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SERVANTS OF SIN

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

ROMANCES

**IN THE DAY OF ADVERSITY
ACROSS THE SALT SEAS
THE CLASH OF ARMS
DENOUNCED**

**THE SCOURGE OF GOD
THE HISPANIOLA PLATE
FORTUNE'S MY FOE
A GENTLEMAN ADVENTURER
THE DESERT SHIP**

NOVELS OF TO-DAY

**A BITTER HERITAGE
HIS OWN ENEMY
THE SILENT SHORE
THE SEAFARERS**

SERVANTS OF SIN

A ROMANCE

BY

JOHN BLOUNDELLE-BURTON

"HOW DOTH THE CITY SIT SOLITARY THAT WAS
FULL OF PEOPLE! NOW IS SHE BECOME AS A
WIDOW! SHE THAT WAS GREAT AMONG THE
NATIONS AND PRINCESS AMONG THE PROVINCES."

**METHUEN & CO.
36 ESSEX STREET W.C.
LONDON
1900**

TO
MY FRIEND
ERNEST FOSTER

CONTENTS

CHAP.

- I.** **MONSIEUR LE DUC.**
- II.** **LES DEMOISELLES MONTJOIE AT HOME.**
- III.** **THE ROMANCE OF MONSIEUR VANDECQUE.**
- IV.** **A SISTER OF MERCY.**
- V.** **THE DUKE'S DESIRE**
- VI.** **THE DUKE'S BRIDE.**
- VII.** **MAN AND WIFE.**
- VIII.** **THE STREET OF THE HOLY APOSTLES.**
- IX.** **ALONE.**
- X.** **THE PRISON OF ST. MARTIN DES CHAMPS.**
- XI.** **THE CONDEMNED.**
- XII.** **MARSEILLES.**
- XIII.** **"MY WIFE! WHAT WIFE? I HAVE NO WIFE."**
- XIV.** **WHERE IS THE MAN?**
- XV.** **THE PEST.**
- XVI.** **"I HAD NOT LIVED TILL NOW, COULD SORROW KILL."**
- XVII.** **AN ARISTOCRATIC RESORT.**
- XVIII.** **"THE ABANDONED ORPHAN"--PROLOGUE**
- XIX.** **"THE ABANDONED ORPHAN"--DRAMA**
- XX.** **"THE WAY TO DUSTY DEATH"**
- XXI.** **A NIGHT RIDE.**
- XXII.** **THE STRICKEN CITY.**
- XXIII.** **WITHIN THE WALLS.**
- XXIV.** **A DISCOVERY.**
- XXV.** **FACE TO FACE.**
- XXVI.** **"REVENGE--BITTER! ERE LONG BACK ON ITSELF RECOILS!"**
- XXVII.** **"I LOVE HER!--SHE IS MY WIFE."**

XXVIII. THE WALLED-UP DOORS.

XXIX. ASLEEP OR AWAKE.

XXX. "IF AFTER EVERY TEMPEST COME SUCH CALMS!"

SERVANTS OF SIN

CHAPTER I

MONSIEUR LE DUC

Lifting aside the heavy tapestry that hung down in front of the window of the tourelle which formed an angle of the room--a window from which the Bastille might be seen frowning over the Quartier St. Antoine, a third of a mile away--the man shrugged his shoulders, uttered a peevish exclamation, and muttered, next:

"Snow! Snow! Snow! Always snow! Curse the snow!" Then he turned back into the room, letting the curtain fall behind him, and seated himself once more in a heavy fauteuil opposite the great fireplace, up the chimney of which the logs roared in a cheerful blaze.

"Hard winters, now," he muttered once more, still thinking of the weather outside; "always hard winters in Paris now. 'Twas so when I rode back here after the campaign in Spain was over. When I rode back," he repeated, "a year ago." He paused, reflecting; then continued:

"Ay, a year ago. Why! so it was. A year ago to-day. A year this very day. The last day of December. Ay, the bells were ringing from Notre Dame, St. Roch--the Tour St. Jacques. To welcome in the New Year. Almost, it seemed, judging by the events of the next few weeks, to welcome me to my inheritance. To my inheritance! Yet, how far off that inheritance seemed once! As far off as the love of those curs, my relatives, was then."

He let himself sink farther and farther into the deep recesses of the huge fauteuil as thus he mused, stretched out his long legs towards the fire, stretched out, too, a long arm and a long, slim brown hand towards where a flask of tokay stood, with a goblet by its side; poured out a draught and drank it down.

"A far-off love, then," he said again, "now near, and warm, and generous. Bah!"

Looking at the man as he lay stretched in the chair and revelling in the luxury and comfort by which he was surrounded, one might have thought there was some incongruity between him and those surroundings. The room--the furniture and hangings--the latter a pale blue, bordered with fawn-coloured lace--the dainty ornaments, the picture let in the wall above the chimney-piece, with others above the doorway and windows--did not match with the occupant. No more than it and they matched with a bundle of swords in one corner of it; swords of all kinds. One, a heavy, straight, cut-and-thrust weapon; another an English rapier with flamboyant blade and straight quillon; a third of the Colichemarde pattern; a fourth a viperish-looking spadron; a fifth a German Flamberg with deadly grooved blade and long-curved quillons.

Surely a finished swordsman this, or a man who had been one!

Looking at him one might judge that he was so still--or could be so upon occasion.

His wig was off--it hung upon the edge of an old praying-chair that was pushed into a corner as though of no further use; certainly of none to the present occupant of this room--and his black-cropped hair, his small black moustache, which looked like a dab stuck on his upper lip--since it

extended no further on either side of his face than beneath each nostril--added to his black eyes, gave him a saturnine expression, not to say a menacing one. For the rest, he was a thick-set, brawny man of perhaps five-and-forty, with a deeply-tanned complexion that looked as though it had been exposed to many a pitiless storm and many a fierce-beating sun; a complexion that, were it not for a whiteness beneath the eyes, which seemed to tell of late hours and too much wine, and other things that often enough go with wine and wassail, would have been a healthy one.

Also, it was to be noted that, in some way, his apparel scarcely seemed suited to him. The satin coat of russet brown; the deep waistcoat of white satin, flowered with red roses and pink daisies and little sprays of green leaves; the white knee-breeches also of satin, the gold-buckled shoes, matched not with the sturdy form and fierce face. Instead of this costume *à la Régence* one would have more expected to see the buff jerkin of a soldier, the brass spurs at the heels of long brown riding-boots, and, likewise, one of the great swords now reclining in the corner buckled close to his thigh. Or else to have seen the man sitting in some barrack guardroom with, beneath his feet, an uncarpeted floor, and, to his hand, a pint stoop, instead of finding him here in this highly-ornamented saloon.

"The plague seize me!" he exclaimed, using one of his favourite oaths, "but there is no going out to-night. Nor any likelihood of anyone coming in. I cannot go forth to gaze upon my adorable Laure; neither Morlaix nor Sainte Foix are likely to get here."

