground where he died, the brigand chief seized Annunziata, who meanwhile had swooned, and resumed his flight through the forest. Hearing the sound of further pursuit, Vampa paused in dismay and listened. Three persons seemed to be rapidly approaching. The chief thereupon concealed the unconscious girl behind a huge fragment of rock and threw himself flat upon the ground, hoping thus to escape observation. As he did so he saw the glare of old Solara's torch. It flashed full in the face of a peasant, a perfect stranger, who had heard Annunziata's cry and come to the rescue. The shepherd had a knife in one hand; he instantly cast away his torch and closed in desperate conflict with the new comer. At that moment the Viscount came upon the scene, moving as if to take the part of the stranger. Vampa leaped up, grasped him by the throat and, under the threat of instant death if he refused, forced him to take an oath of silence in regard to the events of the night. Massetti was so bewildered that he scarcely knew what he was doing. No sooner had he taken the oath than Vampa treacherously dealt him a crushing blow that sent him reeling to the ground, where he lay motionless and unconscious. Then the chief again threw himself upon the soil, springing up once more to face Espérance. The latter aimed a pistol at him, but he whirled it from his hand. Then the young man struck fiercely at him, but Vampa dodged the blow and his adversary fell forward from his own impetus on a thick growth of moss beside Massetti's prostrate form. Taking prompt advantage of his opportunity, the chief secured possession of the yet unconscious Annunziata and this time succeeded in bearing her in triumph to a hut he had provided for her reception."

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Peppino then proceeded to relate what the reader has already learned from Annunziata's pitiful recital to Mme. de Rancogne in the Refuge at Civita Vecchia. When he had concluded, he glanced at his auditor and said:

"Are you satisfied, Signor Count?"

"I am," answered Monte-Cristo, in a hoarse voice that sounded strangely unlike his own. "You have fully earned the freedom of yourself and your comrade Beppo. The tale of black iniquity you have so vividly told me might seem improbable in other ears but to me it bears the impress of truth. One point, however, is obscure. I cannot imagine in what manner you learned the particulars of certain events in your narrative, events which you could not have witnessed with your own eyes. Enlighten me on this point."

"Willingly," answered Peppino, without the slightest hesitation. "I learned the details you speak of partly from Vampa himself and partly from old Solara. The twain compared notes after the latter had openly joined the bandits, and I took good care to overhear their conversation."

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Monte-Cristo had arisen and now paced the cell for several moments plunged in deep thought. His brow was cloudy and dark, but his eyes sparkled fiercely and his hands were clenched so tightly that his nails left red marks in his flesh. The Italian still sitting on the edge of his bed watched him narrowly, not knowing what to make of his preoccupation and agitated by a vague fear lest he might refuse to fulfil his promise. At length Monte-Cristo appeared to have solved the knotty problem that had perplexed him and to have arrived at a decision. He came in front of the Italian, halted and, gazing steadfastly at him, said:

"My good fellow, I have, as you know, obtained freedom for yourself and Beppo by pledging my word to the Procureur de la République that both of you shall at once quit the country. On your side you have done as you agreed and I am now about to execute my part of the bargain."

Peppino's countenance assumed an expression of the utmost delight. All his apprehensions instantly vanished.

"Now," continued Monte-Cristo, impressively, "I have a proposition to make to you. You can be exceedingly useful to me if you will and at the same time acquire a large sum of money honestly and honorably."

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The Italian's eyes glittered with pleasure.

"Name your proposition, Signor Count," he said, enthusiastically. "I accept it in advance. But is Beppo included in it?"

"He is," answered the Count. "The revelations you have made to me have decided me to go to Rome at once. I shall take my daughter with me, as well as my Nubian servant Ali. I desire you and Beppo to enter my service and accompany me. Humanity demands that I use all my influence to right the unfortunate Viscount Massetti, and I wish you to aid me in the work."

"I will do as you desire, Signor Count," said the Italian, "and I will promise that Beppo shall also comply with your wishes."

"Very well," rejoined Monte-Cristo. "It is understood and agreed upon. One condition, however, I must exact. You and Beppo must hold no communication with Luigi Vampa or any of his band, at least not until I so direct."

"The condition shall be scrupulously observed, Signor Count. While in your service your

commands shall be our only law."

"It is sufficient. Now I am going to set you and Beppo at liberty. You will at once accompany me to my residence and there the preparations for our departure will immediately be made. We shall start for Rome to-morrow."

"As your Excellency pleases," said the Italian.

Monte-Cristo summoned the gardien on duty at the poste, directing him to produce Beppo, and soon the Count and the Italians were seated in the former's barouche and being rapidly driven by Ali towards the mansion on the Rue du Helder. [Pg 236]

No sooner had they arrived at their destination than the Count, giving the new additions to his retinue into the charge of the faithful Nubian, repaired to his study, summoning Zuleika to him. The girl hastened to obey the summons, and the sight of her father's pale, stern countenance instantly told her that something very unusual and important had taken place.

"My child," said the Count, taking her tenderly in his arms and gazing fondly into her upturned, anxious face, "I have to-day received some very startling intelligence."

Zuleika's heart beat wildly at this announcement; she felt convinced that the very startling intelligence concerned her unfortunate, long-silent lover.

"Father," said she, in a tremulous voice, "have you received word from the Viscount Massetti?"

"No, my child," answered Monte-Cristo; "but tidings of the gravest nature relating to him have been imparted to me."

"Tidings of the gravest nature, father! Is it possible that he is dead?"

As she uttered the last words, the poor girl burst into a flood of tears.

"No, my child," replied the Count. "Young Massetti is not dead."

"Has he succeeded in clearing himself of that terrible charge?" the girl asked, trembling with anxiety. [Pg 237]

"Alas! no! But he is innocent, Zuleika, as innocent of the dreadful crime imputed to him as the babe unborn! Of that you can rest assured, for the proof of his innocence is in my hands!"

Zuleika gave a wild cry of joy and flung her arms about her father's neck.

"Calm yourself, my child," resumed Monte-Cristo; "all will yet be well. I start for Rome to-morrow with Ali and two of Giovanni's friends. Be ready to accompany me!"

Zuleika's ecstasy was almost beyond bounds; but alas! she did not know that Giovanni's mind had been overthrown by the shame and disgrace that had been heaped upon him!

CHAPTER XIX.

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THE MANIAC OF THE COLOSSEUM.

After quitting their guides at the Colosseum Maximilian and Valentine advanced towards the centre of the gladiatorial arena where the demented Giovanni Massetti was standing. He did not notice them, did not seem to pay even the slightest attention to his surroundings, but kept his eyes upturned towards heaven, the murmur of bitter malediction constantly issuing from his lips. As M. and Mme. Morrel approached his words became clearer and clearer and they had no difficulty whatever in fully understanding their terrible import. No wonder the guides were frightened by such a flow of bitter scathing curses!

The afflicted Viscount maintained his motionless, statue-like attitude, resembling more the weird creation of some sculptor's vivid fancy than a living, breathing mortal. Valentine was filled with indescribable sorrow as she gazed at him and realized that this wreck of noble, glorious manhood was the beloved of Zuleika's heart, the being with whose unhappy destiny that of Monte-Cristo's daughter was inextricably entwined. Oh! that by some miracle, such as the fabled divinities of old Olympus were said to have performed, he might be restored to reason and the possession of an unblemished name! But the days of miracles were over, and if the young Italian was to be brought back to sanity and cleared from the fearful charge against him that had wrought all this harm, this misery, it must be by earthly and ordinary means. Perhaps she and her husband were destined to work these apparently impossible changes! Who knew? Many things equally improbable had happened, and why should not this wondrous transformation, a transformation worthy of the wand of some potent Prospero, be effected? Valentine was a devoted friend and an enthusiast, and Monte-Cristo's maxim, "Wait and Hope," was her guiding star. "Wait and Hope!" Oh! how cheering, how reassuring was that simple, trustful motto! [Pg 239]

Maximilian, on his side, felt unutterable pity for both the wretched man before him and the lovely Zuleika, the sweet and tender child of his benefactor, languishing and despairing far away in her father's luxurious, palatial home. The poor girl was surrounded by all the blessings that

unbounded wealth could confer; she had the Count's love, Mercédès' love, Espérance's love and the sincere affection of all who knew her; but alas! princely riches, parental, brotherly love and the affection of friends were as nothing compared to the passion that was gnawing at her vitals, a desperate, hopeless passion that was but a heavy weight of woe! But was this passion altogether desperate and hopeless? Time alone could show!

M. and Mme. Morrel were now within a few feet of the hapless, crazed young man, but his attention was so engrossed by the mad thoughts surging through his bewildered brain that he yet failed to detect their presence.

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Bidding Valentine remain where she was, her husband drew close beside Giovanni and suddenly placed his hand on his shoulder. The Viscount started at this unexpected interruption of his sombre reverie and hastily glanced at the intruder. His eyes, however, had a stony, uncomprehending stare, expressing neither surprise nor fear.

"Giovanni Massetti," said Maximilian, "listen to me! I am a friend!"

The young man replied, in a low, discordant voice:

"Who is it mentions Giovanni Massetti? There was once a man who bore that name, but he is dead, dead to the world!"

"I have told you I am a friend," resumed M. Morrel. "I have come to save you!"

"A friend!—a friend!" cried the maniac, with a burst of bitter, mocking laughter that pierced Maximilian through and through like a sharp-pointed, keen-edged stiletto and made Valentine shudder as if she had come in contact with polar ice. "A friend!—a friend! Come to save me—me! ha! ha! ha! A labor of Hercules with no Hercules to accomplish it! You are mad, my poor fellow! Besides, I am not Giovanni Massetti—I am a King, an Emperor! Behold my sceptre and my crown!"

He pointed to his tall staff and the wreath of ivy leaves encircling his head, pointed triumphantly and with all the dignity of a throned monarch.

It was a pitiful sight, in the highest degree pitiful, this spectacle of intellect overthrown, of the glorious mental light of youthful manhood which had become clouded and obscured.

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Maximilian was deeply affected, but, knowing full well that all his firmness, resolution and resources would be requisite in dealing with the wretched man he had come so far to aid, he controlled his emotion and said, in a comparatively steady voice:

"Giovanni Massetti, in the name of the woman you love, in the name of Zuleika, Monte-Cristo's daughter, I conjure you to be calm and hear me. I am her ambassador, I come to you from her!"

The young man put his hand to his forehead and seemed to be striving to collect his scattered senses.

"Zuleika?—Zuleika?" he murmured. "Monte-Cristo's daughter? Yes, yes, I have heard of her before—a long time back in the dreary past! I read of her in some book of history or the verses of some oriental poet. She was a Queen!—yes, she was a Queen! Well, what of this Zuleika?"

He stood as if waiting for some Arabian romance to be unfolded to him, with parted lips and a vacant smile sorrowful to see.

Since his interview with the old Count Massetti Maximilian's hope for the success of his difficult mission had been but a very slender thread. Now that thread was stretched to its utmost tension, and Zuleika's ambassador felt that it must shortly snap asunder and vanish irrecoverably. Love is ever a potent influence with man but this poor demented creature appeared to have lost even the faintest conception of the crowning passion of life, since Zuleika's name, the name of his betrothed, had failed to awaken his memory or touch a sympathetic chord in his bosom.

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As Maximilian stood uncertain what to do next, but as yet reluctant to abandon the miserable Viscount to his fate, Valentine came to him and, placing her hand on his arm, said:

"My husband, it is useless to endeavor to move this unfortunate man in his present condition; his mind is incapable of rational action. Only by care and soothing influence can he be restored to himself. He must be induced to accompany us to some asylum, some institution where he can be treated for his dreadful malady."

"You are right, Valentine, as you always are," answered M. Morrel. "The course you suggest is the only one to be taken at this juncture. But how is Giovanni to be induced to accompany us? Force cannot be employed—we have no legal right to use it—and I greatly fear that the Viscount will not follow us of his own accord, no matter to what solicitations we may resort."

"Trust that to me, Maximilian," rejoined Valentine, sweetly and persuasively. "Remember what I said about a woman's wit and tenderness."

"I remember it, and now, if ever, is the time for the trial of their power, for I have utterly failed. But, surely, Valentine, you do not propose to risk dealing with this poor man whose mind is reduced to chaos and who might, in a sudden access of unaccountable fury, do you harm even before I could interfere?"

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"I certainly do propose dealing with him! I am an enchantress, you know, and now you shall witness a further and more convincing proof of the potency of my spells than was shown in bringing your dead hope to life!"

Maximilian was not altogether satisfied with his wife's heroic resolution, but she firmly persisted in it and finally he allowed her to have her way. She quitted his side and approached Giovanni, her fine countenance wearing a bewitching smile as seductive as that of a Scandinavian valkyria ministering at the feast of heroes in the fabled Valhalla.

The guides, who amid their petitions to the Blessed Virgin had steadily watched the singular proceedings of their patrons, were both astounded and horrified when they saw Valentine leave her husband and boldly walk towards the maniac. They redoubled the fervency of their prayers and breathlessly waited for what was about to happen.

The Viscount had not yet observed Valentine. When she came in front of him and paused, still smiling, he saw her for the first time. Dropping his staff, he clasped his hands and gazed at her in an ecstasy of admiration.

"What beautiful, what heavenly vision is this?" he exclaimed, ardently, his voice assuming more of the characteristics of humanity than it had yet displayed.

Valentine was silent; she wished to get Massetti completely under her influence before speaking to him. Motionless and statuesquely she stood, allowing the maniac to gaze his fill at her. [Pg 244]

"Who are you, divine vision?" continued the Viscount, seeming to think himself the prey of some passing dream. "Oh! you are a spirit!—a goddess such as of old presided over the sports of the Colosseum!—perhaps Juno herself! Do not vanish from my sight, do not become a filmy cloud and dissolve in ether! Oh! speak to me, glorious apparition! Let me hear the celestial melody of your voice and die listening to its marvellous cadences!"

Valentine, humoring the caprice of the demented man, said, in the most enticing tone she could assume:

"You have guessed aright, oh! mortal! I am, indeed, Juno, the Queen of the goddesses of Mount Olympus! By the direct command of Jupiter I have sought you out this night!"

She came closer to him and took his hand. He raised hers to his lips and devotedly kissed it. Then he gazed into her eyes like one entranced. Woman's wit and tenderness had triumphed. The maniac whom even the mention of Zuleika's name had failed to touch was completely under Mme. Morrel's influence. She had subdued him; she could do with him as she wished.

"A miracle! a miracle!" cried both the cicerones simultaneously. "The Blessed Virgin be praised!"

Maximilian was not less astonished than the guides, but with his astonishment joy and gratitude were mingled—joy that Giovanni was now tractable and gratitude to his noble and fearless wife who had effected the wondrous transformation. He said to himself that Valentine was, indeed, an enchantress, but a modern Circe, who, unlike her ancient prototype, employed her spells and fascinations to promote good, results. He glanced at Valentine, with a smile of encouragement and approbation, eagerly waiting for the next step she should take, for the next audacious effort she should essay. [Pg 245]

Giovanni made no reply to Valentine's fantastic speech, and, after preserving silence for an instant, she resumed:

"I am here for your welfare, to aid you in your overwhelming misfortunes!"

"Ah! yes; I have misfortunes, but I had forgotten them," said the young man, musingly.

"I am sent to relieve you of them," continued Valentine. Then, throwing into her voice its most persuasive quality, she added, fixing a magnetic gaze upon the Viscount: "My mission is to take charge of you, to see that you are restored to health and happiness. Come with me!"

"I will follow you, sweet vision, to the very end of the earth!" said Giovanni, enthusiastically.

Valentine hastily beckoned to her husband; he hurried to her and she whispered in his ear:

"Send one of the guides for a coupé. We must not lose a single moment. Poor Massetti will follow me as a dog follows its master! While he is under my influence it is imperative that he be removed to an asylum where he can be properly looked after and if possible cured. No doubt the guides can tell you of such an institution. Use the utmost dispatch, Maximilian!" [Pg 246]

The young soldier needed no repetition of these wise and humanitarian injunctions. He gave the requisite directions and soon the desired vehicle was in readiness without the Colosseum. Maximilian had also ascertained the address of a proper curative institution.

Meanwhile Valentine had continued to employ her successful tactics with the Viscount, who every moment yielded to her more and more. When the coupé was announced, she said to him:

"My chariot is waiting to convey you to my Olympian abode. Will you come with me?"

"Your wishes are my laws, oh! beautiful goddess!" replied Giovanni. "Take me where you will, so that you do not desert me and leave me to perish in despair!"

Mme. Morrel led the unresisting young man to the coupé, Maximilian and the guides following the pair at a short distance in order to guard against any unforeseen freak on the part of poor Massetti. There was no occasion for their services, however, and the Viscount was soon safely installed in the coupé with Valentine upon one side of him and her husband upon the other.

After a brief drive, during which Giovanni, who seemed to have lost all comprehension of the presence of any one save Valentine, remained quietly gazing at her, the vehicle drew up in front of the insane asylum. [Pg 247]

Massetti was induced to enter the institution without the slightest trouble. Maximilian thereupon made all the necessary arrangements, and the young man was placed in comfortable quarters. The physician who examined him stated that his case was not beyond hope.

CHAPTER XX.

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THE ISLE OF MONTE-CRISTO.

At the appointed time the Count of Monte-Cristo and Zuleika, accompanied by Ali, Peppino and Beppo, the two Italians attired in the traveling garb of French servants, left Paris for Marseilles. On their arrival at the latter city they proceeded immediately to the harbor, where Monte-Cristo's yacht awaited them in obedience to instructions telegraphed by the Count to the Captain of the craft, whose name was Vincenzo, and who was a son of Jacopo, the former smuggler, long in command of the ill-fated Alcyon, lost in the frightful storm and volcanic disturbance in the Mediterranean some years before. The present yacht was a new and superb vessel, as fleet and as beautiful as a bird. It was fitted up in the most complete manner; the cabin, superbly carpeted and furnished, was hung with elaborately wrought, costly tapestry, while here and there on the walls were curiously arrayed clusters of ancient barbaric weapons gathered from the site of old Carthage, the ruins of historic Babylon and even from the crumbling tombs of those redoubtable warriors who far back in the dim ages of antiquity had defended distant Cathay against the incursions of the fierce Tartar hordes. The yacht was named the Haydée in honor of the loving and devoted Greek slave, the mother of Espérance and Zuleika, who had filled such an important part in Monte-Cristo's life and had left behind her such tender memories. [Pg 249]

As soon as the Count and his little party were safely on board the craft it set sail, gliding swiftly out upon the wide, sparkling expanse of water. Monte-Cristo and Zuleika stood upon the deck, conversing pleasantly and enjoying the ever-changing panorama presented to their gaze. The Haydée glided swiftly past the Île Ratonneau, conspicuous by reason of its towering lighthouse; then came the Pointe des Catalans, with its beach where Mercédès had once dwelt and where the unfortunate sailor Dantès had seen the light in her chamber window on that memorable night when he was being conducted to captivity. At length a black and frowning rock rose before them, surmounted by a gloomy fortress. As he caught sight of this dismal crag, Monte-Cristo knitted his brows and through his clenched teeth muttered an imprecation upon the tyranny of man.

"What is it that so moves you, father?" asked Zuleika, in a soft voice, gazing solicitously into his face.

"Look yonder, my child," replied the Count, with strong emotion; "the fortress upon that rock is the accursed Château d' If!"

Zuleika glanced at the fortress with a feeling of terror and dread. She knew the story of her father's long imprisonment and keen suffering in the dark dungeon of that forbidding pile, of his meetings with the Abbé Faria there and of his subsequent daring escape; but she knew nothing of what had passed between the Abbé and the sailor Dantès relative to the famous treasure concealed by Cardinal Spada within the grottoes of the Isle of Monte-Cristo, the treasure that diverted from the grasp of Pope Alexander VI. had made the Count so enormously rich. On this topic her father had never yet seen fit to enlighten her. The sight of the Château d' If made her shudder and turn pale, though at the same time it fascinated and enchained her. She clung closely to Monte-Cristo and said, tremulously: [Pg 250]

"Oh! what a frightful place it is! My very heart is chilled by its dismal aspect!"

"Dismal as it looks from here, my child," returned the Count, "it is a thousand times more so within! It is the chosen abode of gloom and despair!"