And, after glancing out at the fast falling snow, he abandoned himself once more to his reflections. Though, now, those reflections were aided by the perusal of a packet of letters which he drew forth from an escritoire standing by the side of the fireplace. A bundle of letters all written in a woman's hand.

He knew them well enough--by heart almost; he had read them over and over again in the past year; it was perhaps, therefore, because of this that he now glanced at them as they came to his hand; it happening, consequently, that the one he had commenced to peruse was the last he had received.

It was dated not more than a week back--the night before Christmas, of the year 1719.

"Mon ami," it commenced, "I am desolated with grief that you cannot be with me this Christmastide. I had hoped so much that we should have spent the last New Year's Day together before our marriage."

"Bah!" exclaimed the man, impatiently. "Before our marriage. Bah!" and he rattled the sheet in his hand as he went on with its perusal. "I imagine that," the letter continued, "after all which has gone before and has been between us it will ere long take place----."

"Ah!" he broke off once more, exclaiming, "Ah! you imagine that, dear Marquise. You imagine that. Ha! you imagine that. So be it. Yet, on my part, I imagine something quite the contrary. I dare to imagine it will never take place. I think not. There are others--there is one other. Laure--Laure--Laure Vauxcelles. My beautiful Laure! Yet--yet--I know not. Am I wise? Does she love me? Love me! No matter about that! She will be my wife; the mother of future Desparres. However, let us see. To the Marquise." And again he regarded his letters--flinging this one aside as though not worth the trouble of further re-reading--and took up another. Yet it, also, seemed scarcely to demand more consideration than that which he had accorded its forerunner in his hands, and was also discarded; then another and another, until he had come to the last of the little packet--that which bore the earliest date. This commenced, however, with a vastly different form of address than did the one of which we have seen a portion. It opened with the pretty greeting, "My hero." And it opened, too, with a very feminine form of rejoicing--a pæan of delight.

"At last, at last, at last, my soldier," the writer said, "at last, thou hast come to thine own. The unhappy boy is dead; my hero, my Alcides, is no longer the poor captain following the wars for hard knocks; his position is assured; he is rich, the inheritor, nay, the possessor of his great family title. I salute you, monsieur le----."

As his eyes reached those words, there came to his ears the noise of the great bell pealing in the courtyard as though rung by one seeking immediate entrance. Then, a moment later, the noise of lackeys addressing one another; in another instant, the sound of a footfall in the corridor outside--drawing nearer to the room where the man was. Wherefore he came out of the tower with the window in it, to which he had vainly gone, as though to observe what might be happening in the street--knowing even as he did so that he could see nothing, since, whoever his visitor might be, that visitor and his carriage, or sedan-chair, had already entered the courtyard with his menials.

Then, in answer to the soft knock at the door, he bade the person come in.

"Who is below?" he asked of the footman, thinking some friend had kindly ventured forth on this inclement night to visit him--perhaps to take a hand at pharaon or piquet.

"Monsieur, it is Madame la Marquise----"

"La Marquise?"

"Grignan de Poissy."

For a moment the man addressed stood still, facing his servant; his eyes a little closed, his upper eyelids lowered somewhat; then he said quietly:

"Show Madame la Marquise to this apartment. Or, rather, I will come with you to welcome Madame la Marquise." While, suiting his action to his words, he preceded the footman to the head of the great staircase and warmly welcomed the lady who, by this time, was almost at the head of it. Doubtless, she knew she would not be denied.

That this man had been (as the letter, which he had a few moments ago but glanced at, said) "a poor captain following the wars" was no doubt the fact; now, however, he was becoming a perfect courtier, and testified that such was the case by his demeanour. With easy grace he removed from her shoulders the great furred houppelande, or cloak, which the ladies of the period of the Regency wore on such a night as this, and carried it over his own arm; with equal grace he led her into the room he had but now quitted, placed her in the great fauteuil before the fire, and put before her feet a footstool, while he, with great courtesy, even removed her shoes, and thus left her silk-stockinged feet to benefit by the genial warmth thrown out by the logs.

"I protest it is too good of you, Diane," he whispered, as he paid her all these attentions, "too good of you to visit thus so idle an admirer as I am. See, I, a soldier, a man used to all weathers, have not dared to quit my own hearth on such a night as this. Yet Diane, adorable Diane, why--why--expose yourself to the inclemency of the night--even, almost, I might say, to the gossip of your--and of my--menials."

"The gossip of your menials!" the lady exclaimed. "The gossip of your menials? Will this fresh incident expose us to any further gossip, do you suppose? It is a long while since our names have been coupled together, Monsieur le Duc."

"Monsieur le Duc!" he repeated. "What a form of address! Monsieur le Duc! My name to you is--has ever been--Armand."

"Ay, 'tis so," she answered, while, even as she continued speaking a little bitterly to him, she shifted her feet upon the footstool, so that they should get their full share of the luxurious warmth of the fire. "'Tis so. Has been so for more years now than a woman cares to count. Desparre," she said, addressing him shortly, "how long have we known each other--how old am I?"

For answer he gave her a deprecatory shrug of the shoulders, as though it were impossible such a question should be asked, or, being asked, could possibly be answered by him; while she, her blue eyes fixed upon his face, herself replied to the question. "It is twenty years," she said, "since we first met."

"Alas!" with another shrug, meant this time to express a wince of emotion.

"Yes, twenty years," she continued. "A long while, is it not? I, a young widow then; you, Armand Desparre, a penniless porte-drapeau in the Regiment de Bellebrune. Yet not so penniless either, if I remember aright"--and the blue eyes looked steely now, as they gazed from beneath their thick auburn fringe at him--"not penniless. You lived well for an ensign absolutely without private means--rode a good horse, could throw a main with the richest man in the regiment."

"Diane," he interrupted, "these suggestions, these reminiscences are unseemly."

"Unseemly! Heavens! Yes, they are unseemly. However, no matter for that. You are no longer a poor man. Armand Desparre is rich, he is no more the poor marching soldier, he is Monsieur le Duc Desparre."

"More recollections," he said, with still another shrug. "Diane, we know all this. The world, our world, knows who and what I am."

"Also our world knows, expects, that there is to be a Duchess Desparre."

"Yes," he answered, "it knows, it expects, that."

"Expects! My God!" she exclaimed vehemently, "if it knew all it would not only expect but insist that that duchesse should be the woman who now bears the title of the Marquise Grignan de Poissy."

"It does not know all. Meanwhile," and his eye glanced towards the heap of swords in the corner of the room, "who is there to insist on what my conduct shall be--to order it to be otherwise than I choose it shall be? Frankly, Diane, who is there to insist and make the insistence good?"

"There are men of the De Poissy family," she replied, and her glance, too, rested on those swords. "Desparre is not the only master of fence in Paris."

"Chut! They are your kinsmen. I do not desire to slay them, nor, I presume, will they desire to slay me. And, desiring, what could they do? De Poissy himself is only a boy."

"He is the head of the house. He will not see the wife of the late head slighted." Then, before he could make any answer to this remark, she turned round suddenly on him and exclaimed, while again the blue eyes looked steely through their heavy lashes:

"Who is Laure Vauxcelles?"

This question, asked with such unexpectedness, startled even the man's cynical superciliousness, as he showed by the way in which he stammered forth an answer that was no answer at all.

"Laure--Vauxcelles! What--what--do you know of her? She is not of your--our--class."

"Pardon. Every woman who is well favoured is--of your class."

"What do you know of her?" he repeated, unheeding the taunt, though with a look that might have been regarded as a menacing one.

"Only," she answered, "that which most of those who are of your--our--class know. The gossip of the salon, the court, the Palais Royal. Armand Desparre, I have been in Paris two days and was bidden to the Regent's supper last night--otherwise I should have been still at the Abbaye de Grignan dispensing New Year hospitality with the boy, De Poissy. Instead, therefore, I was at supper in the oval room. And de Parabère, de Sabran, de Noailles, le Duc de Richelieu--a dozen, were there. One hears gossip in the oval room, 'specially when the Regent has drunk sufficient of that stuff," and she nodded towards Monsieur's still unfinished flask of tokay. "When he is asleep at the head of his table endeavouring to--well--sleep off--shake off its fumes ere going to his box close by to hear La Gautier sing."

"What did you hear?" Desparre asked now.

"Gossip," the Marquise answered. "Gossip. Perhaps true--perhaps idle. God knows. The story of a man," she continued, with a shrug of her shoulders, "no longer young, once very poor, yet always with pistoles in his pocket, since he did not disdain to take gifts from a foolish woman whom he had wronged and who loved him."

"Was that mentioned?"

"It was hinted at. It was known, too, by one listener, at least--myself--to be true. A man," she continued, "now well to do, able to gratify almost every desire he possesses. Of high position. The story of a man," she went on with machine-like insistence, "who, finding at last, however, one desire he is not able to gratify--the desire of adding one more woman to his victims, and that a woman young enough to be his daughter--is about to change his character. To abandon that of knave, to adopt that of fool."

"Also," interrupted Monsieur le Duc, "a man who will demand from Madame la Marquise Grignan de Poissy the name of her gossip. It is to be desired that that gossip should be a man. Otherwise, her nephew the Marquis Grignan de Poissy will perhaps consent to be Madame's representative."

"To adopt the rôle of a fool," she continued, unheeding his words. "To marry the woman--the niece of a broken-down gamester--who refuses to become his victim. A creature bred up in the gutter!"

"Madame will allow that this--fool--is subject to no control or criticism?"

"Madame will allow anything that Monsieur le Duc desires. Even, if he pleases, that he is a coward and contemptible."

CHAPTER II

LES DEMOISELLES MONTJOIE AT HOME

Outside the snow had ceased to fall; in its place had come the clear, crisp, and biting stillness of an intense frost, accompanied by that penetrating cold which gives those who are subjected to it the feeling that they are themselves gradually freezing, that the blood within them is turning to ice itself. A cold, hard night; with the half-foot long icicles cracking from the increasing density of the frost, and falling, with a little clatter and a shivering, into atoms on the heads or at the feet of the passers-by; a night on which beggars huddled together for warmth in stoops and porches, or,

being solitary, laid down moaning in their agony on doorsteps until, at the end, there came that warm, blissful glow which precedes death by frost. A night when the well-to-do who were abroad drew cloaks, roquelaures, and houppelandes tighter round them as they shivered and shook in chariots and sedan chairs; when dogs were brought in from kennels and placed before the blazing fires so that their unhappy carcasses might be thawed back to life and comfort, and when horses in their stalls had rugs and cloths strapped over their backs so that, in the morning, they should not be found stretched dead upon their straw.

Inside, except in the garrets and other dwellings of the outcasts, who had neither fuel to their fires nor rags to their backs, every effort was made to expel the winter cold; wood fires blazed on hearths and in Alsatian stoves; each nook and cranny of every window was plugged carefully; while men, and in many cases, women as well, drank spiced Lunel and Florence, Richebourg and St. Georges, to keep their temperatures up. And drank copiously, too.

It was the coldest night of the winter 1719-20; the coldest night of that long spell of frost which had gripped Paris in its icy grasp.

Yet, in the salons of the Demoiselles Montjoie that frost was confronted--defeated; it seemed unable to penetrate into the warmed and scented rooms, over every door and window of which was hung arras and tapestry; unable to touch, and cause to shiver in touching, either the bare-shouldered women who lounged in the velvet fauteuils or the group of men who, in their turn, wandered aimlessly about.

"Confusion!" exclaimed one of the latter, a well-dressed, middle-aged man, "when is Susanne about to begin? What are we here for? To gaze into each other's fascinating faces or to recount our week-old scandals? The fiend take it! one might as well be at home and have been spared the encounter with the night air!"

"Have patience, Morlaix!" exclaimed a second; "the game never begins until the pigeons are here. Sportsmen fire not into the air, nor against one another. Do you want to win my louis-d'ors, or I yours? No, no! On the contrary, let us combine. So, so," he broke off, "there come two. The Prince Mirabel and Sainte Foix."

"Mirabel and Sainte Foix!" exclaimed the other. "Mirabel and Sainte Foix! My faith, all we shall get out of them will not make us fat. Sainte Foix cannot have got a thousand louis-d'ors left in the world, and those which he has Mirabel will attach for himself. Mon Dieu! that one of the Rohans should be one of us!"

The other shrugged his shoulders; then he said:

"Speak for yourself, mon ami. Meanwhile, I do not consider myself the same as Mirabel. I have not been kicked out of the army. I am no protector of all the sharpers in Paris. Speak for yourself, my friend. For yourself."

"Now, there," said the other, taking not the slightest notice of his acquaintance's protestations, which he probably reckoned at their proper value. "There is one who might be worth----"

"Nothing! He would have been once, but his money is all gone. La Mothe over there has had some of it, Mirabel also; even I have touched a little. Now, there is none to touch. They even say he owes the respected Duc Desparre twenty thousand livres, and cannot pay them."

"Desparre will expect them."

"That is possible. But I have great doubts--as to his ever getting them, I mean. Yet he is a gentleman, this Englishman; it may be he will find means to pay. It is a pity he does not ask his countryman, John Law, for assistance. He might put him in the way of making something."

"He might; though that I also doubt. Law has bigger friends to help than dissolute young Englishmen; and they are not countrymen, the financier being Scotch. Meanwhile, as I say, Desparre will expect his money. He will want it, rich as he is, for his honeymoon."

"His honeymoon! Faugh! the wretch. He is fifty if an hour. And, frankly, is it true? Has he bought Laure Vauxcelles?"