He gently put his daughter from him and gave way to a profound reverie in which he remained plunged for some moments. All the details of his imprisonment and the startling adventures that succeeded it passed through his mind in rapid review, and an ardent, irresistible desire to revisit the locality where he had unearthed Spada's millions took entire possession of him. Suddenly he said to Captain Vincenzo:

"Make for the Isle of Monte-Cristo!"

"Aye, aye, Signor Count," answered the Captain, and the necessary orders were at once given. The Haydée, promptly obeying her helm, swung about swiftly and gracefully, instantly darting off in the direction of the famous island.

Zuleika, on hearing her father's command, cast upon him a look of astonishment and anxiety. She had expected that they would proceed directly to Italy and this change in the yacht's course betokened another programme.

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"My child," said the Count, divining her thoughts, "I propose to stop at the Isle of Monte-Cristo only a few hours; the delay will not be important, especially as we can make up the time lost by crowding sail, while I wish to show you some spots intimately connected with my history that will interest you."

"I shall be delighted to visit the Isle of Monte-Cristo, father," replied Zuleika. "I have heard so much about it and its wonders. You have a mansion there, have you not?"

The Count smiled, as he answered:

"Not exactly a mansion, Zuleika, but something that might be made to serve as a substitute for one did we need a temporary refuge, though I greatly fear that from long neglect we shall find it at present in a most deplorable condition."

Zuleika's curiosity was now considerably excited. What could this mysterious residence, or, as her father quaintly styled it, this substitute for a mansion be like? What knowledge she possessed of the Isle of Monte-Cristo had been derived from fragmentary recitals made to her by Mercédès and her son Albert de Morcerf, but as neither of these informants had ever set foot upon the island their information was necessarily very vague, though it made up in the marvellous what it lacked in distinctness.

At length, towards afternoon, the rocky shore of the Isle of Monte-Cristo became visible. The Count's visage brightened as he saw it and a thrill of pleasure passed through him. Though the Haydée was yet at a considerable distance he could plainly descry the lofty peak upon which he had stood and watched the smugglers depart in their tartane, La Jeune Amélie, on that eventful morning when, with his gun and pickaxe, he had started out to prosecute his search destined to be fraught with so much excitement and to be crowned with such a glorious, dazzling result. The golden sunlight fell full upon this peak and the surrounding masses of stone, making them glitter as if encrusted with sparkling diamonds of great price. Here and there grew olive trees and stunted shrubs that stood out distinctly against the blue, cloudless sky; as the yacht drew nearer their green tints formed a striking contrast with the prevailing hue of the rocks, adding vastly to the picturesqueness of the wild and romantic scene presented.

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"How beautiful the island looks!" exclaimed Zuleika, enthusiastically, as she leaned against the bulwarks of the vessel and gazed out over the sea.

"Yes," replied Monte-Cristo, who was standing beside her, "it does, indeed, look beautiful from here, but a closer view will dispel the charm for the island is nothing but a barren waste."

"What! Is it a desert?" asked Zuleika, in surprise.

"A perfect desert, my child," answered the Count, "uncultivated and uninhabited."

"Uninhabited!" cried Zuleika, gazing intently at the shore. "I certainly see life there! Look! What was that?"

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"A wild goat leaping from one rock to another," returned Monte-Cristo, smiling. "The island is full of them. When I said it was uninhabited I meant by human beings."

The Haydée by this time had approached as near the island as possible; she was therefore anchored. The Count then ordered a boat lowered, into which he descended with Zuleika and Ali. A stout sailor took the rudder, two others grasped the oars, and, in a few minutes, a little cove was gained and the disembarkation effected.

"Men," said the Count, addressing the sailors, "you can now row back to the yacht. When you see me come upon the beach and wave my handkerchief thrice, return for us."

"Aye, aye, Signor Count," answered the coxswain for the boat's crew. His words were accompanied by the fall of the oars and the boat shot off towards the Haydée.

"You are now on the Isle of Monte-Cristo," said the Count to Zuleika as he took her hand to lead her forward. "Prepare to see what you have termed its wonders!"

"They will, no doubt, prove wonders to me, at any rate," returned the girl, smiling.

The Nubian stood before his master with uncovered head, respectfully waiting for orders.

"Go in advance, Ali," said the Count, "and see that all is right."

The Nubian made a profound salaam in oriental fashion and hastened away.

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The Count and his daughter leisurely followed. As they walked they disturbed hosts of grasshoppers, that leaped with a whirring flutter of wings from the bushes and fled before them. This amused Zuleika, but she could not repress a cry of affright as now and then a green, repulsive looking lizard emerged from under the loose stones beneath her very feet and shot hastily away in search of a more secure hiding-place. Occasionally, too, they saw wild goats that pricked up their ears and stared at them with wide open eyes, then gathering themselves for a spring bounded off up the rocks and vanished.

At last Monte-Cristo and Zuleika came upon the Nubian, who had stopped beside a huge boulder that seemed to have lain for ages where it had fallen from the cliffs above. A thick, bushy growth of wild myrtle and flowering thorn had sprung up around it, and its surface was covered with emerald hued moss. The Count and his daughter also stopped, the former glancing around him and at the vast stone with evident satisfaction.

"Nothing has been touched since I was here last," said he, as if to himself; then, turning to Ali, he added: "Unmask the entrance to the grottoes!"

The Nubian produced a rusty crowbar from some nook where he had evidently concealed it in the past, thrusting the point beneath the boulder; then he exerted a strong, steady pressure upon the crowbar and the great rock slowly moved aside, disclosing a circular opening in the midst of which was a square flagstone bearing in its centre an iron ring. Into this ring Ali inserted his crowbar and with a mighty effort raised the flagstone from its place. A stairway descending apparently to the bowels of the earth was disclosed, and from the sombre depths escaped a flow of damp, mephitic air.

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Zuleika drew back in affright. All that had passed since they came to the boulder was strange, bewildering and terrifying to her. Had the days of enchantment returned? Was Ali some potent wizard like Aladdin's pretended uncle in the old Arabian tale or was she simply under the dominion of some disordered dream? Her knees trembled beneath her and she moved as if to flee, but her father caught her by the arm and his smiling countenance reassured her.

"Fear nothing, Zuleika," he said, soothingly. "We are about to visit my subterranean palace. That is all."

By this time the atmosphere of the stairway had become purified and Monte-Cristo said to Ali:

"Descend and light up the grottoes. When all is ready give the usual signal."

The faithful servant entered the opening and vanished down the stairway. Soon a delicious oriental perfume ascended. This was followed by a vivid illumination of the gaping chasm and then came a long, reverberating whistle.

"Ali notifies us that all is prepared for our reception," said Monte-Cristo to Zuleika. "Come, my daughter!"

He descended the stairway first, Zuleika following him in a state of mind difficult to describe. She was not afraid now, but her sensations were of an exceedingly peculiar nature. The novelty and singularity of the adventure rather attracted her, though, at the same time, she felt a sort of reluctance to attempt it. However the opening was now as light as day, and as they descended the intoxicating perfume increased in intensity until it was almost as if acres of tube-roses had suddenly bloomed and filled the caverns with their heavy fragrance.

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At the bottom of the stairway Ali received them, conducting them into a vast chamber that had evidently once possessed great splendor, but was at present dingy and dust-covered as if it had been long deserted. It was the apartment in which Monte-Cristo as Sinbad the Sailor had welcomed the Baron Franz d' Epinay years before, but the crimson brocade, worked with flowers of gold, though it still lined the chamber as it did then, was now faded and moth-eaten, while the Turkey carpet in which the Baron's feet had sunk to the instep, as well as the tapestry hanging in front of the doors, was in the same condition. The divan in the recess had been riddled by worms and the silver scabbards of the stand of Arabian swords that surmounted it were tarnished, the gems in the handles of the weapons alone retaining their brilliancy. The once beautiful lamp of Venice glass hanging from the ceiling, which Ali had filled and lighted, was also tarnished and its delicately shaped globe was cracked from top to bottom. Monte-Cristo sadly contemplated this scene of ruin and decay, but he contemplated it only for a moment. Then he turned to Zuleika and said:

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"My child, this was once my salon and its beauty riveted the eyes of all who saw it, but I deserted it and time has done its work, aided by neglect—its beauty is no more! Shall I raise another ghost of the past and show you its former occupant?"

"Surely, I see him before me, do I not?" said Zuleika, gazing tenderly at her father.

"Not as he was, my child, not as he was. Wait here a few moments, with my faithful Ali as your guard and protector, and I will invoke the fantastic apparition!"

As he spoke he raised the faded tapestry, revealing the door leading to the inner apartment; opening this door and closing it behind him he was lost to sight; the tapestry fell back to its place, masking the point of entrance.

After a brief absence he reappeared dressed in his famous Tunisian costume, but that, alas! had also lost its pristine glory like everything else in this abandoned subterranean abode. Still the wrecks were there—the red cap with the long blue silk tassel; the vest of black cloth embroidered with gold; the pantaloons of deep red; the large, full gaiters of the same color, embroidered with gold like the vest; the yellow slippers; the cachemire around his waist, and the small, crooked cangiar passed through his girdle.

Zuleika gazed at him in amazement. In his faded, tarnished, moth-eaten finery he, indeed, looked like a fantastic apparition, a picturesque ghost of the past.

He moved aside the tapestry once more and again opened the door leading to the other apartment. Zuleika entered and the Count followed her, Ali remaining in the outer chamber to guard against surprise or intrusion. The marvellous salle-à-manger was precisely the same as the Baron d' Epinay had seen it. Here time seemed to have been defied. The marble of which the magnificent apartment was built was as bright and beautiful as ever, the antique bas-reliefs of priceless value were well preserved, and the four superb statues with baskets on their heads were yet in their places in the corners of the oblong room and yet perfect, though no pyramids of splendid fruit now filled the baskets. In the centre of the salle-à-manger the dining-table still stood with its dishes of silver and plates of Japanese china. It was at this table that both the Baron d' Epinay and Maximilian Morrel had taken that wonderful green preparation, that key to the gate of divine dreams, the hatchis of Alexandria, the hatchis of Abou-Gor. It was at this table that Maximilian, when falling under the influence of the potent drug, had caught his first glimpse of his beloved Valentine after her supposed death; it was at this table that he had been reunited to her on awaking from his hatchis dream. It was in this room that Haydée had confessed her love for Monte-Cristo and had been taken to his heart.

All these recollections came thronging upon the Count as he stood gazing about him. The thought of Haydée almost melted him to tears, but he forced back the briny drops, and, taking Zuleika tenderly in his arms, cried out, in a voice full of emotion:

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"Oh! Haydée, Haydée, I have lost you, but you live for me again in this blessed treasure you have bequeathed to me—our darling daughter!"

Zuleika flung her arms about her father's neck and kissed him fervently.

"I know not," she said, effusively, "what memories, what associations, this room recalls, but it has made you think of my mother and I bless it!"

When they both had grown calmer, Monte-Cristo said to his daughter:

"There is yet another apartment for us to see. Let us go to it."

They entered the adjoining chamber. It was a strangely furnished apartment. Circular in shape it was surrounded by a large divan, which, as well as the walls, ceiling and floor, was covered with what had been magnificent skins of the large-maned lions of Atlas, striped Bengal tigers, spotted panthers of the Cape, bears of Siberia and foxes of Norway, but all these elegant furs that were strewn in profusion, one over another, had been eaten by moths and worms and rotted by the dampness until they scarcely held together. The divan was that upon which the Baron d' Epinay had reclined, and the chibouques, with jasmine tubes and amber mouthpieces, that he had seen, prepared so that there was no need to smoke the same pipe twice, were still in their places and were the only things in the whole room that had escaped from the clutch of years unscathed. This chamber was brilliantly illuminated by the blaze of several large lamps of tarnished silver and gold suspended from the ceiling and protruding from the walls, and the salle-à-manger was lighted in the same fashion.

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Zuleika stood in the midst of all this decayed grandeur, lost in wonder, utterly bewildered by what she beheld. She spoke not a single syllable, for words were inadequate to express her deep amazement.

Monte-Cristo threw himself upon the divan from which a cloud of stifling dust arose. Taking one of the chibouques in which a supply of Turkish tobacco yet remained, he lighted it and began to smoke.

Zuleika now saw that the heavy, delicious perfume with which the grotto palace was filled came from frankincense smouldering in a huge malachite vase placed in the centre of this bewildering chamber.

After he had puffed a few whiffs of smoke from the chibouque, Monte-Cristo removed the amber mouthpiece from his lips and rising said:

"You have now seen my subterranean abode, Zuleika, the abode where in the past I sought refuge from the world and solace for my woes. It seems to you like the product of some potent magician's spell and, in truth, it was so, but that magician was good fortune and the spell was colossal wealth, to the vast and subtle influence of which all nations and all lands yield slavish submission and implicit obedience! You do not know the romantic, incredible history of this abode, my daughter, and it is not my intention to relate it to you, for your youthful brain could scarcely comprehend it. Be satisfied then with what you have beheld. Treasure it in your memory if you will either as a reality or merely as a passing vision, but do not, I conjure you, ever mention this adventure to me or any other living soul! I have had confidence in you, my child; repay that confidence by strictly obeying this wish, nay, this command, of mine! These grottoes belong to the past and to oblivion; to the past and to oblivion, therefore, let them be consigned! Promise me to do as I desire!"

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Amazed by this strange speech, which the Count uttered in a voice tremulous with emotion, as much as by any of the inexplicable wonders she had seen, Zuleika replied, in a tone full of agitation:

"I promise, solemnly promise, father, to fulfil your injunctions in this matter to the very letter! I

have a woman's curiosity and a woman's inclination to gossip," she added, with a faint smile, "but for your dear sake I will repress them both, at least, so far as concerns this truly marvellous subterranean palace and our visit to it to-day!"

"And you will keep your word, my noble child!" said Monte-Cristo, gazing tenderly and admiringly at her. "Now I will remove this Tunis dress in which I have been, without doubt, exceedingly ridiculous in your eyes, for you are altogether unacquainted with the associations that surround it and endear it to me, dignify it, so to speak, beyond any other costume I have ever worn!"

Zuleika lifted her hands in protest, exclaiming:

"You could not, dear father, appear ridiculous in my eyes, no matter in what garb you were clothed!" [Pg 262]

Monte-Cristo smiled approvingly, but a trifle incredulously and quitted the circular apartment. When he returned he was clad in the costume he had worn on coming from the yacht.

"Take a last look around you, Zuleika," he said, in a tone he vainly endeavored to render firm. "We are now about to quit this place forever!"

He took her hand and led her from the room. Slowly and as if regretfully they passed through the *salle-à-manger* and the apartment they had first entered, gaining the stairway and preparing to ascend it. At the foot of the steps Monte-Cristo paused and turned to Ali. He was ghastly pale and trembled slightly. With a powerful effort he, however, controlled his agitation.

"Ali," said he, in a voice that sounded strangely in Zuleika's ear, "is everything in readiness?"

The faithful Nubian, scarcely less affected than his master, bowed affirmatively.

"Then farewell, ye grottoes of Monte-Cristo!" cried the Count, excitedly. "Farewell forever!"

He hastily mounted the stairway, almost dragging Zuleika with him. Ali remained below.

When they reached the open air they paused until the mute joined them; then the little party regained the beach, where Monte-Cristo waved his handkerchief thrice. In obedience to this signal the boat immediately left the yacht and was pulled swiftly to the shore.

A few moments later the Count, Zuleika and Ali were safely deposited on the Haydée's deck and the gallant little vessel turned her prow towards the Italian coast. [Pg 263]

Monte-Cristo and his daughter, with Ali at a short distance from them, stood closely watching the fast disappearing island. The Count was more agitated and paler than he had yet been. Nervous tremors shook his frame and his teeth were firmly clenched. The usually impassible countenance of the faithful Nubian mute wore an expression of blank horror. Zuleika gazed at her father and then at the servant. She knew not what to make of their strange, inexplicable emotion. Placing her hand upon the Count's shoulder, she was about to speak to him, to endeavor to calm his agitation, when suddenly there was a loud explosion on the Isle of Monte-Cristo and a huge column of black smoke shot up into the air.

The Count covered his face with his hands as if to shut out the sight. Ali fell prostrate upon the deck, pressing his contorted visage against his master's feet.

"What was that, oh! father, what was that?" cried Zuleika, clinging to the Count in wild alarm.

"The subterranean palace of the Isle of Monte-Cristo is no more!" he replied, sadly. "At my command it replaced with its magnificence the rude and shapeless grottoes, at my command it has perished!"

As he spoke the rocky island was gradually lost to view in the distance, and the Haydée sped over the waves of the Mediterranean like some glorious water-fowl in full flight.

CHAPTER XXI.

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ZULEIKA LEARNS THE TRUTH.

Nothing occurred to impede the progress of the Haydée and, after a rapid and pleasant voyage, the beautiful craft cast anchor in the harbor of Civita Vecchia, the principal seaport city of the Pontifical States, which owes its origin to the Emperor Trajan. The strict quarantine regulations of the place caused a brief delay, which Monte-Cristo and Zuleika bore with ill-concealed impatience, but the period required by law for purification at length expired and the travelers were accorded official permission to proceed to Rome. Of this they immediately availed themselves and in a short time were in the Eternal City comfortably installed in the best apartments the Hôtel de France afforded.

The Count's first care was to send his card to M. and Mme. Morrel, who at once hastened to his parlor, where the most cordial greetings were exchanged. That Monte-Cristo should be in Rome did not in the slightest degree astonish Maximilian and Valentine, who were fully aware of his habit of suddenly making his appearance in unexpected spots apparently without motive, but the

presence of Zuleika at this critical juncture both surprised them and filled them with consternation. What answer should they make to her when she inquired concerning Giovanni? How was the fact of his sad condition to be kept from her when all Rome knew of it and it was the current gossip of the city? Valentine had written several letters to the girl since quitting Paris, but in them had dealt only in generalities; she had studiously refrained from informing her of the true state of things, hoping against hope that she would eventually have some cheering intelligence to impart. The Count, however, speedily relieved the devoted husband and wife of their anxiety. He knew as well as they that his daughter could not fail soon to learn that the Viscount was a maniac and preferred to break the terrible news to her himself. As soon, therefore, as the greetings were over, before Zuleika could whisper to Mme. Morrel the question that was trembling on her lips, the dreaded inquiry as to her lover and his whereabouts, he said, in a quiet tone:

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"Maximilian and Valentine, you, no doubt, wonder why we have come to Rome, what is our business here. I will tell you. We have come to clear an unfortunate man, the Viscount Giovanni Massetti, of a fearful charge that has long hung over him."

M. and Mme. Morrel exchanged glances. Now was their time to speak, to avow their mission to Monte-Cristo.

"Count," said Maximilian, pointing to his wife, "we also came hither on the same errand. Zuleika confessed her love for the young Italian to Valentine, who extracted from her the nature of the charge to which you have just alluded. Pardon us for having acted without your authorization, but we desired to succeed before confessing to you the part we had taken in the affair."

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Monte-Cristo smiled.

"You need no pardon from me," he said, gently, much affected by this proof of devotion to his daughter and through her to him; "on the contrary you have my gratitude as well as Zuleika's! But what success have you met with?"

"Alas! none of any moment as yet," answered M. Morrel, sadly.

"Such a result was to be expected," returned the Count, gravely. "You had no evidence to establish Giovanni's innocence and it was impossible for you to obtain any. I have the evidence, conclusive evidence! When the proper moment arrives I will produce it, remove the stain from his name and confound his enemies!"

"Thank God!" simultaneously exclaimed M. and Mme. Morrel, Valentine taking Zuleika in her arms, kissing her and clasping her to her bosom.

"But," continued Monte-Cristo, glancing anxiously at his daughter, "the unfortunate young man must first be taken in hand and cured!"

Maximilian and Valentine again exchanged glances. They felt relieved. The Count knew all. He was making the disclosure gradually, considerately. They silently waited for further developments, holding their breath. Valentine's heart beat almost audibly. Zuleika started from her arms and gazed at her father with anxious, astonished eyes.

"Cured?" she repeated, in a tremulous voice. "Is Giovanni ill?"

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"He is, my child," answered the Count.

What would he say next? How much was he going to disclose? Surely not the whole of the dreadful truth! These thoughts shot like lightning through the minds of M. and Mme. Morrel. Maximilian stood like a statue, motionless, pale, gazing upon Monte-Cristo as a condemned criminal gazes upon his executioner. Valentine seized her husband's hand and held it like a vise.