"Ay, body and soul; from her uncle Vandecque. She is his, and cannot escape; she is in his grip. There is no hope for her. Vandecque is her guardian; our law gives him full power over her. It is obedience to the guardian's orders--or--you know!"

"Yes, I know. A convent; the veil. I know. Ha! speak of the angels! Behold!" and his eyes turned towards the heavily-curtained doorway, at which a woman, accompanied by a man much her senior in years, appeared at the moment.

A woman! Nay! little more than a girl--yet a girl who ere long would be a beautiful woman. Tall and supple, with a figure giving promise of ripe fulness ere many months should have passed, with a face of sweet loveliness--possessing dark hazel eyes, an exquisite mouth, a head crowned with light chestnut hair, one curl of which (called by the roués of the Regent's Court a

"follow me, young man") fell over the shoulder to the fair bosom beneath. The face of a girl to dream of by night, to stand before by day and worship.

No wonder that Desparre, forty-five years of age as he really was, and a dissolute, depraved roué to whom swift advancing age had brought no cessation of his evil yearnings, was supposed to have shown good taste in purchasing this modern Iphigenia, in buying her from her uncle, the gambler, Vandecque--the man who entered now by her side.

In this salon there was a score of women, all of whom were well favoured enough; yet the glances they cast at Laure Vauxcelles showed that they owned their superior here. Moreover, they envied her. Desparre was thought to be enormously rich--had, indeed, always been considered so since he inherited his dukedom; but now that he had thrust his hand into the golden rain that fell in the Rue Quincampoix and, with it, had drawn forth more than a million livres--as many said!--there was not one of them who, being unmarried, would not have sold herself to him. But he had elected to buy Laure Vauxcelles, they understood; and yet Laure hated him. "She was a beautiful fool!" they whispered to each other.

The tables were ready by the time she and her uncle had made their greetings. The "guests" sat down to biribi, pharaon (faro), and lansquenet. It was what they had come for, since the Demoiselles Montjoie kept the most fashionable gambling-house in Paris--a house in which the Regent had condescended to play ere now. A house in which, many years later, a milliner's girl, who was brought there to exhibit her beauty, managed to become transformed into a king's favourite, known afterwards as Madame du Barry.

Soon the gamblers were at it fast and furious. The stockbrokers of the Rues Quincampoix^[1] and Vivienne--not having had enough excitement during the day in buying and selling Mississippi shares--were now engaged in retrieving their losses, if possible, or losing their gains. Even the greater part of the women had left the velvet lounges and fauteuils and were tempting fate according to their means, with crowns, louis-d'ors shares of the Royal Bank, or "The Louisiana Company"; gambling in sums from twenty pounds to a thousand.

And Vandecque, Laure's uncle, having now his purse well lined, though once nothing rubbed themselves together within it but a few beggarly coppers, was presiding at the lansquenet table, had flung down an important sum to make a bank, and was--as loudly as the manners of good society under the Regency would permit--inviting all round him to try their chance. While they, on their part, were eager enough to possess themselves of that purse's contents, though he himself had very little fear that such was likely to be the case.

Two there were, however, who sat apart and did not join in the play--one, the ruined young Englishman of whom Morlaix and his companion had spoken, the other, Laure Vauxcelles, the woman who was to be sold in marriage to Desparre. Neither had spoken, however, on Laure's entrance with Vandecque. The man had remained seated on one of the velvet lounges at the far end of the room, his eyes fixed on the richly-painted ceiling, with its cupids and nymphs and goddesses--fitting allegories to the greatest and most aristocratic gambling hell in Paris! The girl, on entering, had cast one swift glance at him from those, hazel eyes, and had then turned them away. Yet he had seen that glance, although he had taken no notice of it.

Presently, the game waxing more and more furious while Vandecque's back was turned to them (he being much occupied with his earnest endeavours to capture all the bank notes and the obligations of the Royal Bank and the Louisiana Company, and the little piles of gold pieces scattered about), the young man rose from his seat, and, walking to where Laure Vauxcelles sat some twenty paces from him, staring straight before her, said:

"This should be almost Mademoiselle's last appearance here. Doubtless Monsieur le Duc is anxious for--for his union with Mademoiselle. When, if one may make so bold to ask, is it likely to take place?"

For answer, the girl seated before him raised her eyes to those of the young Englishman, then--with a glance towards Vandecque's back, rounded as it bent over the table, while he scooped up the stakes which a successful deal of the cards had made his--said slowly:

"Never. Never--if I can prevent it."

She spoke in a low whisper, for fear the gambler should hear her, yet it was clear and distinct enough to reach the ears of the man before her; and, as he heard the words, he started. Yet, because--although he was still very young--the life he had led, the people he had mixed among in Paris, had taught him to steel himself against the exhibition of all emotion, he said very quietly:

"Mademoiselle is, if I may say it, a little difficult. She appears to reject all honest admiration offered to her. To--to desire to remain untouched by the love of any man?"

"The love of any man! Does Monsieur Clarges regard the love of the Duc Desparre as worth having? Does he regard the Duc Desparre as a man? As one whose wife any woman should desire to become?"

Monsieur Clarges shrugged his shoulders, then he said:

"There have been others."

"Yes," she answered. "There have been others."

"And they were equally unfortunate. There was one----"

"There was one," she replied, interrupting, and with her glance firmly fixed him, "who desired my love; who desired me for his wife. A year ago. Is it not so? And, Monsieur Clarges, what was my answer to him? You should know. Recall it."

"Your answer was that you did not love him; that, therefore, you could be no wife of his. Now, Mademoiselle, recall yourself--it is your turn--what he then said. It was this, I think. That he so loved you that, without receiving back any love from you in return, he begged you to grant his prayer; to believe that he would win that love at last if you would but give yourself to him; while, if you desired it, he would so show the reverence he held you in--that, once you were his wife, he would demand nothing more from you. Nothing but that he might be by your side; be but as a brother, a champion, a sentinel to watch and guard over you, although a husband in truth. That was what he said. That was all he desired. Mademoiselle, will the Duc Desparre be as loyal a husband as this, do you think?"

"The Duc Desparre will never be husband of mine."

The Englishman again shrugged his shoulders. He had learnt the trick well during a long exile in Paris--an exile dating from the time when the Pretender's cause was lost by the Earl of Mar, and he, a Jacobite, had followed him to France after the "15."

"But how to avoid it now?" he asked. "The time draws near--is at hand. How escape?"

"Is there not one way?" she asked, with again an upward glance of those eyes.

"No no no!" he replied, his calmness deserting him now. "No! no! Not that! Not that!"

"How else? There is no other."

As they spoke the play still went on at the tables; women shrieked still, half in earnest half in jest, as a card turned up that told against them. Still Vandecque crouched over the board where he held the bank and where his greedy hands drew in the stakes, for he was winning heavily. Already he had twenty thousand livres before him drawn from the pockets of Mirabel, Sainte Foix, the stockbrokers of the Rues Quincampoix and Vivienne, and from the female gamblers. And, gambler himself, he had forgotten all else; he had forgotten almost that the niece whom he guarded so carefully until the time should come when he would hand her over to her purchaser, was in the room.