Zuleika stared at the Morrels; she could not understand their action, their breathless interest. Then her glance reverted to her father and, for the first time, she saw that, notwithstanding his apparent calmness, he, too, was under the dominion of some intense emotion.

"Father!" she cried, clasping her hands appealingly, "what do you mean? You say that Giovanni is ill, but your look expresses more than your words! With what fearful malady has he been stricken? Tell me, I conjure you! I will be strong—I will bear it!"

"My child," said the Count, in a solemn tone, "then summon all your courage, all your firmness to your aid! Young Massetti, overwhelmed by his troubles, has fallen a prey to a mental disease!"

"Mon Dieu! mon Dieu!" groaned Zuleika, in anguish, "do you mean to say that he has lost his mind, that he is a lunatic?"

"Such, alas! is the case! But, my daughter, trust in me! I will find him and science will effect his cure!"

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The poor girl, stunned by the terrible intelligence of her lover's condition, stood for an instant with her eyes stonily fixed upon her father. Tears refused to come to her relief. Then she tottered, staggered as if she had been suddenly struck with a heavy missile, and fell fainting into Valentine's outstretched arms. Maximilian assisted his wife to place her in a fauteuil, after which he seized the bell cord.

"For what are you going to ring?" asked Monte-Cristo, who had hurried to his daughter's side.

"For brandy," answered M. Morrel, his hand still on the cord. "It will revive her."

"Never mind the brandy," returned the Count, as he took a small vial containing a red-looking fluid from his pocket and, opening Zuleika's mouth, poured eight drops of the liquid down her throat. "This is the Abbé Faria's elixir, a potent remedy that never yet failed of effect! It will work like a charm! See! It is already doing its office!"

As he uttered these words Zuleika moved slightly in the fauteuil, then opened her eyes and gazed about her in bewilderment. Almost immediately, however, she realized that she had swooned and a full sense of her father's terrible though considerably made revelation returned to her. She buried her face in her hands, quivered from head to foot, and then the glistening drops trickling through her fingers told that the tears had at last come to calm her. Valentine bent over her, gently stroking her raven hair and endeavoring in a womanly way to soothe her, while the Count and Maximilian looked on with anxious countenances, waiting for Mme. Morrel's touch and influence to do their work.

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Suddenly Zuleika removed her hands from her tear-bathed visage, straightened herself up in the fauteuil and, fixing her glance on Monte-Cristo, said, in a low, faint and gasping tone that betrayed the depth, the intensity, of her emotion:

"Father, you spoke of finding Giovanni! Has he disappeared?"

The Count compressed his lips, hesitating to reply. He wished to keep back as much of the dread truth as possible. He feared the effect upon his daughter of the startling announcement that young Massetti was wandering about amid the ruins of the Colosseum like a second King Lear on the blasted heath. But Maximilian came quickly to his aid.

"There is no need to find the Viscount," he said. "He has already been found and is at present under treatment in a suitable institution, where he is both comfortable and contented."

Zuleika cast a grateful look at M. and Mme. Morrel. Monte-Cristo seized Maximilian's hand and pressed it warmly.

"You have done this, my friend," said he, his countenance brightening, "and I thank you for it!"

"Do not thank me," replied the husband, gazing fondly and admiringly at his wife; "thank Valentine, for she it was who formed the plan and successfully carried it into execution!"

Mme. Morrel cast down her eyes and a heightened color overspread her charming face.

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"You are an angel, Valentine!" exclaimed Monte-Cristo, enthusiastically. "Maximilian said awhile ago that no success of any moment had as yet crowned your united efforts, but his statement was too modest. Your success has been conspicuous; you have taken the first step that I designed making and simplified my task to a marked degree. I am deeply indebted to you both."

M. and Mme. Morrel lifted their hands and shook their heads in protest.

"The debt is all on our side," said Maximilian, deprecatingly, "and no matter what we may do we can never discharge it. We owe you the happiness of our lives!"

Monte-Cristo turned the conversation; he took but little credit to himself for the benefits he had conferred upon his fellow-creatures, considering that every good action on his part went towards atoning for the terrible catastrophes he had caused in the prosecution of his relentless vengeance against his old-time enemies.

"Tell me," said he, addressing M. Morrel, "what is the Viscount's present condition. Is he recovering?"

Maximilian looked hastily in the direction of Zuleika; the poor girl was intently watching him, eagerly waiting for his answer. His voice was somewhat unsteady as he replied:

"Ever since he was placed in the institution of which I told you he has received the closest and most skilful care, but his progress is very slow, almost imperceptible, though the physician who is ministering to him has never ceased to assure us that he will ultimately regain the full possession of his health and senses."

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"Oh! take me to him, take me to him at once!" cried Zuleika, starting to her feet. "My place is by his side! I will nurse him, I will cure him!"

Monte-Cristo glanced at Maximilian, who shook his head negatively and whispered in the Count's ear:

"It will never do to take her to him now; the shock of seeing him would be too great! He would not even recognize her—he recognizes no one!"

Zuleika divined enough of what was passing to realize that Maximilian opposed her wishes, was striving to prevent her from going to her lover, from ministering to his wants. She sprang to her father, clasped her arms about his neck, and, looking pitifully and pleadingly into his face, exclaimed:

"Oh! take me to Giovanni, take me to him! Do not deny your loving, dutiful daughter's most earnest prayer! Do not deny it, oh! my beloved father, do not deny it!"

Monte-Cristo was touched to the very depths of his soul; M. and Mme. Morrel were equally affected. The Count, however, instantly decided what was to be done. Tenderly, compassionately, embracing his daughter, he said to her, in a soothing voice:

"My child, for the present it is best that you do not go to Giovanni. I will see him for you and without delay put a plan in operation that I do not doubt will result in his speedy cure. I know a wondrous physician whose skill is so great that he can almost restore the dead to life. He belongs to the despised race of Jews, but is as good as well as a marvellous man. His name is Dr. Israel Absalom and he resides here in Rome, within the walls of the shunned and execrated Ghetto, near the Capitoline Mount. I will go to him at once and take him to young Massetti. My daughter, rest assured that this learned Hebrew will work another miracle and give your lover back to you and in all the glory of his mind and manhood! Be content, therefore, to remain where you are for a brief period, with our devoted friend Valentine as your companion and comforter."

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"Yes, Zuleika," said Mme. Morrel, persuasively, "be content to remain with me. I will not quit you even for an instant. We will talk of Giovanni, of the happiness and joy the future has in store for both of you, and, believe me, the hours will pass on rapid wings!"

As Valentine spoke she gently disengaged the girl from her father's neck and passed her arm lovingly around her slender waist. Zuleika's head sank upon her friend's shoulder.

"I yield to my father's solicitations and to your own, Valentine," she said, submissively. "You are older and wiser than I am and what you say is without doubt for the best. I will remain and trust to the wondrous physician."

"I have heard a great deal of this Dr. Absalom since I have been in Rome," said M. Morrel, addressing Monte-Cristo. "The common people regard him as a magician and the higher classes as a cunning charlatan, but, if his legitimate scientific skill is generally denied, his brilliant and marvellous success, even in cases that the best Roman physicians have abandoned as hopeless, is universally admitted."

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"Dr. Absalom is neither a magician nor a charlatan," answered Monte-Cristo, warmly, "but a physician of the utmost experience and of the highest possible attainments. He is bent beneath the weight of years and arduous study, yet his eye is as keen and his perception as acute as if he were a youth of twenty. No man knows either his age or his history. I met him long ago in Athens, where I had the good fortune to rescue him from the clutches of a howling mob of ruffians who had seized upon him and were about to slay him as a sorcerer because he had taken into his hut and cured of the plague a wretched Greek who had been cast into the streets to die! For my sake he will save Giovanni!"

"But," said Maximilian, as a sudden thought occurred to him and filled him with dismay, "Dr. Absalom can practise outside of the Ghetto only by stealth and at the risk of being thrown into prison! He will not be allowed to visit the Viscount Massetti!"

The Count of Monte-Cristo drew himself up proudly and his peculiar smile passed over his countenance.

"I will take care of that!" he said, impressively.

Zuleika was left with Mme. Morrel, and, accompanied by Maximilian, Monte-Cristo at once started for the Ghetto.

CHAPTER XXII.

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THE WONDROUS PHYSICIAN.

A brisk walk of half an hour brought the Count and his companion to one of the two gates in the wall of the Ghetto or Jews' quarter of Rome. Monte-Cristo knocked at a wicket and a policeman immediately appeared. He was a young man and wore a military dress. His coat was buttoned to the throat, a yellow cord and tassel gracefully looped over the breast. His hands were encased in white cotton gloves, a helmet adorned with brass was upon his head and at his side hung a sword, while on the collar of his coat the number of his regiment shone in gilt figures. The man's bearing was soldierly and he had evidently seen service in the field. The Count addressed him in Italian, informing him that he and M. Morrel desired to visit the Ghetto, at the same time exhibiting their passports. After examining the papers and seeing that they were in proper form the policeman opened the gate and the visitors entered the crowded and filthy precincts of the Jews' quarter.

"Mon Dieu! what vile odors!" exclaimed M. Morrel, placing his handkerchief saturated with cologne to his nose, as they hurried through the narrow, garbage-encumbered lanes.

"The atmosphere is not like that of a perfumer's shop!" replied the Count, laughing. "But it seems to suit the children of Israel, for they thrive and multiply in it as the sparrows in the pure air and green fields of England!"

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"I pity them!" said Maximilian.

"Tastes differ," returned Monte-Cristo, philosophically. "I will wager that in this whole quarter we could not find a single Jew who would eat a partridge in that state of partial decay in which a Frenchman deems it most palatable!"

"What a strange, uncouth place this is," said M. Morrel, after a brief silence. "It seems like some city of the far orient. No one, suddenly transported here, would ever imagine that he was in the heart of Rome."

"It closely resembles the Judengasse at Frankfort-on-the-Main," replied the Count, "and is quite as ancient though much larger. But the Germans are more progressive and liberal than the Romans, for the gates that closed the Judengasse were removed in 1806, while those of the Ghetto still remain and are, as you have seen, in charge of the police, who subject every person entering or quitting the place to the closest scrutiny. Even as far back as the 17th century the gates of the Judengasse were shut and locked only at nightfall, after which no Jew could venture into any other part of Frankfort without incurring a heavy penalty if caught, whereas here at the present time, in this age of enlightenment and religious toleration, the gates of the Ghetto are kept closed day and night, and the poor Israelites, victims of bigotry and unreasoning prejudice, are treated worse than the pariahs in Hindoostan! Rome is the Eternal City and verily its faults are as eternal as itself!"

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Monte-Cristo had evidently visited the Ghetto before, as he seemed thoroughly familiar with its crooked lanes and obscure byways, pursuing his course without hesitation or pause for inquiry. It apparently contained no new sights or surprises for him. To M. Morrel, on the contrary, who now was within its walls for the first time, it presented an unending series of wonders. The buildings particularly impressed him. They looked as if erected away back in remote antiquity, and were curiously quaint combinations of wood and stone, exceedingly picturesque in appearance. Most of them were not more than eight or ten feet wide and towered to a height of four stories, resembling dwarfed steeples rather than houses. Not a new or modern edifice was to be seen in any direction. Many of the buildings were in a ruinous condition and some seemed actually about to crumble to pieces, while here and there great piles of shapeless rubbish marked the spots where others had fallen. As they were passing one of these piles, much larger than the rest, Maximilian called Monte-Cristo's attention to it. The Count glanced at it and said:

"That was once the dwelling of old Isaac Nabal, known to his people as Isaac the Moneylender, but styled by the Romans Isaac the Usurer. He was enormously rich and loaned his gold at exorbitant rates to the extravagant and impecunious Roman nobles. Isaac was wifeless and childless, but so eager for gain was he that he kept his house constantly filled with lodgers. The house was perhaps the oldest in all the Ghetto. Strange noises were heard in it every night occasioned by the falling of plaster or partition walls. It was no uncommon thing for a lodger to be suddenly roused from his sleep by a crash and find himself bruised and bleeding. Still old Isaac sturdily refused to make repairs. He asserted that the rickety edifice would last as long as he did, and he was not wrong, for one night it came down bodily about his ears and he perished amid the ruins together with thirty others, all who were in the aged rookery at the time. This catastrophe happened twenty years ago."

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"Do the houses often fall here?" asked M. Morrel, glancing uneasily around him at the dilapidated buildings.

"Very often," answered the Count. "Age and decay will bring them all down sooner or later."

"Then for Heaven's sake let us hasten lest we be crushed beneath some sudden wreck!" said Maximilian. "The houses project over the street at the upper stories until they almost join each other in mid air. If one should fall there would be no escape!"

"Have no fear, Maximilian!" replied Monte-Cristo, smiling. "A famous astrologer once assured me that I bore a charmed life, and if I escape you will also!"

The ground floors of the houses were for the most part occupied as shops of various kinds and the upper portions used as dwellings. Jewish merchants stood at the doors of the shops and Jewish women, some of them very beautiful, were occasionally seen at the upper windows. The streets were thronged with pedestrians of both sexes and here and there groups of chubby, black-haired children were at play.

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Maximilian was amazed to notice that most of the men they met took off their hats to Monte-Cristo and that some of them saluted him by name.

"You appear to be pretty well known to the Israelites," said he, at length.

"Yes," answered the Count, "many of them know me. I have had frequent occasion to consult with them on matters of importance. They are a shrewd and trusty people."

By this time Monte-Cristo and M. Morrel had reached a lane narrower and darker than any they had yet traversed. Into this the Count turned and after he had taken his companion a short distance stopped in front of a dingy but well-preserved building. It differed from its neighbors in having no shop on the ground floor and in being tightly closed from bottom to top. It looked as if it were uninhabited.

"We have reached our destination," said Monte-Cristo. "This is the residence of Dr. Absalom."

Maximilian stared at him in astonishment.

"The house is deserted," said he. "Are you not mistaken?"

"No. This is the place."

"I fear then that the physician has left it and perhaps also the Ghetto."

Monte-Cristo smiled.

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"You do not know him," he said. "His habits and manner of living are very peculiar. Prepare to be greatly surprised!"

Thus speaking he went to the door of the tightly-closed dwelling and struck five loud raps upon it, three very quickly and two very slowly delivered. The sounds seemed to reverberate through the house as if it were not only uninhabited but also unfurnished. Several minutes elapsed but no response was heard to Monte-Cristo's signal, no one came in obedience to his summons. The Count held his watch in his hand and his eyes were riveted upon the dial.

M. Morrel grew slightly impatient; he said to his companion, triumphantly:

"I told you that the house was deserted and I was right!"

The Count smiled again, but made no reply, still keeping his eyes fixed on the dial of his watch.

"Ten minutes!" said he, and he repeated his signal, but this time struck only three rapid blows. As before no answer was returned.

Maximilian was much interested and not a little amused, the Count's proceedings were so singular.

"Fifteen minutes!" said Monte-Cristo at length, putting up his watch and giving one long, resounding rap upon the door.

The effect was instantaneous. The portal swung open through some unseen influence, as if by magic, disclosing a long, bare, gloomy corridor, but not a sign of human life was visible.

M. Morrel's interest and amusement changed to wonder and amazement; he was thoroughly mystified and bewildered.

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"The common people of Rome are not very far astray in their estimate of this Dr. Absalom!" he muttered. "This certainly looks as if the man were a magician!"

"Pshaw!" returned Monte-Cristo, with a display of impatience he rarely exhibited. "The learned Hebrew is compelled to take his precautions; that is all. Follow me, and no matter what you may see or hear, if you wish our enterprise to be crowned with success utter not a word, not a sound, until I give you permission!"

The Count entered the corridor, followed by his perplexed and astounded friend. Immediately the door closed noiselessly behind them and they found themselves amid thick darkness. Monte-Cristo took M. Morrel by the hand, leading him forward until their progress was completely barred by what appeared to be the end of the corridor. Here the Count paused and said some words in Hebrew. A faint response came promptly from beyond the corridor in the same language, and immediately the light of a lamp flashed upon the visitors. A door had opened and on the threshold stood the strangest looking specimen of humanity Maximilian had ever beheld. The new comer was a very aged man, with stooped shoulders, a long white beard that reached to his waist and a profusion of snowy hair that escaped from beneath a cap of purple velvet at the side of which hung a bright crimson tassel. He wore a long Persian caftan of pink satin, profusely and beautifully embroidered with gold, full oriental trousers of red velvet and elaborately adorned slippers of tiger skin. On his long, bony fingers sparkled several diamond rings undoubtedly of immense value and a cluster of brilliant emeralds magnificently set in gold adorned his breast. This singular vision of eastern luxury, wealth and sumptuousness held the lamp, which was of wrought bronze and resembled those found among the ruins of ancient Pompeii, above his head and by its light Maximilian could see that his eyes were keen and piercing and that his countenance betokened the highest intellectuality.

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"Who is it that thus summons the sage from his meditations?" asked the old man, in a remarkably youthful voice. This time he spoke in Italian.

"One who served you in the past, oh! Dr. Absalom," replied Monte-Cristo, also using the language of Italy, "and who now solicits a service of you in return. Remember the mob of Athens and the Frank who interposed to save you from destruction!"

The old man lowered his lamp and held it close to his famous visitor's face; then he joyfully exclaimed:

"Welcome, Edmond Dantès, Count of Monte-Cristo! Welcome to the abode of your devoted servant Israel Absalom! Whatever he can do to serve you shall be done, no matter at what cost!"

Then, for the first time, he observed that the Count was not alone and fixed his keen eyes on M. Morrel with a look of suspicion and inquiry.

"One of my dearest friends, M. Maximilian Morrel, Captain in the Army of France," said Monte-Cristo, in answer to this look. "You can have as full confidence in him as in me."

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Dr. Absalom bowed profoundly to M. Morrel, and without another word led the way to an inner apartment. It was a vast chamber, closed like the front of the house, brilliantly illuminated by a huge chandelier suspended from the ceiling in which burned twenty wax candles of various hues. The room was provided with all the apparatus and paraphernalia of a chemist's laboratory of modern days, also containing many strange instruments and machines such as aided the researches and labors of the old-time disciples of alchemy.

In the centre of the apartment stood a vast table covered with gigantic parchment-bound tomes and rolls of yellow manuscript. Behind this table was a huge, high-backed chair of elaborate antique workmanship resembling the throne of some Asiatic sovereign of the remote past. In this chair the physician seated himself after having installed his visitors each upon a commodious and comfortable Turkish divan.

Maximilian noticed that the floor of the room was covered with soft and elegant Persian rugs and that the walls were hung with exquisitely beautiful tapestry. Monte-Cristo had warned him to prepare to be greatly surprised, but Dr. Absalom's lavish display of wealth, luxury and taste in the midst of the filthy, dilapidated Ghetto, nevertheless, absolutely stunned him. The Count had also cautioned him not to speak without his permission—a useless injunction, for the young Frenchman was too much amazed to utter a syllable.

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After seating himself the Hebrew sage, who seemed to be a man of business as well as of science, requested the Count to state in what he could serve him. Thereupon Monte-Cristo succinctly related the history of the Viscount Massetti, told of his mental malady, his confinement in the insane asylum and ended by asking the physician if he could and would cure him.

"I have already heard somewhat of this unfortunate young man," replied Dr. Absalom, "and the fact of his insanity was also imparted to me, but before expressing an opinion as to what my science can do in his case, I must have the particulars."

The Count motioned to M. Morrel, who, having by this time partially recovered from his bewilderment, at once proceeded to give the aged Hebrew the information he required. When he had concluded Dr. Absalom said, in a quiet, confident tone:

"Count of Monte-Cristo, the case is plain. I can and will cure this stricken young Italian!"

"I was sure of it!" cried the Count, joyously and triumphantly. M. Morrel was not less delighted, but, at the same time, he could not feel as confident as his friend of the Jew's ability to perform his promise.

The physician spoke a few words in Hebrew to Monte-Cristo. The reply of the latter seemed to give him entire satisfaction, for he said in Italian:

"In that event there will be no opposition from either the authorities of Rome or those of the insane asylum. I will be at the asylum at noon to-morrow, fully prepared to restore Massetti to health and reason!"

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The Count and Maximilian arose and bidding the sage adieu were conducted by him to the corridor. They were soon in the street and made their way out of the Ghetto as speedily as possible.

CHAPTER XXIII.

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A MODERN MIRACLE.

Monte-Cristo, whose power and influence seemed to be absolutely boundless, presented himself on the following morning at the insane asylum where the Viscount Massetti was under treatment armed with a permit from the Papal Secretary of State, Cardinal Monti, for the Hebrew physician, Dr. Israel Absalom, to assume charge of the case of the noble patient. The director of the institution shrugged his shoulders when this permit was exhibited to him by M. Morrel, who had accompanied the Count for the purpose of introducing him to that official.

"Messieurs," said he, in very good French, "I am bound to respect this paper, but I solemnly protest against trusting the patient to this Hebrew charlatan and wash my hands of all responsibility in the premises!"

"M. the director," replied Monte-Cristo, in a dignified tone, "notwithstanding the repeated assertion of your physician who has been in charge of young Massetti ever since his arrival here that his malady was entirely curable, he has made but little if any progress with the sufferer, who to-day is still insane. Dr. Absalom, even though he be a charlatan as you maintain, but which, if you will pardon me, I must decline to admit, could not make a more conspicuous and complete failure!"

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"M. the Count," said the director, coldly, evidently not relishing Monte-Cristo's bluntness, "all that the most advanced science can do has been done. Insanity is a disease slow and difficult of cure; time is required to produce results and it will be fully a year before the Viscount can, even under the most favorable circumstances, be thoroughly restored."

"Your experience entitles your opinion to respect," returned the Count, with equal coldness, "but still I cannot accept that opinion as final."

"As you please," said the official, haughtily. "After your Jewish physician, if he really be such, has vainly administered his nostrums and ineffectually mumbled his incantations, you will be glad enough to have the regular practitioner of the asylum resume the functions of which you now see fit so summarily to deprive him."

"Perhaps," answered the Count, smiling. "It is part of my creed never to despise science in whatever form it may come!"

The director bowed with satirical politeness.

At noon precisely Dr. Absalom arrived. He had discarded his gaudy and fantastic attire of the previous day and appeared in the ordinary street dress of a European. If he had seemed imposing to Maximilian at his house in the Ghetto, he looked still more imposing to him now, shorn as he was of all oriental accessories and depending for effect upon the wondrous intellectual aspect of his countenance alone. The only article of luxury he had about him was a massive gold-headed cane on which his years caused him to lean heavily. [Pg 287]

Monte-Cristo and M. Morrel received him with the utmost courtesy and deference, but the director hardly noticed him and with difficulty concealed his disgust. The Hebrew sage, however, was used to the uncivil manner in which the Italians treated the people of his nation and showed not the faintest sign of displeasure, though the Count and Maximilian could scarcely restrain themselves from resenting the official's insulting behavior.

Without delay Dr. Absalom was conducted to young Massetti's chamber by the physician who up to that time had attended the patient. He was an elderly man, but though an Italian showed marked respect for the aged, noble-looking Hebrew. Monte-Cristo and M. Morrel accompanied the two savants, the former confident in Dr. Absalom's power to perform his promise, the latter hoping for his success, yet doubtful of it.

As the party entered the apartment of the maniac the Italian physician said to his Jewish confrère:

"Dr. Absalom, I would very much like to witness your mode of treatment. Will you kindly permit me to remain in the room?"

"Certainly," replied the Hebrew. "I have nothing whatever to conceal; but," he added, with twinkling eyes, "I warn you in advance that you will be no wiser after you have witnessed my operations and their result than you are at present!"

The Viscount was sitting in a large arm-chair, his face buried in his hands. At the entrance of the four men he murmured, without looking up: [Pg 288]

"Why has the beautiful vision left me? Why does the divine Juno deny me the light of her presence?"

Dr. Absalom glanced inquiringly at his companions.

"He means Valentine, my wife," explained Maximilian. "She resorted to a pardonable little artifice to lure him hither."

"Let her be sent for at once," said the Hebrew. "I shall have need of her."

"But," objected Monte-Cristo, "Mme. Morrel is taking charge of my daughter, this poor young man's betrothed, who is terribly cast down by her lover's fearful misfortune and cannot be left alone."

"His betrothed!" exclaimed Dr. Absalom. "Better and better! Let her also be brought! I shall have need of her too!"

"You shall be obeyed, Doctor," said Monte-Cristo, and M. Morrel was at once dispatched to the Hôtel de France with instructions to return immediately with his wife and Zuleika.

When they had arrived and their presence in an adjoining apartment was announced to Dr. Absalom by Maximilian, the Hebrew said:

"M. Morrel, kindly conduct your wife hither, and you, M. the Count, go to your daughter and remain with her until I summon you. Tell the poor child to be of good cheer! that her lover shall be restored to her!"

Monte-Cristo quitted the chamber, followed by Maximilian, who instantly came back with Valentine.

"Mme. Morrel," said the Jewish physician, "go to the patient and take his hand." [Pg 289]

Valentine did as directed. At her touch the Viscount started up, exclaiming, in tones of the utmost delight:

"Divine Juno, pardon me! I have wronged you! I thought you had deserted me, but I was in error, for you are here!"

He fixed his eyes upon her, gazing at her like one entranced, paying no heed whatever to the others in the apartment. Valentine glanced at Dr. Absalom, who slowly left his place, gliding stealthily to Massetti's side. Erecting himself to his full height, he extended his hands above Giovanni's head; almost instantly the demented man sank back into his chair as if pressed down by some colossal, some irresistible force; then he closed his eyes, falling into a calm, peaceful slumber. Valentine, released from his clasp, stood looking on, lost in speechless wonder. Maximilian was also amazed at this prompt exhibition of the Hebrew's power, but the Italian physician, who had been intently watching, whispered in his ear:

"The Jew is a mesmerist; that is all; at least, all that has been developed so far!"

Meanwhile Dr. Absalom continued to hold his hands above the patient's head that drooped more and more until it finally sank upon his breast. For a moment longer the Hebrew maintained his position; then he withdrew his hands, taking a small vial from the pocket of his coat and uncorking it; immediately a powerful and subtle odor pervaded the apartment, causing Valentine, Maximilian and the Italian physician to breathe painfully, as if stifling.

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"What is it?" gasped M. Morrel, catching the Italian by the arm.

"I do not know," answered the latter. "But look at Massetti—his face is violet, the preliminary hue of death! If the Jew kills the patient nothing can save him from the fury of the Roman populace!"

The subtle odor increased in intensity and the Viscount's face changed from violet to an ashen paleness.

"He is dead!" cried the Italian. "Dr. Absalom, you are a murderer!"

The Hebrew waved his hand commandingly and, with a look of the utmost dignity and sternness, said:

"Be silent and wait!"

He corked the vial, replaced it in his pocket and opened a window. The fresh air flooded the place and gradually the oppressive odor vanished.

The patient was yet of a ghastly pallor. Dr. Absalom felt his pulse, counting the beats by his watch. A smile of satisfaction overspread his intellectual countenance.

"The remedy has done its work!" he said. "Now for the second and vital application! Whatever may happen," he added, impressively, turning to the Italian physician, "I charge you on your life not to interfere or interrupt me!"

Producing another vial, larger than the first, he held it aloft and shook it, examining its contents with the closest scrutiny. The deeply interested and somewhat awed observers saw a bright green fluid flash in the sunlight. Satisfied with his examination, the Hebrew uncorked the vial; then, opening the patient's mouth, he poured the emerald liquid gradually down his throat, drop by drop. For some seconds after this no change in Massetti was perceptible. He still sat sleeping in his chair with his head bowed, and the ghastly hue of his visage remained unaltered. Dr. Absalom had again drawn his watch from his fob, dividing his attention between noting the flight of time and intently observing the patient. So profound was the silence in the room that the regular tick of the watch was distinctly audible in all parts of it.

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Suddenly Giovanni began to quiver. A violent convulsion followed, shaking him from head to foot and fearfully contorting his face, his hands curling up like a strip of paper that has been scraped with a knife. His condition was frightful to behold. Maximilian and the Italian looked on anxiously, holding their breath. Valentine unable to bear the sight turned away, emotion and terror contending within her for the mastery. The Hebrew, however, was all nerve and confidence. When a quarter of an hour had elapsed he put up his watch. Massetti's convulsion had passed away, his hands had uncurled and his unearthly pallor had been succeeded by a faint flush. He reclined in his chair as if wrapped in a healthful slumber. Presently his lips parted.

"Zuleika!" he murmured. "Oh! my beloved!"

Dr. Absalom glanced at the Italian physician significantly, triumphantly.

"The patient is dreaming," he said, "and it is a good sign—he is dreaming of his betrothed whom in his insanity he had entirely forgotten—another good sign! My treatment is working! I shall succeed!" Turning to Maximilian, he added: "Aid me to place the Viscount upon his bed, if you please."

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M. Morrel complied with alacrity and Massetti was immediately extended on his couch in a comfortable position. Dr. Absalom again felt his pulse, counting it as before by his watch; then he said:

"The patient may now awake at any time, but it is probable that fifteen minutes will first elapse. Let the Count and his daughter be summoned."

Maximilian opened the door and beckoned without. Monte-Cristo and Zuleika entered.

"My child," said the Hebrew, taking the latter by the hand and leading her to her lover's bedside, "look upon your betrothed! He is sleeping peacefully and dreaming of you! Awhile ago he uttered your name! Courage, daughter, courage! The worst is over! The clouds are sweeping from the

young man's mind to leave it clear and perfect! Remain here where I place you! It is important that upon awaking the patient's eyes shall rest on you!"

Zuleika, astounded, bewildered, gazed at her lover and with difficulty resisted the impulse to cast herself upon his neck.

Monte-Cristo, Maximilian, Valentine and the Italian physician grouped themselves a short distance away, waiting and watching. Their eagerness and anxiety were intense.

Five minutes, ten minutes passed, then fifteen. As Dr. Absalom's watch told the quarter of an hour, the Viscount all at once opened his eyes. They rested on Zuleika. The anxious interest of the spectators was now at the highest pitch. The Count, M. Morrel, Valentine and the Italian leaned forward breathlessly. Giovanni put his hand to his brow, uttered a low sigh and then sat up, gazing at Monte-Cristo's daughter in bewilderment. At last he spoke. [Pg 293]

"Zuleika, darling Zuleika!" he said, faintly, but very tenderly, at the same time extending his arms towards her. The girl glanced at Dr. Absalom. He pointed to Giovanni and smiled. She instantly comprehended his permission and threw herself into her lover's embrace.

"Giovanni, dear Giovanni," she murmured, "you are yourself again, are you not?"

"Myself, Zuleika? Have I ever been otherwise?"

"You have been very ill, Giovanni."

"Ah! yes. That is the reason I am here." Glancing around him he added: "There is your father, too, but who are those strangers with him?"

"The physicians, and two of our most devoted friends, M. Morrel and his wife."

The Viscount sank back upon the couch and took Zuleika's hand in his, clasping it warmly.

"I feel faint and feeble," he said, "oh! so very faint and feeble, but a terrible, crushing weight seems to have been removed from my brain!"

He spoke rationally. Dr. Absalom had worked a modern miracle—the young man's reason was fully restored!

The Count and Maximilian exchanged glances of delight. Valentine's eyes were wet with tears of joy. As for Zuleika, her cup of happiness was full. Dr. Absalom smiled placidly. The Italian physician advanced and took him by the hand. [Pg 294]

"I congratulate you," said he, cordially. "Your skill is simply amazing!"

The Hebrew bowed profoundly.

"Doctor," said he, "I have fulfilled my promise and my portion of the work is done. The rest remains for you to accomplish. You must resume charge of the patient and restore his strength."

With these words the old savant resumed his hat, saluted all present and, leaning heavily upon his gold-headed cane, passed slowly from the apartment.

Monte-Cristo followed him, enthusiastically expressing his gratitude; taking from his pocket a huge roll of bank-bills, he offered it to the Hebrew, but the latter firmly refused to accept.

"I remember the Athenian mob, M. the Count!" said he, impressively.

As they passed the director's office, that official came out.

"Well?" said he to Monte-Cristo. "The Jew has failed, of course!"

"He has succeeded!" replied the Count, with a smile of triumph.

"You do not mean to tell me that the patient is restored to reason!" exclaimed the director.

"That is exactly what I do mean to tell you!" retorted Monte-Cristo, sharply.

"Humph! there is some cunning trick about this!" cried the official, returning to his office and abruptly closing the door behind him. [Pg 295]

The Italian physician resumed charge of the Viscount Massetti, Zuleika and Valentine nursing him by turns. In two weeks the young man quitted the asylum as fully restored in body as he was in mind.

CHAPTER XXIV.

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A DESPERATE ENCOUNTER.

When the Viscount Massetti quitted the insane asylum, Monte-Cristo provided quarters for him at the Hôtel de France where he could be near both himself and his daughter. During the period of the young Italian's convalescence the Count had refrained from communicating to him the details

of the foul conspiracy disclosed by Peppino, but no sooner was Zuleika's betrothed installed in the hôtel than he gave him all the startling particulars. Massetti was not astonished, for he had long suspected a portion at least of the truth, but his indignation against old Pasquale Solara knew no bounds, and inwardly he swore to take speedy and complete vengeance upon him though the Count warned him to be exceedingly prudent and not to imperil the success of his operations in his behalf by any rash proceeding. Monte-Cristo did not inform the young Italian of his plans, distrusting his natural hot-headedness and impetuosity, but urged him to be content to leave the prosecution of the scheme of rehabilitation entirely in his hands. The Count had also instructed the Viscount that in consequence of Peppino's revelations he had no further objections to his union with Zuleika and that the marriage should take place immediately upon the full and open establishment of his innocence in the eyes of the world. At this the ardent young man was delighted to his heart's core; the certainty of his approaching happiness and the tenderness the girl exhibited for him compensated in a large degree for all his trials and tortures, but at the same time he was impatient of the necessary delay in restoring him to the possession of an unstained name and reputation, thinking that Monte-Cristo was much too careful and slow.

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He was now permitted to see Zuleika almost constantly and their love tête-à-têtes were of the most delicious and impassioned description. They passed hours together upon the vast upper balcony of the hôtel in the soft Italian dusk and moonlight evenings, discoursing those sweet and tender nothings so precious to lovers and so insipid to matter-of-fact people whose days of romantic attachment are over. Sometimes, however, their conversation was of a more practical character; they spoke of their projects for the future—where they should go on their bridal tour and what they should do before settling down to the calm, peaceful existence of placid matrimonial joy. They had decided to take up their permanent residence in Paris; thus they would always be near Monte-Cristo, Espérance and Mercédès, near Albert de Morcerf and his wife, near those friends of friends Maximilian and Valentine Morrel; besides in the gay French capital, the city of cities, while enjoying themselves to the utmost they could escape all allusions to Giovanni's past which they could not possibly hope for did they settle in Rome, where every time the youthful couple appeared in public the old scandal, the old charge against the Viscount would undoubtedly be freshly and perhaps venomously commented upon.

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Occasionally, when Zuleika was with her father or in company with Mme. Morrel, young Massetti would take long walks into the country for the purpose of breathing the free air and increasing his strength by means of healthful exercise. During these strolls he shunned every person he met, it being Monte-Cristo's desire that he should studiously avoid observation.

The news of Massetti's sudden and marvellous cure had spread throughout Rome, but people shook their heads when they talked of it and agreed with the opinion expressed by the director of the insane asylum that Dr. Absalom had made use of some trick, the influence of which could not be permanent, but would soon be dissipated, when the poor, deluded Viscount would instantly fall into a worse mental condition than before.

Undoubtedly the Count Massetti heard of his son's restoration to sanity and bodily health, but he paid no attention whatever to it, continuing proudly and haughtily to ignore the fact of Giovanni's existence. Monte-Cristo had not called upon the aged and inflexible nobleman for two reasons—he feared that his indignation would get the better of him in an interview and, besides, he knew it would be entirely useless to approach the Count without being armed with young Massetti's complete vindication.

During one of those strolls already alluded to the Viscount went much further than usual. It was a bright, balmy and cheerful morning, and the sun's gladdening radiance, the brilliant green of the trees, the fragrant odors from flowers and grass, the chirping of insect life and the wild, intoxicating songs of the birds all contributed to draw him on and to make him forget Monte-Cristo's injunctions as to keeping out of the sight of the passers-by.

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He scarcely noticed in what direction he walked or what road he took, indulging in a careless, delicious daydream full of dolce far niente delights. He had fixed his eyes upon the ground and was sauntering leisurely along when, all at once, he became conscious that some one was approaching. He hastily looked up. The pedestrian was yet some distance away, but his heavy shoes clattered upon the gravel of the highway with a ringing sound. He was evidently an old man and a peasant. In his right hand he held a staff and his large, broad-brimmed hat was drawn down slightly over his visage as if to protect it from the heat of the sun. Giovanni was about to step aside into a little grove of chestnut trees beside the road there to wait until the new comer had passed, but on taking a second glance at him something familiar in his aspect suddenly arrested him, and by one of those inexplicable impulses which sometimes take possession of a man he paused and waited.

The peasant had also noticed Giovanni and his action, but he did not relax his pace, did not seem inclined to pay even the slightest attention to him. He came tramping on, reached the Viscount and passed him without as much as a nod of the head in salutation. But Massetti with a start recognized him. With a flush of rage on his face and all his blood boiling in his veins, he turned, sprang after the old man and laid his hand upon his shoulder. The peasant abruptly halted, also turned, and a fierce imprecation escaped his lips. He surveyed the irate young Italian from head to foot, sneeringly, scowlingly.

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"Why, do you stop me?" he said, roughly. "I do not know you."

"But, Pasquale Solara, I know you!" exclaimed the Viscount. "We have met in good time and in a

fit place! The opportunity for which I have long and impatiently waited has at length arrived! You shall feel the crushing weight of my vengeance! You shall answer to me for your despicable, your unnatural crimes! Pasquale Solara, base wretch who sold your own daughter to a fate worse than death, ignoble scoundrel who did not respect the dictates of hospitality, I am Giovanni Massetti!"

As he spoke he leaped in front of the morose shepherd, barring his passage with his body.

"Well, what if you are Giovanni Massetti!" replied old Pasquale, coldly and defiantly. "I care not for you! Stand out of my path and let me pass before I strike you to the earth as I would a mongrel, yelping cur!"

With these words he raised his staff menacingly over the young Italian. The latter with the quickness and agility of a deer sprang at the staff, grasped it and sent it whirling into the chestnut grove. Then he caught old Solara by the throat and a terrible struggle at once began. The two men closed with each other as if in a death-clutch, wrestling like a couple of athletes. Massetti had not yet regained his full vigor, but his rage lent him strength. On his side, Pasquale, though old, had muscles of steel and a grasp like iron. He whirled his adversary round and round, at times almost overturning him, but the Viscount struggled manfully, occasionally wrenching the shepherd from his feet and lifting him bodily in the air. The breath of both came forth in hot, quick, labored gasps, while their faces were red with exertion. For a long while the result was doubtful, the strife continuing fiercely without any decided advantage on either side. Often the Viscount was borne nearly to the ground but he invariably recovered, straightened himself up and vigorously renewed the conflict. Not a word was uttered now. The concentrated energies of the contestants were bent upon the strife, depriving them of the power of speech. Finally by a rapid movement Giovanni succeeded in tripping Solara, who fell with a crash, the young Italian coming down upon his prostrate body with great force and for an instant almost checking his respiration. Both were partially stunned by the fall and lay motionless. Massetti was the first to regain possession of his faculties. He half arose, placed his knees on old Pasquale's breast and, drawing a pistol, cocked it.

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"What are you going to do?" gasped the under man, his terror giving him the power to speak.

"I am going to kill you, Pasquale Solara!" hissed the Viscount, between his set teeth.

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"Murderer!" shrieked the shepherd, desperately, making a frantic struggle to rise, but not succeeding.

This ominous word, with all the terrible weight of meaning it conveyed, struck upon the young Italian's ear like a sound of doom. A murderer? Yes, he would be a murderer, if he slew old Solara then and there, and branded with an assassin's dark crime he must forever resign all hope of possessing his beloved Zuleika, must abandon her to die of a broken heart! Perhaps, too, he would be seized, tried, condemned and meet a felon's fate upon the ignominious scaffold! True, Roman justice might be silenced with money, but he was a disowned and disinherited son, a penniless outcast! These thoughts brought him to a realization of the black depths of the yawning gulf into which he was about to plunge and made him hesitate. But a quick idea came to his relief—if he were to fight a duel with old Solara and kill him thus the Roman law would not pursue him, he would not be stamped with a murderer's crime! He would do it, he would fight him! Springing to his feet, he drew a second pistol, and, casting it upon the ground beside his astonished foe, said to him, speaking slowly and impressively:

"Pasquale Solara, I will give you a chance for your life! Rise, take that pistol and face me! We will fight!"