"It is an accursed law," the Englishman murmured; "a vile, accursed law which gives a father or a guardian such power. In no other country would it be possible. Yet Lau--Mademoiselle--that which you meditate must never be. Oh! to think of it! To think of it!"

He buried his head in his hands now as he spoke--he had taken a seat beside her--and reflected on the terror of the thing, the horror that she, whom he had loved so madly--whom, alas! he loved still, though she cared nothing for him--should be doomed to one of two extremes--marriage with Desparre, or a convent. Or, worse--a third, a more fearful horror! That which she meditated--death!

For that, if she had taken this resolve, she would carry it out he did not doubt. She would never have proclaimed her intention had she not been determined. She had said it was the only way!

But, suddenly, he looked up at her, bent his head nearer to hers, whispered a word. Then said aloud:

"There is your safety. There your only chance. Take it."

As he spoke, she started, and a rich glow came into her face while her eyes sparkled; but a moment later her countenance fell again, and she drew away from him.

"No! no!" she said. "No! no! Not that way. Not that. Not such a sacrifice as that. Never! never never!"

An evening or so after the meeting between Laure Vauxcelles and Walter Clarges at the gambling hell kept by the Demoiselles Montjoie, Vandecque sat in the saloon of his apartments in the Passage du Commerce. Very comfortable apartments they were, too, if bizarre ornaments and rococo furniture, combined with the most gorgeous colours possible to be obtained, could be considered as providing comfort. Yet, since it was a period of bizarrerie and whimsical caprice in furniture, clothing, and life generally (including morals), it may be that, to most people--certainly to most people with whom the once broken-down but now successful gambler was permitted to associate--the rococo nature of his surroundings would not have appeared particularly out of place. And, undoubtedly, such a warm nest must have brought comfort to the heart of the man who paid at the present moment 250f. a week for the right of occupying that nest, since there had been a time once when he scarce knew how to find one franc a day whereby to pay in advance for a night's lodgings in a back alley. Also, he had passed, previously to that period of discomfort, a portion of his life away from Paris in a condition which the French termed politely (whenever they mentioned such an unpleasant subject) "in retreat," and had been subjected to a process that they designated as "*marqué*," which, in plain English, means that he had been at the galleys as a slave and had been branded. "For the cause of religion," he said, if he ever said anything at all on the subject; "for a question of theft and larceny with violence" being, however, written in the factum of the eminent French counsel who appeared against him before the judges in Paris.

His life had been a romance, he was in the habit of observing in his moments of ease, which were when the gambling hells were closed during the day-time, or the stockbrokers' offices in the Rues Quincampoix and Vivienne during the night-time. And so, indeed, it had been if romance is constituted and made up of robbery, cheating, chicanery, the wearing of blazing scarlet coats one month and the standing bare-backed in prison yards during the next, there to have the shoulders and loins scourged with a whip previously steeped in brine. A romance, if drinking flasks of champagne and iced tokay at one period, and water out of street fountains at another, or riding in gilt sedan-chairs one week and being flogged along at a cart tail another, formed one. For all these things had happened to Jean Vandecque, as well as the galleys in the past, with the carcan, or collar around his neck, and the possession of the gorgeous apartments in the Passage du Commerce at the present moment--all these, and many more.

With also another romance--or the commencement and foundation of one. That which has now to be told.

Struggling on foot along the great road that leads from the South to Paris, ten years before this story begins, Jean Vandecque (with the discharge of a liberated convict from the galley *Le Requin* huddled away in the bosom of his filthy shirt) viewed the capital at last--his face burnt black by the Mediterranean suns under which he had slaved for five years, and by the hot winds which had swept over his nakedness during that time. God knows how he would have got so far, how have traversed those weary miles without falling dead by the wayside, had it not been for that internal power which he possessed (in common with the lowest, as well as the highest of beasts) of finding subsistence somehow; of supporting life. An egg stolen here and there along the country roads; a fowl seized, throttled, and eaten raw, if no sticks could be found wherewith to make a fire; a child robbed of a loaf--and lucky that it was not throttled too; a lonely grange despoiled; a shopkeeper's till in some hamlet emptied of a few sous; a woman cajoled out of a drink of common wine; and Paris at last. Paris, the home of the rich and well-to-do; the refuge of every knave and sharper who wished to prey upon others. Paris, into which he limped footsore and weary, and clad in dusty rags; Paris, full of wealth and full of fools to be exploited.

He found his home, or, at least, he found the home in which his unhappy wife sheltered; a garret under the roof of a crazy, tumble-down house behind Notre Dame--found both home and wife after a day's search and many inquiries made in cellars and reeking courts and hideous alleys, into which none were allowed to penetrate except those who bore the brand of vagabond and scoundrel stamped clear and indelible upon them.

Also, he found something else: A child--a girl eight years old--playing in a heap of charred faggots in the chimney; a child who told him that she was hungry, and that there was no food at all in the place.

"Whose is the brat?" he asked of his wife, knowing very well that, at least, it was not hers, since it must of a certainty have been born three years before he went "into retreat" on the Mediterranean. "Whose? Have you grown so rich that you adopt children now; or is it paid for, eh?"

"It is paid for," the patient creature said, shuddering at the man's return, since she had hoped that he had died in the galley and would never, consequently, wander back to Paris to molest her. "Paid for, and will be----"

"Badly paid for, at least, since its adoption leads you to no better circumstances than these in which I find you. Give me some food. I have eaten nothing for hours."

"Nor I; nor the child there. Not for twenty-four hours. I have not a sol; nor anything to sell."

The man looked at his wife from under bushy black eyebrows--though eyebrows not much blacker than his baked face; then he thrust his hand into his pocket and drew forth five sols and weighed them in his hands as though they were gold pieces. He had stolen them that morning from the basket of a blind man sleeping in the sun outside St. Roch, when no one was looking.

"Go, buy bread," he said. "Get something. I am starving. Go."

"Bread--with these! They will not buy enough for one. And we are so hungry, she and I. See, the child weeps for hunger. Have you no more?"

"Not a coin. Have you?"

"Alas! God, He knows! Nothing. And we are dying of hunger."

"How is it you are not at work, earning something?"

"They will trust me no more. They fear I shall sell the goods confided to me. Who entrusts velvets, or silk, or laces to such as I, or lets such as I enter their shops to work there?"

"What is to be done, then?"

"Die," the woman said. "There is nought else to do."

"Bah! In Paris! Imbecile! In Paris, full of wealth and food! Stay here till I return."

And he went swiftly out. Some hours later, when the sun had sunk behind the great roof of the Cathedral, when the children were playing about beneath the spot where the statues were, and when the pigeons were seeking their niches, those three were eating a hearty meal, all seated on the floor, since there was neither chair nor table nor bed within the room; a meal consisting of a loaf, a piece of bacon, and some hard-boiled eggs. The woman and the child got but a poor share, 'tis true, their portions being the morsels which Vandecque tossed to them every now and again; while of a wine bottle, which he constantly applied to his mouth, they got nothing at all. Yet their hunger was appeased; they were glad enough to do without drink.