The shepherd arose with some difficulty; he was considerably bruised and had, besides, seriously strained one of his legs. Taking up the weapon, he cocked it and without a word, but with a look of demoniac ferocity and triumph upon his evil countenance, assumed a position about twenty paces distant from his opponent. Instantly both raised their pistols and fired. When the light smoke cleared away it became evident that neither of them had been hit. Old Solara cast his empty weapon from him with a curse and, producing a pair of long, keen-bladed knives, threw one of them towards the Viscount.

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"You challenged me and I accepted!" he said, in a harsh tone. "Now I challenge you! Take that knife and fight me!"

Massetti hesitated, with a look of horror upon his countenance. A duel with knives! It was barbarous! It was worthy of the red savages of the American wilds!

"Take the knife, I say!" thundered old Solara. "Take it and face me, or by the canopy of heaven I will show you less mercy than you have been weak enough to show me! I will stab you to the heart where you stand!"

He advanced with his murderous weapon in his outstretched hand, having previously rolled up his sleeve and bared his brown, sinewy arm.

Massetti stooped and took up the knife from where it lay. He also bared his arm, nervously grasping the hilt of the weapon.

Pasquale Solara's eyes gleamed like those of a tiger seen through the darkness of a Hindoostan jungle. They had a terrible, a bloodthirsty gleam. The shepherd now felt sure of his ground. With a pistol he was nothing, with a knife he was a power! Giovanni could not cope with him; he would

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fall an easy victim to his skill and cunning!

The Viscount watched the old scoundrel with feverish anxiety, fully realizing what was passing through his mind. That Pasquale would vanquish him, kill him, he could not doubt, for he knew no more about fighting with a knife than an infant in its cradle. However, his courage did not desert him, and he resolved to sell his life as dearly as possible.

Seeing Giovanni take the knife and prepare for the combat, Solara bent partially forward and rushed upon him. The long, keen blades met with a flash of fire. The young Italian confined himself to acting upon the defensive, the utmost activity and watchfulness being required on his part to parry and ward off his opponent's skilful and incessant thrusts. The shepherd fought with the bewildering rapidity of the lightning's flash and seemed to be in a thousand different places at once so swiftly did he advance, retreat and spring aside. His excitement made him forget his hurts.

At length Massetti's arm became so strained and fatigued that it was impossible for him to hold out much longer. His hand was tightly clutched about the haft of his knife, but it was so benumbed that he could not feel the weapon. Still with the energy and resolution of despair he continued the unequal conflict, hoping against hope that some unexpected turn of affairs might give him the advantage.

Meanwhile old Solara, fiendishly confident, was steadily and surely closing upon him, narrowing the limit of his retreat after each blow. Finally he retreated no more, but began pressing his adversary backwards towards the chestnut grove, the while delivering blow after blow. Then he suddenly gave his wrist a dextrous twirl and Giovanni's knife was torn from his grasp, falling about ten feet away. Instantly the young man was forced to the ground and old Pasquale stood over him with his legs wide apart, firmly planted to give the death-dealing thrust. As Massetti lay his eye caught the glimmer of his own knife beyond the shepherd and slipping like a serpent between Solara's legs he seized it, sprang to his feet and, before Pasquale could recover from his surprise at this unlooked-for manœuvre, buried the glittering blade in his breast. Solara reeled and fell upon the grass, where he lay bathed in blood.

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"You have escaped me, Viscount Massetti!" he groaned.

Young Massetti could scarcely realize what had happened, what he had done, so miraculous did the result of this strange duel appear to his bewildered mind.

As he stood like one in a dream he heard a sound as of many feet. Hastily dashing into the chestnut grove, he looked back and saw old Solara surrounded by a group of Luigi Vampa's men.

CHAPTER XXV.

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A VISIT TO THE REFUGE.

Among the details of the Count of Monte-Cristo's plan for the rehabilitation of Giovanni Massetti was a visit to Annunziata Solara at the Refuge in Civita Vecchia. This visit he made one morning in company with Zuleika and M. and Mme. Morrel. Madame de Rancogne was delighted to see the Count and cordially welcomed him and his party.

"So this handsome young lady is your daughter, Edmond," she said, seating herself beside Zuleika and taking her hand. "How rapidly time flies. To-day we are in the midst of the enjoyment of youth and to-morrow we are the middle-aged people of our locality. Then in another brief space we are the aged, after which comes death!"

Zuleika blushed at Helena's compliment to herself and looked at her curiously while she delivered the closing part of her speech. But the Countess of Monte-Cristo of the past was not of a sombre nature, and, smiling, she added:

"The most dazzling and enchanting side to the picture of youth is love! Has Zuleika, Count, ever experienced the tender passion? It will be exceedingly strange if she has not."

Monte-Cristo's daughter blushed again.

The Count smiled as he replied:

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"Yes, Helena, Zuleika has experienced the crowning passion of life. She is betrothed to the Viscount Giovanni Massetti of Rome."

"What!" exclaimed Mme. de Rancogne, stricken with amazement and horror. "That Giovanni Massetti who has been disowned and disinherited by his father for the commission of one of the vilest and most dishonorable crimes known to the world?"

"The same!" answered Monte-Cristo, calmly.

Mme. de Rancogne was now more astounded than ever.

"You know this man's record and yet you allow him to win your daughter! Count, this is not like you! I cannot understand it!"

"Helena," returned Monte-Cristo, "this poor young man has been maligned, falsely accused by persons inimical to him."

The Superior of the Order of Sisters of Refuge slowly but firmly shook her head, looking the while at the Count and his daughter with an expression of deep sympathy and compassion upon her noble countenance.

"You have been deceived, imposed upon, Edmond," she rejoined. "There can be no doubt whatever as to the young man's terrible and damning guilt. Besides, my assertion admits of immediate verification and proof. Massetti's unfortunate victim, the beautiful peasant girl Annunziata Solara, is now an inmate of this institution whither she dragged herself when overcome by shame and suffering of the keenest description, seeking to find here an asylum and a cloister where prying eyes could not find her out and where the venomous tongue of scandal could not tear open her wounds and set them to bleeding afresh. She is a member of our Order, has devoted the rest of her days to the achievement of good actions and the raising up of the fallen and betrayed of her sex. Annunziata Solara is here, almost within sound of my voice, and will, though with reluctance I am convinced, confirm every word I have uttered relative to her cowardly and villainous abductor!"

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"To hold an interview with this unfortunate creature is what has brought me here with Zuleika and my friends the Morrels," said the Count. "Of course, I wished to see you, Helena, and enjoy once again the pleasure of your society," he added, his agreeable smile accompanying his words.

The Superior bowed gracefully and arose.

"I can understand then your anxiety to see and speak with Annunziata at the earliest possible moment. Therefore, I will immediately summon her to this apartment where the desired interview can take place without delay."

As she uttered these words Mme. de Rancogne hastened from the salon, shortly afterwards returning with the former flower-girl of the Piazza del Popolo in Rome.

Annunziata stood for an instant in the centre of the apartment, gazing inquiringly at the visitors, for Mme. de Rancogne had not informed her of their business, preferring that Monte-Cristo in his wisdom and experience should conduct the interview and develop his wishes in his own peculiar fashion.

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The Count and Maximilian gazed at old Pasquale Solara's daughter with considerable interest, but it was an interest altogether masculine. Valentine also looked at her attentively, with that searching, penetrating look one woman invariably casts upon another. As for Zuleika, her eyes literally devoured the peasant girl, flashing with what was not exactly hatred for a rival but rather an instinctive fear and distrust. She was well aware that Giovanni had flirted with this girl, had been enthralled by her physical charms, had almost yielded to her sway, and she felt a peculiar interest in the creature who had temporarily at least stolen the heart of her lover from her.

Annunziata had been greatly benefited by her sojourn in the calm and quiet Refuge. She had by a great and heroic exercise of her strength of mind put aside from her all thoughts of her lamentable history, of her suddenly clouded and terrible past. She had thoroughly abandoned herself to the discipline and duties of the Sisters of the Order of Refuge, and had sought with more or less success even to forget herself. Her unruffled life, passed in the continual doing of good, filled her with peacefulness and satisfaction, and for the first time in a long while she fully realized what it was to be perfectly contented and happy. In consequence her physical condition had improved, promptly responding to her mental ease. She had recovered the beauty she had lost during her confinement in the bandits' hut and her subsequent wanderings as a homeless, starving outcast. Her plumpness had also returned, and her glance had all the brightness and gayety that had formerly distinguished it. Still a general refinement had taken possession of her, and Annunziata was no longer the child of nature she had been when she lived in the romantic cabin in the forest.

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Madame de Rancogne was the first to speak.

"Sister Annunziata," she said, "here are his Excellency the Count of Monte-Cristo, Zuleika his daughter, and M. and Mme. Morrel. Allow me to make you acquainted with them and to assure you that they are true friends of mine, firmly to be relied on. They wish to interrogate you in regard to a certain matter. You can answer their questions without fear and without the slightest hesitation. The Count of Monte-Cristo is the very soul of chivalry and honor!"

The Count bowed in acknowledgment of this well-turned speech and, addressing Annunziata, who, notwithstanding Mme. de Rancogne's assurances, began to tremble and feel distressed, said:

"Sister Annunziata, I wish to ask you certain important questions as your Superior has told you. I am pursuing an investigation that promises to be fruitful in the very best results of the highest possible good. Sister Annunziata, I wish your aid in clearing the record of an innocent man, one who has suffered as greatly as you have and for whom you can, therefore, feel pity and sympathy. I allude to the Viscount Giovanni Massetti."

The girl gave a sudden start and turned ghastly pale.

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"The Viscount Giovanni Massetti?" repeated she, interrogatively, half doubting whether she could have heard the name aright.

"Yes," said Monte-Cristo, "the Viscount Giovanni Massetti, who has been falsely accused of having abducted you!"

"Falsely accused!" cried Annunziata. "Why, Signor Count of Monte-Cristo, the wretched young man is guilty of everything with which he has been charged, whether the charges were made by persons inimical to him or not!"

The visitors were still closely watching the peasant girl. They had expected she would say exactly what she had said and, therefore, were not in the slightest degree astonished or disconcerted. Her earnestness and the circumstance that she certainly ought to know the identity of her abductor were well-calculated to inspire confidence in her statements and to induce a belief in the guilt of the young Viscount Massetti.

Monte-Cristo answered Annunziata firmly but considerately.

"Sister," he said, "notwithstanding your belief that Massetti was your abductor, I know the contrary to be true and have in my possession indubitable proof of what I assert!"

Annunziata shook her head.

"The proof must, indeed, be conclusive that would shake my belief!" she said, with a slight trace of bitterness in her tone.

"It is conclusive!"

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"But if young Massetti is innocent of my abduction and of my poor brother's murder, who then, in Heaven's name, is the guilty party?"

"Luigi Vampa!"

"Luigi Vampa?"

"Yes. He forced his way into your cabin on that eventful night, abducted you and afterwards shot your brother Lorenzo in the forest."

"You say you have indubitable proof of this. How was it obtained?"

"From a man named Peppino, who overheard all the details of the nefarious bargain and conspiracy entered into by the brigand chief and old Pasquale Solara."

"Pasquale Solara? My father! Oh! Signor Count, what do you mean?"

"Be calm, my child, and listen to me. Your father despicably sold you to Luigi Vampa for a large sum of money and they together so arranged the abduction that all suspicion would fall with crushing force upon the shoulders of the young Italian!"

Annunziata put her hand to her forehead and stood still, rooted to the spot by horror and amazement. She had no great love for her moody and morose father, who never had done anything calculated to inspire affection for him in the bosom of his daughter, but, at the same time, it seemed incredible and horrible to her that her parent should have been guilty of this unnatural behavior towards her, of this unmanly conduct with regard to an innocent guest who in all confidence was partaking of the hospitality his roof afforded. She looked at Monte-Cristo doubtingly and then at Mme. de Rancogne, who was smiling upon her encouragingly.

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"As God is my judge," said she, solemnly, "I believe Giovanni Massetti to have been my abductor!"

"Of course," returned Monte-Cristo, "but you are in error!"

"I saw his face! Surely I ought to have been able to recognize that!"

"Certainly; but, I tell you, everything was so arranged as to deceive you into believing the young Italian the criminal, the despicable wretch who had failed to respect a woman's honor!"

"It may be as you assert, but I cannot rid myself of my firm and deep-rooted belief in the matter. I have forgiven the Viscount Massetti for the foul wrong he did me, but to the latest day of my earthly existence I shall believe him guilty!"

Suddenly fixing her eyes upon Zuleika with a gaze of bewildering intensity, Annunziata stood as if anxious to speak to her of some very important topic.

Monte-Cristo's daughter divined this, and, going to the former flower-girl, said to her:

"Is there anything I can do for you, Sister Annunziata? If so you have only to ask it!"

Annunziata laid her hand upon Zuleika's shoulder, asking, in a tone that notwithstanding all her efforts to control it was not a little unsteady and tremulous:

"Do you love him?—do you love the Viscount Massetti?"

"Yes," answered Zuleika, lowering her eyes beneath the intensity of the other's look.

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"So I thought, but oh! daughter of a noble family, beware of the perfidious young man! He will

not hesitate to deceive you as he deceived me! Then he will leave you to your fate as he left me to mine, and life-long sorrow and misery will be your portion!"

Zuleika gazed pityingly at the peasant girl.

"You loved him once, did you not?" she asked.

"Perhaps I did, perhaps I did not!" replied Annunziata. "I do not know! Certainly my heart spoke for him, but that may have been only friendly esteem! However, after the abduction and the horrible and disgraceful events that followed it, I grew to hate him with the bitterest description of hate! I have told you that I have forgiven him and it was the truth. I have forgiven and am endeavoring to forget him!"

There was a suspicious glitter in the girl's eyes as she spoke, something that hinted of the presence of tears, but the glitter passed away and, turning to Mme. de Rancogne, she said:

"Are your guests through with questioning me, Madame the Superior?"

Mme. de Rancogne glanced inquiringly at Monte-Cristo, who nodded his head affirmatively.

"The interview is concluded," replied Helena, "and now, if you so desire, you can return to your apartment."

Annunziata, more affected and agitated by what she had just passed through than she cared to admit, bowed to the visitors and the Superior and hastily quitted the salon. [Pg 315]

"Poor girl! she remains perfectly unconvinced!" said Monte-Cristo, after her departure.

"And she is right!" rejoined Mme. de Rancogne, warmly. "I have heard all the details of her story and the chain of evidence against the Viscount Giovanni Massetti is altogether complete. To doubt his guilt would be sheer idiocy!"

After a sojourn of a few hours longer at the Refuge, Monte-Cristo and his party returned to Rome to go actively to work in Massetti's cause.

CHAPTER XXVI.

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VAMPA AND MONTE-CRISTO.

After his fearful and exhausting duel with old Pasquale Solara in which he had been so nearly vanquished and so signally favored by Fate, the Viscount Massetti dragged himself rather than ran through the chestnut grove by the roadside, pausing now and then to glance back through the trees and note what was taking place among Vampa's bandits. His wounded antagonist was evidently unconscious, for the brigands were bending over him, some of them seeming to be engaged in endeavors to restore him to his senses. Another circumstance tending to confirm this supposition was the absence of pursuit, for had the shepherd been able to give even the most fragmentary information relative to the encounter, Vampa's men would have immediately devoted their attention to a search for his successful assailant, and in Giovanni's present condition of exhaustion his capture could not have been doubtful.

The young Italian did not waste a moment, but made his way towards Rome as rapidly as he was able, though his progress was necessarily toilsome and painful in the extreme. Having at length reached the bank of a small brook at a safe distance from the scene of the conflict, he washed the dust and sweat from his face, and held his benumbed hand in the cool, limpid water until the blood resumed its normal circulation. Then he arranged his torn and disordered garments so as not to attract too much attention from the curious pedestrians he would be sure to meet on the outskirts of the city, resuming his journey strengthened and refreshed. Contrary to his expectations he eventually gained the Hôtel de France without exciting any special observation or comment. Once in his own apartment he carefully locked the door and, casting himself upon his bed, breathed freely for the first time since old Solara had fallen by his hand. [Pg 317]

His thoughts, however, were not altogether of a reassuring nature. He had taken an Italian's vengeance upon the despicable old Pasquale Solara, who certainly merited all he had received, but how would Monte-Cristo look at the affair when he learned of it as he most assuredly would when he began his campaign against Vampa, if not before? Undoubtedly with strong disapprobation and displeasure. The Count had cautioned him to keep out of sight, to restrain his impetuosity, and he had done neither. On the contrary he had shown himself to the shepherd, declared his identity and assumed the responsibility of dealing with him, though, to be sure, he had given him a chance to defend himself. If Solara was dead, if he had expired without making any revelation, his secret was secure and even Monte-Cristo could not unearth it, but would not the death of old Pasquale deprive the Count of a most important witness, a most important factor in his rehabilitation? Perhaps so, perhaps not, for it was by no means certain that Monte-Cristo could force Solara to confess and make at least partial and tardy amends for his atrocious misdeeds. It was highly probable that Annunziata's wretched father, even if brought to bay, would persist in preserving a stony and unbroken silence, would make no admissions whatever. Taking this view of the matter the Viscount felt relieved and, composing himself on his couch, [Pg 318]

yielded to the influence of extreme fatigue and fell asleep. His slumber was profound and dreamless. Exactly how long he slept he knew not, but meanwhile an event as unexpected as it was portentous occurred almost within earshot of where he lay, an event brought about by his rash and inconsiderate action of that morning.

Monte-Cristo's salon was opposite to Massetti's chamber, a wide corridor separating the two apartments. It was late in the afternoon and the Count, seated at his desk, was pondering over his plans in relation to the Viscount. Matters had not progressed as swiftly as he had hoped. Besides, much further delay seemed inevitable. Maximilian, of course, could do nothing, for the present at least, and Valentine's ability to be of use was limited to encouraging Zuleika and exercising a proper degree of surveillance over the lovers when such surveillance was possible. Peppino and Beppo, too, were comparatively useless, though by careful and well-directed inquiries they had ascertained that Luigi Vampa and his band had changed their quarters from the old rendezvous, locating in a fastness that could not be approached without great difficulty and danger. None of the brigands now visited Rome and even Vampa himself seemed distrustful of the future. According to the intelligence gathered by Peppino and Beppo he constantly went about in various disguises that defied detection, studiously avoiding all his accustomed haunts. With regard to the brigand chief's actions Monte-Cristo could entertain but one of two opinions—either he was filled with remorse for his shameful conduct towards poor Annunziata Solara and for his complicity with old Pasquale in bringing the innocent Viscount under suspicion, which was doubtful, or he was afraid that Roman justice stimulated by young Massetti and such friends as he still possessed would overtake him, which was the more probable. The Count had not hoped for much from Annunziata Solara, though he had calculated somewhat on the effect upon her of his assurance that he possessed conclusive proof of Giovanni's innocence. His recent interview with the girl, however, had established the fact that she firmly believed the Viscount guilty, and it was fair to presume that she would retain her belief in the face of everything with all the proverbial obstinacy of woman. Besides, after all, what was his conclusive proof? Simply the unsupported assertions of a former member of Vampa's band, who in making them had clearly been actuated by a desire of wreaking personal vengeance upon old Pasquale Solara!

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The Count was not a little discouraged, but his own conviction of the truth of Peppino's statement was as strong as ever and, notwithstanding all the apparently insurmountable obstacles, he did not doubt that he would eventually find some way to force Vampa and the shepherd into a full confirmation of every diabolical detail related by the ex-bandit in the cell of the police poste in Paris.

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As he sat thus communing with his sombre thoughts and reflecting that the delay might stretch out into many months, a knock was heard at his door and in response to his permission Peppino entered the salon.

A glance at the man's pale and agitated countenance was sufficient to tell Monte-Cristo that something unusual had happened.

"Well," said he, gazing keenly at him, "what is it?"

The man looked hastily about the apartment and, having satisfied himself that his master was alone, came close to him, bending down and whispering in his ear:

"Signor Count, a strange visitor is below, asking to see you. He is garbed like a Roman noble and his face is made up with paints and cosmetics like that of an actor on the stage of a theatre. Still, I think I have pierced his disguise and that he is no less a personage than Luigi Vampa himself!"

"Ah!" said the Count, rising, with a smile of satisfaction. "Heaven grant that you are correct! If Vampa is here, his visit will simplify matters."

"But you do not mean to see the brigand chief, do you, Signor Count?" said Peppino, in a startled tone.

"Why, pray, should I not see him when for so long I have been impatiently awaiting an opportunity to meet him?" asked Monte-Cristo, in amazement.

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"Because," answered the Italian, with an unmistakable display of fear, "he may have divined your mission to Rome and his business with you here to-day may be assassination!"

Monte-Cristo laughed heartily.

"My good fellow," said he, in a reassuring tone, "dismiss your childish terrors. Vampa will not dare even to attempt to harm me! Show the mysterious visitor up and let the problem of his identity be solved!"

"I know your power over Vampa, Signor Count," returned Peppino, hesitating, "but still in this peculiar instance it may fail you!"

"Pshaw!" said the Count, impatiently. "I tell you I do not fear Vampa. Show him up at once."

Peppino very reluctantly quitted the salon, soon returning with the suspicious visitor.

Monte-Cristo advanced to meet the new comer, who silently pointed to Peppino, motioning towards the door. The Count nodded to the ex-bandit and with a slow step he left the room.

Although Vampa was carefully disguised and even elegantly dressed in the fashionable attire of

the Roman aristocracy, Monte-Cristo, like Peppino, had no difficulty whatever in recognizing him.

"Well, Luigi Vampa!" said he, facing his visitor and calmly folding his arms as soon as they were alone. "What do you want with me?"

The brigand chief did not seem either disconcerted or surprised even in the slightest degree. He boldly returned his host's gaze and said: [Pg 322]

"I knew you would recognize me at once, for I am well aware of your extraordinary keenness and penetration, Signor Count, but, to confess the truth, my disguise was not intended to deceive you; its sole object was to secure me safe entrance to and exit from Rome which of late has become dangerous for men in my line of industry!"

The Count smiled in his peculiar way.

"What do you want with me, Luigi Vampa?" he repeated. "Your errand must be of vast importance since you have taken so much trouble to execute it!"

"It is of vast importance, Signor Count. This morning one of the most efficient members of my band, old Pasquale Solara, was attacked and severely wounded by your protégé the Viscount Giovanni Massetti!"

"Old Solara attacked and severely wounded by the Viscount Massetti? Impossible!"

The Count was greatly disconcerted by this intelligence; he could not conceal his chagrin. The Viscount's rashness and impetuosity would ruin all!

"What I say is true," continued Vampa, "and I have come to you to protest. You must restrain this Viscount Massetti, this reckless madman! He professes to have a grudge against Pasquale Solara and there is no telling to what length he may go if you do not control him. Had Pasquale been able to speak when discovered lying bathed in blood upon the highway by some of the members of my band, young Massetti would have been pursued, captured and made to pay for his murderous assault with his life; but it was only later, when brought into my presence, that he became sufficiently conscious to relate what had happened. Signor Count, I wish to respect your friends, but they on their part must respect me and my band!" [Pg 323]

"Luigi Vampa," replied Monte-Cristo, sternly, "you say that young Massetti has a grudge against old Pasquale Solara! What you seek to belittle with the name of grudge is simply just indignation for an outrage such as human beings rarely commit! This you know!—you to whom Solara basely sold his daughter!—you who plotted with the aged scoundrel that the charge of abduction and murder might fall upon the Viscount's innocent shoulders when you, Luigi Vampa, were the guilty man!"

The brigand chief started and grew pale beneath the paint and cosmetics with which his visage was thickly coated.

"You have been deceived, Signor Count!" he stammered, taken at a disadvantage, but nevertheless speaking guardedly and endeavoring to put on a bold front. "The girl herself, Annunziata Solara, will swear to you that the Viscount Giovanni Massetti was her abductor and the author of her ruin!"

"Yes," replied Monte-Cristo, bitterly, "she will and does say so, for she has been completely blinded by the cunning, fiendish stratagems you resorted to, aided and abetted by that infamous miscreant old Pasquale Solara, for whom a lingering death upon the rack of the ancient Spanish Inquisition would not be a sufficient punishment!" [Pg 324]

"You speak very confidently, Signor Count," said Vampa, resuming his cool self-possession. "Pray tell me how you are going to prove all this?"

"I should be foolish, indeed, did I do so," replied Monte-Cristo, seeing the brigand chief's trap and adroitly avoiding being caught in it. "However, suffice it to say that I can and will make good all I have asserted! Even Annunziata Solara herself shall be thoroughly convinced!"

"Signor Count," said Vampa, pleadingly, "we have long been good friends, have long understood each other perfectly. Do not let the idle tales designing persons have poured into your ears destroy that friendship and that understanding!"

"I have heard no idle tales from designing persons," retorted the Count. "What I have heard was a plain and simple statement of the truth. I know how old Solara summoned you with his signal whistle, how you bargained with him for his beautiful daughter and how you finally bought her of him! I know how you abducted the girl while her infamous father waited outside the cabin with a torch, how you bore her away in your arms through the forest, murdering her brother and in turn encountering my son Espérance and the Viscount Massetti. I know how you carried her to the hut you had prepared, how you kept her a close prisoner there guarded by members of your band until your shameful object was accomplished! I know how you wrote that letter signed Tonio which was intended to influence Annunziata's belief in the Viscount's guilt, and I know how old Solara secreted it where his daughter afterwards found and read it! Now, Luigi Vampa, are you satisfied? You said a moment ago that we have long understood each other. I hope there will be no misunderstanding on your part when I tell you that I mean to force both you and old Solara to confess your crimes and make reparation for them as far as possible!" [Pg 325]

"Then you declare war against us?" cried the brigand chief.

"I do!" answered Monte-Cristo, coldly.

"Then in my own name and in that of Pasquale Solara, I defy you, Edmond Dantès, Count of Monte-Cristo!"

He backed towards the door as if afraid the Count would attack him. When he reached it, he turned, flung it open and stepped into the corridor, instantly finding himself in the grasp of Peppino and Beppo, who at once handed him over to a squad of policemen, the officer in charge of whom said:

"I arrest you, Luigi Vampa! Follow me!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

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THE BANDITS' REPRISALS.

Monte-Cristo was astounded when he saw Luigi Vampa arrested by the Roman policeman and his squad; his first thought was that Peppino, unwilling to let slip so fair an opportunity to obtain vengeance, had betrayed the brigand chief to the authorities; this idea was apparently confirmed by the part the two ex-bandits had taken in their former leader's capture; hence after the officers and their prisoner had departed, he turned fiercely upon Peppino and said, in a tone of anger:

"This is fine work for one of my servants to do, especially one so trusted as you!"

"Signor Count," answered Peppino, humbly, "you are mistaken. I had no hand in it whatever save obeying the order of the officer in command of the police."

"Indeed!" cried the Count, incredulously.

"Yes," continued Peppino, in the same humble voice, "and Beppo here is equally innocent. The officer tracked Vampa to the hôtel and was informed that I had conducted him into your presence. He thereupon sent for me, directing me without further ado to take Beppo, who chanced to be in my company, and seize the chief, who was personally unknown to him, the instant he quitted your salon. I trust your Excellency will pardon us, as we could do nothing but obey."

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"In that case," said Monte-Cristo, "no blame attaches to either of you, but, nevertheless, Vampa's arrest at this critical juncture will seriously interfere with my projected operations."

The police had conducted matters very quietly; still, the tramp of many feet in the corridor had awakened the Viscount and filled him with terror. Knowing the unparalleled audacity of the bandits, he at once jumped to the conclusion that a body of them had entered Rome and taken possession of the Hôtel de France with the object of seizing upon him as the murderer of old Pasquale Solara, who, he did not doubt, was dead. When the tramping feet, which the Count and Vampa were too much engrossed to hear, paused in front of his very door he became fixed in this conclusion and sprang from his bed in wild alarm. He looked hastily around him for some avenue of escape, but there was none. If the brigands were without he was trapped and would speedily be in their hands. He listened with the utmost anxiety, expecting every instant that his door would be forced and his relentless foes come thronging into the chamber. No such movement, however, was made. A deathlike silence prevailed. What was the meaning of all this? What was taking place or about to occur? If the men in the corridor were not Luigi Vampa's bandits, who were they? The Viscount lost himself in a bewildering maze of conjectures. Make a personal examination and satisfy himself he dare not. In the midst of his conjectures he heard a door open directly across the corridor and knew it was Monte-Cristo's. Then a voice of stern command broke the silence, but what was uttered he could not distinguish, though he fancied he made out the ominous word "arrest," which was almost immediately succeeded by a renewal of the tramping of feet. This sound speedily died away and silence again prevailed. Young Massetti was more perplexed than ever. He could make nothing out of the knotty problem presented to him for solution. Suddenly a thought struck him that brought beads of cold perspiration out upon his forehead. Monte-Cristo had been arrested and carried off to a Roman prison! Then he heard the Count's well-known voice angrily addressing some one and this alarming thought vanished as quickly as it had come to him. The party arrested, if an arrest had been made, was, therefore, not Monte-Cristo but some one else, some one who had come from the Count's salon. Who could it possibly be? Maximilian Morrel? No, the idea was absurd, for what had the young Frenchman done to provoke arrest? Finally, unable longer to endure the uncertainty and suspense, the Viscount cautiously opened his door and glanced out into the corridor. His eyes rested upon Monte-Cristo, Peppino and Beppo. The former saw him and at once came to him.

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"What has happened?" demanded Massetti, eagerly.

"Luigi Vampa was here and has been taken away a prisoner by the police," answered the Count.

"Luigi Vampa!" cried the young Italian, in amazement.

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"Yes, Luigi Tampa," returned Monte-Cristo, his brow clouding.

"What brought him to the Hôtel de France?"

"He came to complain of you!"

"Of me?"

"I have said so."

"And you caused him to be arrested?"

"I did not. His arrest was due entirely to his own rashness. The police tracked him hither and apprehended him as he quitted my apartment."

While speaking Monte-Cristo made his way into Giovanni's chamber. Closing the door behind him, he stood gazing at the Viscount with a gloomy air.

"Giovanni Massetti," said he, in a slow, measured tone, "you have disregarded my injunctions and by your impetuosity put all my plans in jeopardy! You did wrong, very wrong, in attacking old Pasquale Solara this morning!"

"I am keenly sensible of it now, after calm reflection," answered the Viscount, penitently. "But still you must make some allowance for me. I came suddenly upon the shepherd and my indignation and desire for vengeance so mastered me at the sight of him that I could not control myself. Nevertheless I gave him a chance for his life. We fought a desperate duel and he was wounded, but whether mortally or not it is impossible for me to say, as Vampa's men made their appearance immediately after his fall, and I was forced into precipitate flight."

"Should Solara die," said Monte-Cristo, moodily, "you will have deprived us of a most important witness, for I calculated upon compelling him to speak, to disclose every detail of the infamous conspiracy against you. But like you I do not know his present condition, as Vampa did not vouchsafe me any information upon that head. I can only hope that he is not seriously wounded and will recover."

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"I am singularly unfortunate," said the Viscount, humbly. "Everything I do seems to be wrong."

"Because you are governed by impulse alone and do not wait for your calmer judgment to come to your aid," replied Monte-Cristo. Then he added, firmly: "Giovanni Massetti, either you must submit wholly to me for the future, be guided entirely by my wishes, or I will be compelled to leave you to your fate! I need not say that I shall abandon you very reluctantly, but abandon you I must unless you cease to trammel my efforts in your behalf!"

The young Italian seized his benefactor's hand convulsively.

"Your Excellency," he exclaimed, supplicatingly, "do not abandon me, do not leave me to my fate at this critical juncture! I will yield you blind and implicit submission and obedience! For the future I will do nothing, take not even the slightest, most unimportant step without your direct authorization or express command!"

"It is well, Giovanni," said the Count, evidently much relieved to find his ardent protégé so tractable. "I will continue the work I have begun and also endeavor to bring it to a speedy and successful conclusion. The arrest of Vampa and the wounding of old Solara have complicated matters to a certain extent, but a brief time, I trust, will suffice to straighten out the complications and tangles, and then the result will be happiness for all of us, the richest possible reward!"

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"God grant it!" cried Massetti, fervently.

"Now," said the Count, "you must not quit the Hôtel de France even for a moment without my permission! Do you promise me that?"

"I not only promise it, I swear it!" exclaimed the Viscount, lifting his eyes and his right hand towards Heaven.

"It is well," repeated Monte-Cristo, joyously, and turning he left Massetti's chamber.

It had been planned that the Count should take Zuleika out riding the following morning, but a desire to know what had become of Luigi Vampa and what the authorities proposed to do in his case prevented Monte-Cristo from fulfilling his promise to his daughter. He, however, determined not to deprive Zuleika of the pleasure she anticipated from her drive and, therefore, when the barouche and its spirited horses were brought to the hôtel door installed Peppino in the driver's seat with the faithful Ali to act as an additional guard and protector.

Zuleika, after bidding her father a tender farewell, was assisted by him into the elegant vehicle and Ali drove off, managing the prancing and mettlesome steeds, with all the dash and skill of a veteran Paris coachman.

They passed along the Corso, which as usual was crowded with splendid equipages and gay promenaders, finally making their way to the vast and beautiful Piazza del Popolo, which presented even a more animated and enlivening scene than the Corso. The elegant equipages were there supplemented by superbly mounted cavaliers and the various paths were alive with handsome girls and their gallants, while interspersed amid the better classes were gorgeously

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attired peasants of both sexes, some simply idling about, others vending small wares and flowers.

Tiring at length of the ordinary sights of Rome, Zuleika directed Ali to drive a short distance into the country. He obeyed with considerable reluctance for he was well aware of the dangers to be encountered in the environs of the city, and Peppino, on his side, was also uneasy, though he did not venture to protest against what he considered a most censurable caprice of his youthful mistress.

However, they drove along for several miles without the slightest incident occurring to warrant the fears of Ali and Peppino or trouble the serenity of Zuleika. The young girl enjoyed the open country, with its stately trees, verdure and refreshing odors, immensely, and internally congratulated herself on having varied her programme by leaving dusty Rome behind her for a time.

Meanwhile Ali, with the habitual fatalism of his nation, had resigned himself in advance to whatever might happen and drove straight onward with his eyes impassably fixed upon the horses. Not so with Peppino; the wily and well-posted Italian was constantly on the alert, scanning every thicket, clump of trees or turn of the road with a searching look long before they came to it; although nothing suspicious had as yet met his gaze, he was not by any means either satisfied or reassured.

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Finally they approached a small roadside inn and Zuleika, complaining of thirst, directed the barouche to be stopped and Peppino to dismount from his seat, enter the inn and procure some wine for her. Peppino made a grimace at this command, but had not the courage to explain to Monte-Cristo's daughter that in obeying her he ran the risk of encountering some of his old comrades who might prove too inquisitive. He slowly clambered down from the barouche and with an exceedingly rueful countenance made his way into the inn. He had not been gone an instant when he suddenly reappeared, running towards the barouche and uttering loud cries of alarm. Half a dozen rough-looking men pursued him and before he could reach the vehicle he was caught. Simultaneously another party of ruffians issued from the inn, catching the horses by the bridle as Ali was about to drive off.

"Not so fast, my sable friend!" said one of the men. "We must make the acquaintance of your beautiful young mistress!"

Zuleika sat speechless, frozen with terror. Ali raised his whip to strike the ruffian who had spoken so flippantly of Monte-Cristo's daughter, but the indignant mute was instantly overpowered and dragged to the ground.

Meanwhile the men who held Peppino in their clutches were examining him closely.

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"I would swear," said one of them, "that this is our old comrade, Peppino, who ran away from us so unceremoniously, taking with him all he could lay his hands on!"

"It is Peppino," put in another. "I know him in spite of his stained face and livery! By the Holy Virgin!" he added, "I know the livery, too! It's Monte-Cristo's!"

"Then the barouche and horses are Monte-Cristo's also!" said the first speaker. "No doubt, too, that young woman there is a member of the Count's family. We followed Peppino for a little fun, comrades, but have fallen upon a slice of rare luck! Monte-Cristo is responsible for Vampa's arrest yesterday, for the chief was taken as he left his room. Now we can make reprisals!"

"Excellent!" cried another of the band. "We can make reprisals and obtain at least one valuable hostage for Vampa's safety! Signora," he said to the terrified Zuleika, "who are you?"

The poor girl, commanding her voice as best she could, replied, with some dignity:

"I am Zuleika, daughter of the Count of Monte-Cristo! In his name I demand that you instantly release us!"

"So!" said the man, turning to his delighted companions. "His daughter! We can now count on Vampa's safety without the shadow of a doubt!"

The leader of the bandits now came from the inn; upon being informed of the important capture his men had made he rubbed his hands in glee. Turning to his lieutenants, he said:

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"Have a guard placed in the barouche beside Monte-Cristo's daughter and let another comrade drive the equipage to the rendezvous of the band. As for the colored driver, let him go back to Rome on foot and carry the news to his master with the compliments of Vampa's men!"

"What shall be done with Peppino?" asked one of the lieutenants.

"Hang him to the nearest tree!" answered the leader, but, immediately taking a second thought, he added: "No. Keep him! Perhaps Monte-Cristo places some value on the scoundrel and it might not be bad policy to retain him as an additional hostage!"

Peppino who had been listening intently to the leader's words heaved a deep sigh of relief. He would certainly experience rough treatment, but at least his life was safe. He, therefore, submitted to be bound without a murmur and even smiled as he was being led away.

The leader's commands regarding Zuleika and the equipage were promptly obeyed, and soon Monte-Cristo's daughter was a close prisoner in a rocky cell of the bandits' subterranean

fastness.

Ali, as soon as set free, started for Rome to give the alarm.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

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THE RAID ON THE BANDITS.

When Ali reached the Hôtel de France and dragged himself to his master's apartment, which was not until quite late in the afternoon, his condition was truly deplorable. Footsore and ready to drop from extreme fatigue, he staggered like a drunken man. He was thickly covered with dust and profuse perspiration made his dark skin glisten. The faithful mute at once threw himself at the Count's feet, embracing his knees and in his marvellous pantomime eloquently entreating pardon.

Monte-Cristo, who was suffering torment because of his beloved daughter's prolonged absence, instantly divined that some terrible accident had befallen her and grew almost wild with grief and apprehension. Raising Ali up, he said to him in a broken, anxious voice:

"Tell me what has occurred without circumlocution or delay, and tell me all!"

The Nubian made a profound salaam in token of submission and obedience. Then he proceeded, in his own peculiar mode of narrating events with which Monte-Cristo was so thoroughly familiar and which in this instance he translated only too readily and unerringly, to recount the particulars of the fatal drive into the outskirts of the city and of the capture of Zuleika, Peppino and the equipage by the brigands.

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Monte-Cristo sat for an instant after he had concluded like one stupefied, so utterly overwhelmed was he by the unexpected and distracting intelligence. Then he sprang to his feet and began pacing the room, muttering as he walked:

"So the wretches have seized my daughter and servant by way of reprisals and intend to hold them as hostages for the safety of Luigi Vampa! What is to be done? Let me think, let me think!"

He placed his hand to his forehead and accelerated his step, passing back and forth with such feverish rapidity that even Ali, impassible as he was by nature, showed alarm, dreading the effect of all this fearful and exhausting excitement upon his adored master to save whom from the slightest trouble or grief he would have freely and unhesitatingly given his life. Monte-Cristo continued to mutter:

"Vampa is a prisoner, closely confined in a dungeon of the Castle of St. Angelo. He is to be tried for his many crimes, among which I have caused to be included the abduction of Annunziata Solara and his attempt to blacken the fair fame of the Viscount Masetti. His conviction and punishment as a bandit may be accepted as certain, whatever may be the fate of the other counts in the black indictment against him, for hosts of those whom he has robbed and maltreated are to testify, and the Roman authorities have for some reason suddenly become his deadly, implacable foes; they will show him no mercy! But the rest of the infamous band, what is to be done with them? Nothing, absolutely nothing, so far as I have been able to learn! Why? Possibly because the police fear to attack the brigands in their stronghold! But I will change this item of the programme—yes, I will change it! I will at once to Cardinal Monti, complain that my daughter has been seized by the bandits and offer with the aid of Captain Morrel to lead a detachment of soldiery against them. Animated by Maximilian and myself, the military will show courage for once. The result cannot be doubtful. We shall capture the whole band, together with their famous fastness, and rescue Zuleika. Peppino, too, shall be delivered. I will not take Masetti with me—no, he is too rash and might imperil the success of the undertaking—no, I will not take him, I will not even inform him of what I propose doing. The Cardinal will scarcely venture to refuse me. Should he hesitate, however, I will shame him into consenting, I will threaten him with invoking the aid of the French minister! No, he will not refuse me! Now for the trial of my power! Oh! Zuleika, my darling child, I will save you, I will save you!"