* * * * *

The passing years brought changes to two of these outcasts, as it did to the wealthy in Paris. Vandecque's wife had died of the small-pox twelve months after his return; the adopted child, Vandecque's *niece*, Mdlle. Vauxcelles, was developing fast into a lovely girl; while as for Vandecque--well! the gallows bird, the man who had worn the iron collar round his neck and who bore upon his shoulders the brand, had disappeared, and in his place had come a grave, sedate person clad always in sombre clothes, yet a man conspicuous for the purity of his linen and lace and the neatness of his attire. While, although he had not as yet attained to the splendour of the Passage du Commerce, his rooms in the Rue du Paon were comfortable and there was no lack of either food, or drink, or fuel--the three things that the outcast who has escaped and triumphed over the miseries and memories of the past most seeks to make sure of in the future.

He was known also to great and rich personages now, he had patrons amongst the nobility and was acquainted with the roués who circled round the Regent. He was prominent, and, as he frequently told himself, was "respected."

He was a successful man.

How he had become so, however, he did not dilate on--or certainly not on the earlier of his successes after his reappearance!--even when making those statements about his romantic life with which he occasionally favoured his friends. Had he done so, he would not, perhaps, have shocked very much the ears, or morals, of his listeners, but he must, at least, have betrayed the names of several eminent patrons for whom he had done dirty work in a manner which might have placed his own ears, if not his life, in danger, and would, thereby, probably have led to his once more traversing the road to Marseilles or to Cette--which is almost the same thing--to again partake of the shelter of the galleys.

Yet he would never have found or come into contact with these illustrious patrons, these men who required secret agents to minister to their private pleasures, had it not been for a stupendous piece of good fortune which befell him shortly after his return to Paris from the Mediterranean. It was, indeed, so strange a piece of good fortune that it may well be set down here as a striking instance of how the Devil takes care of his own.

From his late wife he had never been able to obtain any information as to who "the brat" was whom he had found playing about in the ashes on the hearth in the garret, when he returned from his period of southern seclusion; he had not found out even so much as what name she was supposed to bear, except that of "Laure," which seemed to have been bestowed on the child by

Madame Vandecque on the principle that one name was as good as another by which to call a child. She had said herself that she did not know anything further--that, being horribly poor after Vandecque had departed for the south, she had yielded to the offer of an abbé--now dead--to adopt the girl, twenty-five louis-d'ors being paid to her for doing so. That was all, she said, that she knew. But, she added (with a firmness which considerably astonished her lord and master) that, especially as she had come to love the creature which was so dependent on her, she meant to carry out her contract and to do her best by her. To Vandecque's suspicious nature--a nature sharpened by countless acts of roguery of all kinds--this statement presented itself as a lie, and he believed that either his wife had received a very much larger sum of money in payment for the child's adoption than she had stated, or that she was surreptitiously receiving regular sums of money at intervals on its behalf. Of the two ideas, he inclined more to the latter than the former, and it was owing to this belief that he did not at once take steps to disembarass himself of the burden with which he found himself saddled, and send the child of at once to the Home of the Foundlings whence she would eventually have been sold to a beggar for a few livres and trained to demand alms in the street, as usually happened to deserted children in the reign of Louis the Great. Later on he was thankful--he told himself that he was "devoutly thankful"--that he had never done anything of the sort.

He was one day, about a year after his wife's death, mounting the ricketty stairs which led to the garret in which he had found the woman on his return, when, to his astonishment, he saw a Sister of Charity standing outside the door of his room, looking hesitatingly about her, and glancing down towards him as he ascended to where she was. And it was very evident to him that the woman had been knocking at his door without receiving any answer to her summons. This was a thing certain to happen in any case, since it was Vandecque's habit on quitting his shelter during the day-time to send Laure to play with all the other vagrant children of the alley, and to put the key in his pocket. At night, the plan was varied somewhat when he went forth, the girl being sent to her bed and locked into the room for safety.

"Madame desires--?" he said now, as he reached the landing on which the sister stood, while taking off his frayed hat to her with an inimitable gesture of politeness which his varied and "romantic" career had taught him well enough how to assume when necessary. "Madame desires---"

"To see the woman, Madame Jasmin," the sister answered, her grave solemn eyes roving over the man's poor clothes as she answered. Or, perhaps, since his clothes in such a spot as this would scarcely be out of place, examining his face with curiosity.

"Madame Jasmin!" he repeated to himself, but to himself only--"Madame Jasmin!" How long it was since he had heard that name! Ages ago, it seemed; ages. "Madame Jasmin!" The name his wife had borne as a young widow of twenty, the name she had parted with for ever, on the morning when she gave herself to him at the altar of St. Vincent de Paul. Yet, now, of late years, she seemed to have used it again for some reason, some purpose, and had probably done so during his retreat. Only--what was that purpose? He must know that.

"Madame Jasmin," he said in a subdued voice--a voice that was meant to, and perhaps did, express some sorrow for the worn, broken helpmate and drudge who had gone away and left him, "Madame Jasmin is dead. A year ago. My poor wife was delicate; our circumstances did not conduce to----"

"Ah! your wife. You are, then, Monsieur Jasmin? She doubtless, therefore--you--you understand why I am here? That I have brought what was promised."

Understanding nothing, utterly astonished, yet with those consoling words, "I have brought what was promised," sinking deep into his mind, Vandecque bowed his head acquiescingly.

"I understand," he said. "Understand perfectly. Will not Madame give herself the trouble to enter my poor abode? We can talk there at our leisure." And he opened the door and ushered her within.

CHAPTER IV

A SISTER OF MERCY

Some betterment of his circumstances must have come to Vandecque between the time when he had returned from the South and now (how it had come, whether by villainy or honest labour, if he ever turned his hand to such a thing, it would be impossible to say), since the garret, though

still poor and miserable, presented a better appearance than it had previously done. There were, to wit, some chairs in it at this time; cheap common things, yet fit to sit upon; a table with the pretence of a cloth upon it; also a carpet, with a pattern that must once have been so splendid that the beholder could but conclude that it had passed from hand to hand in its descent, until it had at last' reached this place. A miserable screen also shut off a bed in which, doubtless, Vandecque reposed, while a large cupboard was fitted up as a small bedroom, or closet, in which possibly the child slept.

In one of these chairs the owner of the room invited his visitor to be seated, in the other he placed himself, the table between them. Then, after a pause, while Vandecque's eyes sought again and again those of the sister's, as though their owner was wondering what the next revelation would be, the latter recommenced the conversation. She repeated, too, the purport of her former words, if not the words themselves.