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Hastily putting on his hat and throwing a light cloak about him, the Count of Monte-Cristo departed on his mission, a mission certainly altogether characteristic of the marvellous man.

Cardinal Monti received him cordially, heard his complaint and, after demurring slightly, accepted his offer to lead the soldiers against the redoubtable brigands, agreeing to place two hundred of the Swiss Guard properly officered and equipped at the disposal of himself and Captain Morrel. It was decided that the expedition should start from the Castle of St. Angelo at ten o'clock that night and should be guided by a trusty peasant, then in the Cardinal's service, who professed to know the exact location of the bandits' retreat and the safest route to it.

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These preliminaries satisfactorily settled, Monte-Cristo, his heart overflowing with joy, immediately returned to the Hôtel de France to notify M. Morrel and to make his preparations for the coming campaign. Upon being informed of Zuleika's seizure by the outlaws and of the part her father wished him to take in her deliverance, Maximilian instantly consented, only too happy to have such a signal opportunity of serving his benefactor. Zuleika's misfortune, however,

distressed him greatly.

"Does Valentine know of your daughter's capture?" he asked of the Count.

"No," answered Monte-Cristo, "and I must ask you not to tell her until after the result of the expedition is known. I wish to keep the whole matter a close secret lest young Massetti should hear of it and mar our plans by his usual hot-headedness. With this view I have already instructed Ali, the only person save yourself in the Hôtel de France who is aware of the terrible blow that has fallen upon me, to refrain from communicating the intelligence to any one. It is better thus, for the brigands undoubtedly have spies in Rome at this time and the utmost caution is advisable."

M. Morrel readily assented to the wisdom of the Count's policy of complete silence, and the twain separated to quietly prepare for the night's perilous and exciting adventure. [Pg 340]

At half-past nine o'clock Monte-Cristo and Maximilian entered the court-yard of the grim Castle of St. Angelo, where the detachment of the Swiss Guard was already drawn up under arms awaiting orders. The Count wore a half military dress and had a sword at his side, while his friend was clad in the full uniform of a Captain in the Army of France and similarly provided with the regulation weapon. Both he and Monte-Cristo had a couple of pistols in their belts, freshly and carefully loaded.

The Captain of the Swiss Guard received them and presented the peasant whom Cardinal Monti had sent to act as guide. Then he turned over the command of his men to Captain Morrel, who briefly addressed them in French, a language with which they were well acquainted, informing them that he and his Excellency, the Count of Monte-Cristo, relied on every man to do his duty in suppressing the banditti and rescuing from their rude clutches a beautiful young French girl, no other than the Count's own daughter.

At the close of this address the soldiers saluted, the only way in which the military regulations permitted them to respond.

Monte-Cristo and M. Morrel then had a brief conference with the peasant guide, who seemed very intelligent and thoroughly posted as to the bandits and their stronghold. The information he gave was in every respect satisfactory and it was abundantly plain that the man could be implicitly relied upon. [Pg 341]

Everything was now in readiness and, as the hour of ten was sounded by the clock of the Castle of St. Angelo, the troops headed by Captain Morrel and the Count filed out of the court-yard and began their march. When the open country was reached the guide took up a position a trifle in advance of the detachment and led the way. Complete silence was maintained and the utmost care taken to muffle the tramp of the soldiers' feet.

After marching until nearly midnight, the guide in a low, cautious whisper informed the Count and Maximilian that the bandits' fastness was close at hand. A brief halt for rest and recuperation was immediately ordered; then the advance was resumed, followed by a struggle with the brigands' sentinel, who was seized and overpowered before he could give even the slightest alarm.

"Now, men," said Captain Morrel, in a firm, commanding tone, "for a prompt dash and we shall trap all the wolves in their subterranean den!"

The cave had two entrances. The Count at the head of half the troops speedily possessed himself of one and Maximilian with the rest of the detachment promptly seized the other.

So far the success of the expedition had been complete. The outlaws were caged and could not escape, but, nevertheless, it was probable that they would make a desperate and bloody resistance. Simultaneously Monte-Cristo and Captain Morrel penetrated the gloomy depths with their men and a dozen torches quickly lighted illuminated the cavern as if by magic. Instantly there arose a chorus of wild shouts uttered by the surprised bandits, who, armed to the teeth, came thronging from every direction. A fierce hand to hand battle ensued, the cavern echoing with the rattle of musketry, the reports of pistols and the clash of swords. [Pg 342]

As had been anticipated the brigands contended desperately and with the utmost fury. They were brave, hardy wretches, and though hemmed in on all sides evidently hoped to triumph over the invaders of their stronghold and drive them out in disorder and terror. Their former experience with the Swiss Guard and the police warranted them in entertaining this hope, but on the present occasion they reckoned without their host, for the soldiers had never before had such intrepid, determined and able leaders.

The battle lasted for over an hour and it was not until many had been killed and wounded on both sides that the outlaws began to show signs of wavering. Monte-Cristo and Captain Morrel performed prodigies of valor, animating and encouraging their troops both by word and example. Finally the outlaws were completely subdued, such of them as had not been slain having been made prisoners. The Count escaped without a scratch, but Maximilian was slightly wounded in the left hand.

When the firing and the clash, of swords had ceased, Captain Morrel gave the order to search the cave for Zuleika and Peppino, first placing sentinels at the entrances to guard against surprise and prevent the escape of any of the bandits who amid the confusion might slip from their [Pg 343]

captors.

"Where are the cells?" asked Monte-Cristo of the peasant guide, who had manfully borne his part in the struggle.

"Follow me," answered the man. "I will take you to them."

Monte-Cristo now that the excitement of the fray had left him was filled with anxiety for his daughter. What had happened to her since she had been a captive in the bandits' den? Had her honor been respected as well as her life? His suspense was the most terrible torture possible to conceive. He could scarcely restrain himself until he should learn the truth, be it fatal or favorable. Maximilian was almost equally agitated, but managed to maintain a comparatively calm exterior that he might the better support and cheer his friend in this his hour of bitter need.

The peasant, holding a torch above his head, conducted them into a dark, damp corridor, several soldiers following in charge of a lieutenant. The party had not gone many steps when a man's cries became audible, proceeding from a cell near at hand. The door of this cell was fastened only by a bar of iron, to remove which required but an instant, when it was discovered that the cries came from Peppino, who having heard the noise of the conflict and concluded that relief was near had at once commenced to shout that he might disclose his whereabouts to the invaders. The ex-bandit was set at liberty and the search was continued. [Pg 344]

Presently a low moan struck the Count's attentive ear.

"What was that?" he asked, with a start.

"A moan that was no doubt uttered by your daughter!" answered the guide.

"My daughter!" cried the Count. "Then, thank God, she is alive!"

They reached another cell, the door of which, like that of Peppino's, was fastened by a bar. Within the cell the low moaning continued. Monte-Cristo seized the bar, whirled it aside and flung open the door; then he sprang into the cell, calling wildly on his daughter.

Zuleika was lying in a corner upon a heap of straw and moaning piteously. At the sound of her father's voice, however, she was on her feet in an instant and cast herself rapturously into his arms.

"Are you safe, my darling child?" said the Count, covering her face with kisses. "Did the bandits respect you?"

"I am safe, dear father," answered Zuleika, "safe and uninjured. The bandits frightened me and the solitude and terrors of this dark, dismal dungeon have been fearful to endure. But all my troubles are over now that you are here!"

The Count then directed the guide to conduct them to the bandits' stables and there his horses and barouche were found. The equipage was taken to the open air, and after placing his daughter in the vehicle the Count left her in charge of Peppino and several soldiers of the Swiss Guard, returning to the cavern to bring the work of the expedition to a close. [Pg 345]

When Monte-Cristo reached the point where the Swiss Guard and their prisoners were assembled, he found Captain Morrel superintending the placing of an aged bandit upon an improvised stretcher.

"During your absence, Count," said he, his face radiant with joy, "we made the most important capture of the night! This old man is Pasquale Solara!"

"Where did you find him?" asked the Count.

"In a large cell used by the outlaws as an infirmary. He says he is mortally wounded and slowly dying, that his wound was inflicted by a Roman nobleman who met him upon the highway—a very likely story, truly!"

"It is a fact," answered Monte-Cristo. "The Roman nobleman who wounded him was Giovanni Massetti! But, thank God, he is still alive and will probably last until Vampa's trial at which I may be able to force him to speak out. Have him carefully attended to, Maximilian!"

The captives were formed in line and, none being too much disabled to walk, save old Solara who was borne along on his stretcher, they were marched to Rome surrounded by the triumphant Swiss Guard. Monte-Cristo, Maximilian and Zuleika followed in the Count's barouche, Peppino officiating as coachman.

CHAPTER XXIX.

VAMPA'S TRIAL.

The successful result of the raid upon the bandits made Monte-Cristo and Captain Morrel the heroes of the hour in Rome. Everywhere they went crowds assembled to gaze upon them and

they were greeted with hearty cheers and loud acclamations of joy. Truth to tell the Roman people both high and low had very much to thank them for. The outlaws' band was completely broken up and every member of it was safely bestowed in the dungeons of the Castle of St. Angelo, where, as already stated, the redoubtable leader the notorious brigand chief, Luigi Vampa himself, also languished, awaiting whatever disposition the authorities might choose to make of him with anything but stoicism, for he did not doubt that it would go hard with him. Vampa's arrest was considered as directly due to Monte-Cristo, for had he not come to visit the Count it was improbable that he would ever have been captured. By the advice of Monte-Cristo also the bandits' subterranean retreat had been filled with powder and blown to atoms. No wonder, therefore, the Romans were grateful to the illustrious Frenchman and his able assistant Captain Morrel.

Old Pasquale Solara had been placed in a hospital where he was closely watched and had the attendance of a competent physician, for the Count had assured Cardinal Monti that he could perhaps be made an important witness against Vampa at his forthcoming trial. After examining the shepherd's wound the physician had given his opinion that it was fatal, but that by resorting to proper and judicious measures the old man's life could be prolonged sufficiently to enable him to testify.

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Valentine was much affected when she heard from Zuleika's lips the story of her seizure by the brigands and her imprisonment in the dark, damp cell of their cavern fastness, but her emotion was tempered with joy that her beloved friend had escaped with no other injury than the shock resulting from her fright and natural apprehensions.

When Giovanni learned of his betrothed's dangerous adventure and the perils that had encompassed her his indignation knew no bounds, and in addition he felt considerably hurt that Monte-Cristo had not allowed him to participate in her rescue. The Count and his daughter, however, succeeded in calming him and in convincing him that all had been done for the best. He was further propitiated by Monte-Cristo's assurance that he could now act openly and without fear of prejudicing his case, as the criminals were secured and the end was surely approaching.

Cardinal Monti decided that Vampa's trial should take place within a week and that the first charge investigated should be that relating to the abduction of Annunziata Solara and the conspiracy against the Viscount Massetti. This decision was brought about by the influence of the Count of Monte-Cristo, who represented to the Papal Secretary of State the importance of utilizing the testimony of old Pasquale Solara while he was yet in a condition to give it.

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The Count resolved to make a final effort to convince Annunziata Solara of Giovanni's innocence, though he had determined to employ her evidence in any event, trusting to the lawyers and the Court to extract such admissions from her as would tend to show that she was mistaken in regard to the identity of her abductor. He knew the former flower-girl was conscientious and firmly believed in her theory, but still he was not without hope that she might be led to see matters as they really were. Besides, if her father should see fit to confess she could not fail to be convinced of Vampa's guilt and in that case the expression of her conviction would be of the utmost value.

In pursuit of his plan Monte-Cristo at once communicated with Mme. de Rancogne at the Refuge in Civita Vecchia, begging her to bring Annunziata to Rome without an instant's delay. She promptly responded by appearing at the Hôtel de France with her protégée and the Count arranged an interview between the latter and young Massetti in his salon. When Annunziata accompanied by the Superior of the Order of Sisters of Refuge entered the apartment and found Giovanni waiting for her there she flushed deeply and began to tremble.

"Courage, my poor child," said Mme. de Rancogne, soothingly, "courage!"

"Sister Annunziata," said the Count, who was also in the salon, "have no fear. All we wish in this peculiarly unfortunate matter is to get at the truth. Hear what the Viscount has to say in his own behalf—that is only justice!"

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The flush on the girl's handsome countenance was succeeded by an ashen paleness, but she eventually managed to obtain control of herself. Casting down her eyes, she said:

"I will hear what the Viscount Massetti has to say, but he will not, he cannot, deny his shameful and dishonorable conduct towards me!"

Giovanni, hardly less affected than the girl who supposed herself his victim, advanced to her and took her hand. She did not refuse to let him hold it in his, but studiously refrained from looking him in the face.

"Annunziata," said Massetti, humbly, "I do not deny that my conduct towards you in the past was altogether reprehensible and unpardonable. I do not deny that circumstances so shaped themselves that I was made to seem a wretched, despicable criminal in your eyes; but, Annunziata, I stopped short of actual guilt, and as Heaven is my witness I had no hand either in your abduction or the horrible events that accompanied and followed it! This I swear, and this is God's truth!"

Annunziata lifted her eyes and gave him a searching glance.

"I understand your anxiety to clear yourself," she said, slowly. "With a stain on your name you cannot marry the Count of Monte-Cristo's beautiful daughter!"

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It was a keen, cutting thrust and made Giovanni wince, but he recovered himself instantly.

"I am anxious to clear my name that I may wed Zuleika," he replied, steadily and firmly, "but I am also anxious because I am innocent of all criminal action—innocent of your abduction, of your dishonor and of your brother's blood! Annunziata, do you still decline to believe my solemn assertions?"

"I would gladly believe them if I could," responded the girl; "but, alas! I cannot! I saw your face when your mask fell from it that dreadful night in the forest! I heard the tones of your voice afterwards in the hut guarded by the bandits! What more convincing evidence could I require?"

"You were mistaken, Annunziata, you were fearfully mistaken!" cried the young Italian, overwhelming despair seizing upon him and crushing the hope in his heart. He could not convince the former flower-girl, he could not even shake her convictions! He had failed with her as Monte-Cristo had previously failed at the Refuge in Civita Vecchia! Up to this time he had continued to hold Annunziata's hand, but now he dropped it as if it had been some venomous serpent.

Annunziata was deeply affected, but her emotion arose from an altogether different cause. She felt her shame and disgrace and was, besides, horrified at the idea that she had once hung upon the honeyed words of such a scoundrel as in her view the Viscount Massetti had proved to be.

Monte-Cristo was now thoroughly satisfied that Giovanni could effect nothing with Annunziata and that a further prolongation of the interview would only be fraught with additional suffering for both the girl and young Massetti; he, therefore, requested Mme. de Rancogne to take her protégée to her apartment, and when they had quitted the salon said to the Viscount:

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"We must trust this girl to the lawyers and judges, Giovanni. They perhaps may be sufficiently shrewd to shake her testimony even should old Solara elect to maintain silence on the subject that vitally concerns us."

At the appointed time the trial of Luigi Vampa began in the Judgment Hall of the Vatican, which was crowded to its utmost capacity, both men and women being present and striving to push forward so as to obtain a glimpse of the notorious brigand chief and of the first witness Annunziata Solara.

Cardinal Monti in person presided, assisted by two subordinate Cardinals. In the portion of the hall railed off for the use of the bar sat Monte-Cristo and the Viscount Massetti with their lawyers, the best and most acute advocates in Rome, while just without the rail were M. Morrel and Espérance, the latter having come from Paris expressly to attend the trial, though at his request his testimony was not to be demanded of him. Just within the rail and close beside Maximilian and the son of Monte-Cristo Valentine and Zuleika were seated, both closely veiled. Near them sat Mme. de Rancogne and the unfortunate Annunziata Solara, clad in the dark gray habits of the Order of the Sisters of Refuge, their white faces plainly visible beneath the nuns' bonnets of spotless linen they wore. Peppino sat beside the Count.

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There was a low murmur of conversation in the Judgment Hall, as the audience discussed the probable issue of the trial and expressed diverse opinions, though all were agreed that whatever might be the decision of the Court in regard to the abduction and conspiracy Luigi Vampa would not escape punishment for the crimes he had committed in his capacity of chief of the bandits.

Presently Cardinal Monti arose, magnificent in his princely apparel and glittering jewels, waving his hand for silence. His gesture was instantly obeyed and the entire hall grew still as death. Then the Cardinal resumed his seat on the judicial bench, and, turning to the clerk of the Court, commanded him to proclaim the session opened. This was done, whereupon the Cardinal said, in a voice distinctly audible in all parts of the vast apartment:

"Bring in the accused!"

A moment later Luigi Vampa entered a raised enclosure serving the purpose of a dock in the custody of two stalwart and thoroughly armed military policemen. His face was ashen, but he glanced about him nonchalantly and defiantly. When his eyes rested upon Monte-Cristo and the Viscount Massetti he smiled in a peculiar sort of way as if he felt convinced that all their labors would be in vain. Suddenly he saw the two gray-robed women in their linen nuns' bonnets, starting slightly as he recognized Annunziata Solara, but otherwise evincing no emotion.

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The men and women in the distant portions of the hall got upon the benches, craning their necks to see the accused, and there arose a murmur, a faint hiss, that was promptly checked by the vigilant Court officials who were marching here and there with their long white staffs in their hands and their black caps upon their heads.

Then Cardinal Monti again arose, speaking in a deep, impressive voice:

"Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar," said he, "you stand here accused of many grave crimes, but the charge which the Court will first consider is blacker than all the rest; that charge, Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar, is that you abducted and afterwards seduced a peasant girl named Annunziata Solara and, in collusion with her father, Pasquale Solara, conspired to throw the onus and suspicion of your crime upon an innocent man, the Viscount Giovanni Massetti. What say you, Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar, are you guilty or not guilty?"

"Not guilty, your Eminence!" responded the unabashed brigand chief.

At this there was another murmur in the hall which was promptly suppressed as before.

"Accused, you can take your seat," said the Cardinal.

Vampa did as directed, the policemen remaining standing at his sides with drawn swords in their hands.

"Let the first witness be called," said the Cardinal, addressing the clerk of the Court.

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That official arose and called out, in a loud voice:

"Annunziata Solara!"

The former flower-girl came forward, slowly and timidly, and went upon the elevated witness stand, where the accustomed oath was administered to her by the clerk.

Again there was a general craning of necks, the women showing the strongest anxiety to behold the girl who was said to have been Vampa's victim.

In a low, faltering voice Annunziata proceeded to give her testimony. She repeated her sad story precisely as she had done before, entirely exonerating the bandit chief and throwing the whole weight of the crime upon the shoulders of the Viscount Massetti.

This was the reverse of what the audience had expected and the murmur of surprise was universal.

The prisoner glanced at Monte-Cristo and Massetti with a radiant look of triumph.

The Viscount's lawyers then took the witness in hand, but shrewd and able as they were they utterly failed to make her swerve even a hair's breadth from her evidence. She returned to her place beside Mme. de Rancogne, confident that she had done her duty and uttered not a single syllable that was untrue.

Peppino followed her. He repeated almost word for word the details he had given the Count of Monte-Cristo in Paris. His recital was so vivid, so circumstantial, that it made a wonderful impression both upon the Court and the audience. When he spoke of old Pasquale Solara's infamous sale of his beautiful daughter to Luigi Vampa the male auditors could scarcely restrain their indignation and the women fairly screamed with horror, the utmost efforts of the Court officers being required to force them into anything like quietude. Another sensation was caused by Peppino's exposure of the nefarious conspiracy by which the innocent young Viscount was brought and kept under the suspicion of murder and abduction. When he concluded his narrative and quitted the witness stand he and Vampa exchanged glances of bitter and vindictive hate, and it required all the strength of the policemen in charge of the prisoner to keep him from leaping from the dock and attempting to take summary vengeance upon the fearless and outspoken witness.

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The Viscount Massetti now took the stand. He gave the full history of his acquaintance with Annunziata Solara from the meeting in the Piazza del Popolo to the encounter with Vampa in the forest and the administration of the oath of silence, speaking with such evident sincerity and feeling that his testimony acquired additional weight thereby. The brigand chief watched him closely, listening to his testimony with a contemptuous smile. When the young Italian returned to Monte-Cristo and resumed his seat his pale visage was a mass of perspiration and great agitation had possession of him.

"Call Pasquale Solara," said the Cardinal to the clerk, after referring to a paper upon the desk in front of him.

"Pasquale Solara!" cried the clerk, immediately.

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There was a stir in the audience and four soldiers of the Swiss Guard advanced towards the judicial bench, bearing a stretcher upon which was extended the emaciated form of the aged shepherd.

As her father was borne past her, Annunziata uttered a cry and arose to go to him, but Mme. de Rancogne gently pulled her back into her chair, whispering to her that he was in the custody of the Court and that she could only see him after the trial was concluded, when the requisite permission would be obtained for her.

Old Pasquale was lifted from the stretcher by a couple of soldiers and aided to mount the witness stand. He was so faint and weak that it was necessary to hold him in an upright position after he had with great difficulty mounted the stand. Even then he trembled like a paralytic and it was some moments before he could answer the questions addressed to him. Vampa regarded him with intense anxiety, eagerly leaning forward to catch the feeble, almost imperceptible sounds that issued from his lips.

"May it please your Eminence," said old Pasquale, painfully pausing after every word, "I am a dying man. The hospital physician who has accompanied me and is now in the Judgment Hall assures me that I can last but a few days at most. I have been a great sinner, but I do not desire to go before my angered God with all the weight of my iniquity upon me; therefore, I have resolved to speak, to tell all I know!"

The spectators in the body of the hall shuddered. Old Solara's voice did not reach them, but they felt instinctively that some dreadful revelation was either being or about to be made. Monte-Cristo and Massetti half arose in their seats; they were near enough to grasp the purport of what the shepherd had said and its effect upon them was absolutely overwhelming; they had expected that Pasquale would either tell a cunningly fabricated tale calculated to shield Vampa or take refuge in stony, stubborn silence, but instead he was going to make a clean breast of the whole terrible crime! Annunziata had also heard and was listening for what should follow with a countenance almost as white as her nun's bonnet. Mme. de Rancogne caught her hands and held them firmly; she too was startled beyond expression by old Solara's words and feared the effect of further revelations upon her protégée. Zuleika, Valentine, M. Morrel and Espérance were too far away from the witness stand to comprehend a syllable, but like the spectators in the body of the hall they divined what was on the point of coming, holding their breath in fear and expectation. As for Vampa, he could hardly be kept still; his fingers worked nervously as if he desired to strangle the dying witness, and he glanced at him with the flashing eyes of a ferocious tiger brought to bay.

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Old Pasquale continued, amid the deepest silence:

"I do not seek to shield myself. Vampa is guilty both of the abduction and of the plot to ruin the Viscount Massetti, but I was his tempter and to me he owes his crime! However, with the murder of my son Lorenzo I had nothing to do—the chief alone is responsible for that! But I tempted him with the beauty of my poor daughter Annunziata! Greedy for gold I sold her to him! The abduction was proposed by me and executed by him! The plan to throw young Massetti under suspicion also originated with me, Vampa and myself carrying it out together. In forming the plan I was actuated by a desire to obtain vengeance upon old Count Massetti for a wrong he did me in the past! Now, your Eminence, you know the whole black history!"

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Pasquale Solara ceased and sank back into the arms of the two soldiers who were supporting him, totally overcome by the terrible exertions he had made in delivering his crushing testimony, and lay there a helpless, quivering mass. As they were about to remove him from the witness stand a sudden thought occurred to him, and with a herculean effort he straightened himself up, making a sign to the Court that he had something further to communicate.

"Speak, witness," said Cardinal Monti, in response to this sign.

"Your Eminence," resumed the shepherd, slowly and painfully, "I wish to say yet another word. I received my death wound at the hands of the Viscount Massetti!"

There was a quick stir among those who heard this unexpected accusation and a score of eyes, including those of Cardinal Monti and his associates on the judicial bench, were instantly fixed upon the young Italian, who glanced at Monte-Cristo and the lawyers with a look of consternation. The Count was about to address the Court in explanation, when old Solara, who had paused to recover breath, added:

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"But I richly deserve what I received and it is fitting that I should die by the hand of the man I sought to ruin! The wound, however, was dealt me in a perfectly fair duel and with my latest breath I shall exonerate the Viscount from all blame in the matter as I do now!"

The concluding portion of old Solara's last speech was a surprise. Massetti drew a long breath of relief. It was scarcely probable that he would be prosecuted by the Roman authorities for fighting a duel with the shepherd under the circumstances, and the wounded man had voluntarily removed every suspicion of foul play from him. Monte-Cristo and the lawyers cast congratulatory glances at the young Italian. His rehabilitation now only needed Vampa's conviction and sentence to be perfect, and it could not for an instant be doubted that they would speedily follow.

The effect of her father's testimony or rather confession upon Annunziata had been startling. It completely shattered all her convictions, placing her misfortunes in a new and horrible light. The Viscount was innocent as he had steadily asserted, and her parent stood revealed to her in all his moral hideousness; he was a monster, a demon; he had made his fearful revelations only when death was upon him and reparation was impossible; besides, there was nothing noble or elevating about his remorse—it was thoroughly characteristic of the man—altogether selfish, induced solely by the fear of consequences in the world to come. Annunziata felt as if all faith in humanity had been withdrawn from her, and as she gradually realized the full meaning of her father's words she closed her eyes and with a gasp sank fainting into the arms of Mme. de Rancogne, who, hardly less shocked and surprised than the poor girl herself, used every effort to revive her, finally succeeding.

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In the little group consisting of Zuleika, Valentine, M. Morrel and Espérance uncertainty prevailed for some moments. They had been unable to catch what old Solara had said, to glean more than a general idea that his testimony had been against Vampa. As soon, however, as his emotion permitted him to do so Giovanni went to them and communicated the glad tidings. Zuleika was almost overcome by the immensity of her joy and with difficulty restrained herself from embracing her lover directly in the face of the august Court and the assembled spectators. Valentine was ready to weep with delight and her husband felt as much triumph as if he had won a decisive victory over the combined enemies of France. As for Espérance, he was both enraptured and ashamed—enraptured that the dark stain was removed from Giovanni's name and ashamed that he had been so blind and unjust as to wrongfully suspect him.

When the gist of Pasquale Solara's evidence was whispered around among the audience the

Court officers were powerless to suppress the expressions of horror and enthusiasm. Had the shepherd not been closely guarded by the soldiers he certainly would have been torn to pieces and trodden under foot, so great was the tide of popular indignation against him. At last, however, the tumult subsided and Cardinal Monti, addressing the brigand chief, said:

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"Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar, you have heard the testimony. What have you to say in your defense?"

Vampa forced to his feet by the policemen replied, doggedly and sullenly:

"Nothing!"

Cardinal Monti then turned to his associates on the judicial bench and a brief conference ensued, after which he arose and facing Vampa said, solemnly:

"Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar, the judgment of the Papal Court is that you are guilty, first of the murder of Lorenzo Solara, though as he attacked you the crime has been placed in the second degree, second of the abduction of Annunziata Solara, and third of conspiracy to indelibly blacken the character of a worthy Roman nobleman, the Viscount Giovanni Massetti. Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar, the sentence of the Papal Court is that you be taken hence back to your dungeon in the Castle of St. Angelo, there to undergo solitary imprisonment for life. As this sentence renders it unnecessary to proceed to an examination of the other and less important charge against you, that of robbery on the public highways and of maltreating your captives, your trial is now at an end. Luigi Vampa, prisoner at the bar, may God have mercy upon you and bring you to repentance and ultimate salvation!"

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Cardinal Monti resumed his seat amid loud murmurs of applause and satisfaction. When these died away the clerk declared the Court adjourned, the convict was removed and the audience slowly dispersed.

Mme. de Rancogne and Annunziata Solara immediately returned to the Refuge in Civita Vecchia, where the poor girl lay prostrated for many weeks. After his confession of his infamous deeds she had no further desire to see her despicable and degraded father.

Monte-Cristo and his party rode joyously back to the Hôtel de France in the Count's barouche.

That evening no happier persons existed upon earth than Giovanni and Zuleika.

CHAPTER XXX.

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JOY UNBOUNDED.

The news of the result of Luigi Vampa's trial spread with the utmost rapidity throughout Rome and occasioned the wildest rejoicing, still further augmenting the popularity of Monte-Cristo and Captain Morrel, who were credited by the Roman populace with having brought about the dreaded brigand chief's conviction and inspired his sentence. Everywhere, while the vast importance of old Pasquale Solara's testimony was recognized and admitted, the wretched shepherd himself was execrated as an unnatural, heartless father, as a diabolical scoundrel without a single redeeming trait. The fact of his having turned State's evidence saved him from the heavy hand of the law, but his mortal wound would soon rid the world of him and this circumstance occasioned hearty congratulation in all quarters.

The morning succeeding Vampa's trial a messenger arrived at the Hôtel de France from the Count Massetti, bearing a brief note in which the aged nobleman begged his son to come to him at once. Giovanni exhibited this note triumphantly to Zuleika and the friends who had labored so untiringly and successfully in his cause, and, together with the Count of Monte-Cristo and M. Morrel, immediately repaired to the Palazzo Massetti in Monte-Cristo's barouche. The old Count received his son with open arms and cordially greeted Monte-Cristo and Maximilian.

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"Giovanni," said he, frankly, "I admit that I was wrong, that I was led astray by what seemed to me to be convincing proof. My pride and honor revolted at the stain apparently cast upon them and I acted as almost any Roman father would have done. I acknowledge that I was hasty, that I proceeded to extremities without due reflection or examination. These admissions in the presence of your noble, self-sacrificing friends cost me dear, but, you observe that I do not shrink from them, notwithstanding the deep humiliation. I humbly ask your forgiveness and restore all I have taken from you. Again you are my beloved son and heir."

The old nobleman paused, greatly affected; his eyes were full of tears, tears of mingled contrition and delight. The Viscount's emotion was such that for an instant he was unable to reply. He, however, recovered control of himself with a mighty effort, and said, in a voice tremulous with his colossal joy:

"Father, I have nothing to forgive. Appearances warranted all you did, and I can only thank Heaven that the truth has been developed before it was too late!"

With these words he threw himself upon the old Patrician's neck. The Count embraced him,

drawing him to his heart and their tears mingled together, for Giovanni also was weeping now.

Slowly and as if reluctantly releasing his recovered and rehabilitated son, the Count turned to M. Morrel.

"Captain," he said, "I owe you an ample apology for my haughty and imperious treatment when you stated to me the object of your mission to Rome. I tender it at this moment and venture to hope that you will accept it even though it comes at the eleventh hour!" [Pg 365]

"Count," replied Maximilian, "I should be worse than a boor did I not accept it. Here is my hand in token of my renewed friendship and esteem."

Old Massetti took the Captain's proffered hand and pressed it warmly.

"You fully sustain the reputation of the great nation to which you belong," said he, with the utmost cordiality, "—you are as noble as you are generous!"

"Count," answered M. Morrel, bowing profoundly, "you flatter me! Say rather that I am a French soldier and as such never shrink from my duty no matter in what shape it may come!"

"As you please, Captain," returned the aged nobleman, with an agreeable smile. "To my apology I must, however, add my gratitude for all you have done to aid Giovanni and in the expression of that gratitude I must include Mme. Morrel, of whose heroic exploit in the Colosseum and subsequent devotion to my son in his hour of mental darkness I have heard."

Maximilian again bowed profoundly.

Advancing to the Count of Monte-Cristo the elder Massetti said:

"Now, your Excellency, it is your turn. Your name and deeds have long been familiar to me, but to whom are they not familiar! Still, though you have frequently honored Rome with your illustrious presence, never have I had the pleasure of meeting you until this happy day when I, too, am included in the long list of those who have received overwhelming benefits at your hands. Edmond Dantès, Count of Monte-Cristo, I owe to you my son's restoration to sanity brought about by little less than a miracle, a blessing almost as great as his rehabilitation, for which also I am on the endless roll of your debtors." [Pg 366]

Monte-Cristo bowed, but made no reply.

"My debt, vast as it is," continued old Massetti, "is I learn to be yet further augmented by an alliance between our two houses, and I need not tell you that this increase of my obligations will be a burden of joy that I shall accept with thanks to Heaven for the signal favor shown me!"

Monte-Cristo repeated his bow and said:

"You ratify the compact between our two children then, Count Massetti?"

"With more delight than I can express!" replied the latter, enthusiastically. "May I ask another favor of your Excellency?" he added, suddenly.

"Certainly," said Monte-Cristo, somewhat astonished and casting a look of inquiry at his venerable host.

"In that case," resumed the aged nobleman, "I would like to welcome your daughter immediately to the Palazzo Massetti!"

"She shall be sent for without an instant's delay," answered Monte-Cristo. "Giovanni, return in the barouche to the Hôtel de France and bring Zuleika to your father!"

The young man joyously obeyed and in a very short space of time Monte-Cristo's daughter came timidly and blushing into the presence of the Count Massetti, leaning upon the arm of her betrothed, whose countenance fairly shone with happiness. The youthful pair were accompanied by Mme. Morrel. [Pg 367]

When the presentations had been made, the venerable Patrician stood for a moment contemplating his future daughter-in-law.

"So this is Zuleika!" he said at length. "She is a beautiful and charming girl, and I do not doubt that the attractions of her mind are fully equal to those of her person! My child," he continued, addressing Monte-Cristo's daughter, "I welcome you to my home and to my heart! Make Giovanni as happy as I know he will make you! Now, my children, accept a father's blessing!"

The young couple knelt at the old man's feet and he extended his hands above their heads. When they arose he took Zuleika in his arms and tenderly kissed her.

In the general joy Valentine was not forgotten, the aged Count renewing to her the expression of his gratitude he had previously made to her husband in her behalf.

It was ultimately arranged that the marriage contract should be signed within a week, and this formality was complied with in the presence of many of the young Viscount's relatives, of Monte-Cristo, Mercédès, M. and Mme. Albert de Morcerf, Espérance and M. and Mme. Morrel, Mercédès and the Morcerfs having come post-haste to Rome to take part in the auspicious event. Monte-Cristo gave his daughter the dowry of a Princess and his liberality was fully matched by [Pg 368]

that of the Count Massetti who settled upon Giovanni a fortune equal to that of some oriental potentate.

The marriage took place in Rome and was a grand affair, the wedding festivities lasting all day and far into the night. The happy occasion had the character of a public rejoicing, for the populace grateful to the Count of Monte-Cristo and Maximilian Morrel for the suppression of Luigi Vampa and his dangerous outlaws, who for years had been the terror of rich and poor alike, paraded the streets in vast bodies in honor of Zuleika's nuptials with the man whom the notorious brigand chief had so nearly succeeded in overwhelming with irretrievable ruin and disgrace.

From a very early hour in the morning the Palazzo Massetti was surrounded by cheering and enthusiastic throngs, and by eight o'clock the vast gardens of the Massettis' were thrown open freely to all who chose to enter. The preparations there were on a gigantic and princely scale. Huge tables had been placed in various broad alleys and literally groaned beneath the weight of the abundant and inviting refreshments, while vast casks of excellent wines were on tap. An army of servants waited upon the people, liberally supplying them with the appetizing edibles and the exhilarating product of the vintage. The Papal and French flags were everywhere displayed in company, and the beauty of the decorations of the gardens was such as to excite universal wonder and admiration. The health of the Viscount Massetti and his charming bride was drunk thousands of times amid acclamations of delight, but throughout the whole colossal assemblage perfect order was preserved, the military police on duty finding their occupation a sinecure.

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Immediately in front of the Palazzo Massetti a triumphal arch had been erected. It was covered with the intertwined ensigns of Rome and France and at its apex bore an appropriate motto formed of creamy white orange blossoms and scarlet roses.

The interior of the palazzo rivaled in dazzling splendor the most superb and gorgeous vision that ever entranced a devotee of hatching while dreaming under the potent influence of his favorite drug.

In the principal salon were gathered many personages with whom the reader is familiar, all in festal attire—the Count of Monte-Cristo and his beloved wife Mercédès, their friends Maximilian and Valentine Morrel, Espérance, Mlle. Louise d' Armilly and M. and Madame Albert de Morcerf. Many noble relatives of the groom were also present, to say nothing of hosts of acquaintances. Old Count Massetti, who seemed rejuvenated and whose venerable countenance was wreathed in smiles of joy, moved about among his guests the happiest of the happy.

Presently a door was thrown open, a valet announced the bride and groom and Giovanni entered proudly with the lovely Zuleika hanging upon his arm, her beauty heightened by her blushes and diffidence. She wore a magnificent robe of white satin that a Queen might have envied and the radiance of diamonds of inestimable value flashed from a tasteful necklace that adorned her pearly throat; upon her night black hair rested a wreath of orange blossoms and her flowing bridal veil was fastened back by a sparkling emerald pin.. A murmur of admiration and approval arose from the guests as they beheld Monte-Cristo's daughter and noted her unequalled charms.

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The procession to St. Peter's was witnessed by compact masses of spectators, who loudly cheered the bride and groom and hailed with tumultuous applause all the well-known personages as they in turn appeared.

Within the vast cathedral the concourse was immense, but was kept at a suitable distance by uniformed ushers.

The Pope himself united the young couple in the holy bonds of wedlock, having consented to do so in consequence of his high esteem for the Massetti house, the oldest and most aristocratic in his dominions, and out of consideration for the Count of Monte-Cristo, whose wonderful history had penetrated even the august portals of the Vatican. At the close of the impressive ceremony His Holiness blessed the newly-made husband and wife, and immediately afterwards the grand organ burst out with a triumphal peal, an unseen choir chanting a jubilant marriage hymn, whereupon the bride and groom surrounded by their bridesmaids and groomsmen, Espérance holding the first place among the latter, received the congratulations of their relatives and friends.

That night there was unbounded festivity at the Palazzo Massetti, the glad celebration terminating with a grand ball and an elaborate supper. The next morning Giovanni and Zuleika started upon an extended bridal tour which was to embrace the most interesting portions of Europe.

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Eventually they settled in Paris, as they had originally decided, where Giovanni bought a magnificent residence, furnishing it with all the luxury of the orient.

Their married life was as happy as it was favored, and Zuleika never had occasion to regret that she had clung to Giovanni when all the rest of the world seemed to have deserted him.

Espérance and the young husband at once became as fast friends as ever, and the dark cloud that had separated them in the past was completely forgotten.

The Count of Monte-Cristo and Mercédès continued to lead a tranquil and charming existence in the palatial mansion on the Rue du Helder. Upon the elevation of Louis Napoleon to power the Count, who distrusted him and his schemes, abandoned politics and the agitation of public life forever, contenting himself with doing all the good in his power and aiding the needy in a quiet,

unostentatious way. His daughter and her husband spent a great deal of their time at the family mansion, and the Count and Mercédès acquired additional delight thereby. Albert de Morcerf, his wife and Mlle. Louise d' Armilly remained inmates of the Monte-Cristo residence, aiding not a little in promoting the comfort and happiness of their generous and agreeable hosts.

Maximilian Morrel and his wife returned to Marseilles, but they were frequently in Paris and never failed to find vast enjoyment and gratification in the society of the Monte-Cristos, the Masettis and their friends.

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Giovanni's father died a year or two after the marriage of his son, leaving him his title, his palaces, his vineyard and all his colossal wealth; but even this change in his condition did not induce the young Count to return to Rome, where the sad associations of the past were too powerful for him.

Old Solara expired in the hospital at Rome a few days subsequent to Vampa's trial, and Annunziata lived long with Mme. de Rancogne in the Refuge at Civita Vecchia, drawing what consolation she could from abundant good works.

Peppino and Beppo remained in the service of the Count of Monte-Cristo, leading honest and upright lives.

Waldmann and Siebecker were caught red-handed in the commission of a murder and ended their iniquitous association on the scaffold, the knife of the guillotine ridding the world of two extremely dangerous wretches.

As for Danglars, he suddenly disappeared from Paris one day and was heard of no more.

THE END.

*** END OF THE PROJECT GUTENBERG EBOOK MONTE-CRISTO'S DAUGHTER ***

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