"Doubtless Madame Jasmin told you that you might expect my coming. It has been delayed longer than it should have been. Yet-yet-even in the circumstances of my--of the person for whom I act--money is not always quite easy to be obtained," and she looked at Vandecque as though expecting an answer in assent.

"Naturally. Naturally," he made haste to reply, his quick wits prompting him to understand what that reply should be, while also they told him that this explanation, coupled with the presence here of the visitor, gave an almost certain testimony to the fact that the money mentioned had been now obtained. "Naturally. And--and--it was of no import. Since my poor wife passed away we have managed to struggle through our existence somehow."

Yet he would have given those ears which had so often been in peril of the executioner's knife to know from what possible source any money could have become due to his late wife. Her first husband had died in almost poverty, he recalled; they had soon spent what little he had had to leave his widow. Then, even as he thus pondered, the sister's voice broke in on him again.

"It is understood that this is the last sum. And that it is applied, as agreed upon with your late wife, to the proper bringing up and educating of the child, and to her support by you. You understand that; you give your promise as a man of honour? Your wife said that you were a 'sailor'--sailors are, I have heard, always honourable men."

"I--I was a sailor at the time she took charge of little Laure. As one--as a man of honour--I promise. She shall have nought to complain of. And I have come to love her. I--believe me--I have been good to her, as good as, in my circumstances, I could be."

And, knave as Vandecque was, he was speaking the truth now. He had been good to the child. These two, so strangely brought together, had grown fond of each other, and the vagabond not only found a place in his heart for the little thing, but, which was equally as much to the purpose, found for himself a place in hers. If he had ever seriously thought, in the first days of finding her in his garret, of sending her to the home for abandoned children, he had long since forgotten those ideas. He would not have parted with her now for that possible sum of money which it seemed extremely likely he was going to become the possessor of for having retained her.

"I do not doubt it. Yet, ere I can give you the money, there are conditions to be complied with. First, I must see the child; next, you must give me your solemn promise--a promise in writing--that you will conform to my demands as to the bringing of her up. You will not refuse?"

"Refuse!" said Vandecque. "Refuse! Madame, what is there to refuse? That which you demand is that which I have ever intended, not knowing that you were--not knowing when to expect your coming. Now you have brought the money--you have brought it, have you not?" speaking a little eagerly (for the life of him he could not help that eagerness)--"my dearest desire can be accomplished."

"Yes, I have brought it," the woman answered. "It is here," and she took from out her pocket a little canvas sack or bag, that to Vandecque's eyes looked plump and fat. "It contains the promised sum," she said, "and it is--should be--enough. With that the child can be fed, clothed, educated, if you husband it well. Fitted for a decent, if simple, life. You agree that it is so, Monsieur Jasmin?"

Vandecque bowed his head courteously, acquiescingly, while muttering, "Without doubt it is enough with careful husbanding." Yet, once more he would have given everything, all he had in the world--though 'twas little enough--to know what that small canvas bag contained. While, as for acquiescing in its sufficiency, he would have done that even though it contained but a handful of silver, as he thought might after all be the case.

"Take it then," she said, passing it across the table to him, while the principal thought in Vandecque's mind as she did so was that, whosoever had chosen this simpleton for his, or her agent, must be a fool, or one who had but little choice in the selection of a go-between, "and, if you choose, count the gold; you will find it as promised."

Count the gold! So it was gold! A bag full! Some two or three hundred pieces at least, or he, whose whole life had been spent in getting such things by hook or by crook, in gambling hells, or by, as that accursed advocate had said who prosecuted for the King, theft and larceny, or as a

coiner, was unable to form any judgment. And they were his, must be his, now. Were they not in his own room, to his hand? Even though this idiotic Sister of Charity should decide to repossess herself of them, what chance would she have of doing so. Against him, the ex-galley slave. Him! the knave.

Yet he had to play a part, to reserve his efforts for something more than this present bag of louis'. If one such was forthcoming, another might be, in spite of what the foolish woman had said about it being the last; for were there not such things as spyings and trackings, and the unearthing of secrets; would there not be, afterwards, such things as the discovery of some wealthy man or woman's false step? Oh that it might be a woman's, since they were so much easier to deal with. And then, extortion; blackmail. Ha! there was a bird somewhere in France that laid golden eggs--that would lay golden eggs so long as it lived; one that must be nourished and fed with confidence--at least, at first--not frightened away.

He pushed the bag back towards the Sister, remembering he could wrench it from her again at any moment. With a calm dignity, which might well have become the most highbred gentleman of the Quartier St. Germain hard by, he muttered that, as for counting, such an outrage was not to be thought upon. Also he said:

"Madame has not seen the child. She stipulated that she should do so. Had she not thus stipulated, I must myself have requested her to see her."

Then he quitted the room, leaving the bag of money lying on the table, and, descending one or two of the flights of stairs, sent a child whom he knew, and whom he happened to observe leaving another room, to seek for little Laure and bid her return at once. At one moment ere he descended he had thought of turning the key (which he had left outside when he and his visitor entered the apartment) softly in the lock and thereby preventing her from escaping; but he remembered that he would be on the stairs between her and the street, and that he did not mean to go farther than the doorstep. She was safe.

He returned, therefore, saying that the child would be with them shortly. Then to expedite matters (as he said), he asked if it would not be well for him to sign the receipt as desired? The receipt or promise, as to what he undertook to perform.

"That, too, is here," she replied, while Vandecque's shrewd eye noticed, even as she spoke, that the bag of louis' lay untouched as he had left it. "Read it, then sign."

He did read it, laughing inwardly to himself meanwhile, though showing a grave, thoughtful face outwardly, since his sharp intelligence told him that it was a document of no value whatever. It was made out in the form of a receipt from Madame Jasmin--who had had no legal existence for twelve years, and was now dead--to a person whose name was carefully and studiously omitted from the paper (though that, he knew, would afterwards be filled up) on behalf of a female child, "styled Laure by the woman Jasmin." A piece of paper, he told himself, not worth the drop of ink spilt upon it. Or, even though it were so, not ever likely to be used or produced by the individual who took such pains to shroud himself, or herself, in mystery. A worthless document, which he would have signed for a franc, let alone a bag of golden louis.'

Aloud, however, he said:

"To make it legal in the eyes of his Majesty's judges, the name of my dear wife must be altered to that of mine. Shall I do it or will you?"

"You, if it pleases you."

Whereon Vandecque altered the name of "la femme Jasmin" to that of "le Sieur Jasmin," householder, since, as he justly remarked aloud, he was no longer a sailor, and then, with many flourishes--he being a master hand at penmanship of all kinds--signed beneath the document the words, "Christophe Jasmin." Christophe was not his name, but, as he said to himself saturninely, no more was Jasmin, wherefore he might as well assume the one as the other. Moreover, he reflected that should the paper ever see the light again, it might be just as well for him to be able to deny the whole name as a part of it.

As he finished this portion of the transaction, the door opened and little Laure came in, hot and flushed with the games she had been playing with the other *gamines* of the court, yet with already upon her face the promise of that beauty which was a few years later to captivate the hearts of all who saw her, including the Duc Desparre and the English exile, Walter Clarges. Only, there was as yet no sign upon that face of the melancholy and sorrow which those later years brought to it as she came to understand the life her guardian led; to understand, too, the rottenness of the existence by which she was surrounded. Instead, she was bright and merry as a child of her years should be, gay and insouciant, not understanding nor foreseeing how dark an opening to Life's future was hers. As for externals, she was well enough dressed; better dressed, indeed, than those among whom she mixed. Her little frock of dark Nimes serge--the almost invariable costume of the lowly in France--was not a mass of rags and filth, her boots and thread stockings not altogether a mockery.

"Madame sees," Vandecque remarked, as the child ran towards him with her hands outstretched and her eyes full of gladness, until she stopped, embarrassed at the sight of the

strange lady with the solemn glance; "Madame sees; she recognises that she need have no fear, no apprehension."

"I see." Then, because she was a woman, she called Laure to her and kissed and fondled the child, muttering, "Poor child; poor little thing," beneath her breath. And, though she would have shuddered and besought pardon for days and nights afterwards on her knees, had she recognised what was passing through her mind, she was in truth uttering maledictions on the mother who could thus send away for ever from her so gentle and helpless a little creature as this; who could send her forth to the life she was now leading, to the life that must be before her.

The interview was at an end, and the sister rose from her seat. As for Vandecque, he would willingly have given half of whatever might be in that bag of money still lying on the table--his well-acted indifference to the presence of such a thing preventing him from even casting the most casual glance at it--could he have dared to ask one question, or throw out one inquiry as to whom the principal might be in the affair. Yet it was impossible to do so since he was supposed to know all that his wife had known, while actually not aware if she herself had been kept in ignorance of the child's connections or, on the contrary, had been confided in. "If she had only known more," he thought; "or, knowing more, had only divulged all to me."

But she was in her grave now, and, rascal though he had been, he could not bring himself to curse the poor drudge lying in that grave for having held her peace against such a man as he was, and knew himself to be. If she knew all, then, he acknowledged, it was best she should be silent; if she knew nothing--as he thought most likely--so, also, it was best.

But, still, he meant to know himself, if possible, something about the child's origin. He, at least, was under no promised bond of secrecy and silence; he had never been confided in. For, to know everything was, he felt certain, to see a comfortable future unroll itself before him; a future free from all money troubles--the only discomfort which he could imagine was serious in this world. The person who had sent that bag of louis--the woman had said it contained gold!--he repeated to himself, could doubtless provide many more. He must know who that person was.

With still an easy grace which seemed to be the remnant of a higher life than that in which he now existed, he held the door open for his visitor to pass out; with equally easy politeness he followed her down the rickety stairs and would have escorted her to the end of the court, or alley, and afterwards, unknown to her, have followed the simple creature to whatever portion of Paris she might have gone, never losing sight of his quarry, but that, at the threshold, she stopped suddenly and bade him come no farther.

"It must not be," she said. "Monsieur Jasmin, return. And--forget not your duty to the child."

For a moment he paused dumfounded, perceiving that this simpleton was, in sober truth, no such fool as he had supposed her. Then he bowed, wished her good day, promising all required of him as he did so, and retired back into the passage of the house. Nor could any glance thrown through the crack of the open door aid him farther. He saw her pause at the entrance to the court, and, standing still, look back for some minutes or so, as though desirous of observing if he was following her; also, he saw her glance directed to the window of his room above, as though seeking to discover if he was glancing out of it; if he had rushed up there to spy upon her.

Then, a moment later, she was gone from out the entrance to the court. And, creeping swiftly now to that entrance, and straining his eyes up and down the long street, he observed that no sign of the woman was visible.

He had lost all trace of her.

Amidst the hackney coaches and the hucksters' carts, and, sometimes, a passing carriage of the nobility from the neighbouring Quartier St. Germain, she had disappeared, leaving no sign behind.

CHAPTER V

THE DUKE'S DESIRE

Vandecque never discovered who that woman was, whence she came, nor where she vanished to. Never, though he brought to bear upon the quest which he instituted for her an amount of intelligent search that his long training in all kinds of cunning had well fitted him to put in action. He watched for days, nay, weeks, in the neighbourhood of the Hospital of Mercy, to or from which most of the Sisters, who were not engaged in nursing or other acts of charity elsewhere, passed regularly--yet never, amongst some scores of them who met his eyes, could he discover

the woman he sought. He questioned, too, those in the court who had been dwelling there when first his wife came to occupy the garret in which he had found her later, as to whether they could remember aught of the arrival of the child. He asked questions that produced nothing satisfactory, since all testified to the truth of that which the poor woman had so often told him--namely, that the child was brought to her before she came to this spot. Indeed, he would have questioned Laure herself as to what she could remember concerning her earliest years, only what use was it to ask questions of one who had been but an infant, unable even to talk, at the time the event happened.

At last--and after being confronted for months by nothing but a dense blackness of oblivion which he could not penetrate--he decided that the woman who had appeared to him as a simple and unsophisticated *religieuse*, capable only of blindly and faithfully carrying out the orders given to her by another person, was, in truth, no Sister of Charity whatever, but a scheming person who had temporarily assumed the garb she wore as a disguise. He came also to believe that she herself was Laure's mother, that she had bound herself in some way to make the payment which he had by such extreme good fortune become the recipient of, and that, in one thing at least, she had uttered the actual truth--the actual truth when she had said that those louis' would be the last forthcoming, that there could never be any more. Had she not, he recalled to mind, said that such a sum as she brought was not easily come by, as an excuse for her not having paid them before? Also, had she not wept a little over the child, folded her to her bosom, and called her "Poor little thing"? Did not both these things most probably point to the fact that, judged by the latter actions, she was the girl's mother, and, according to the statement which preceded it, that she was not a woman of extraordinarily large means? Had she been so, she would have been both able and willing to pay down more than five hundred louis' for the hiding of her secret, and would, to have that secret kept always safely (and also to possess the power of seeing the child now and again without fear of detection) have been prepared to make fresh payments from time to time.

For five hundred louis' was what the canvas bag had contained. Five hundred louis', as Vandecque found when, on returning to the garret after losing sight of the woman at the entrance to the court, he had turned them all out on to the table. Five hundred louis' exactly, neither more nor less, proving that the sum was a carefully counted one; doubtless, too, one duly arranged for. Louis' that were of all kinds, and of the reigns during which they had been in existence--the original ones of Louis the Just; the more imposing ones of Le Roi Soleil, with the great sun blazing on the reverse side; the bright, new ones but recently struck for the present boy-king by order of the Regent; all of which led the astute Vandecque to conclude that the pile had been long accumulating--that the first batch might be an old nest egg, or an inheritance; that the second batch was made up of savings added gradually; that the third had been got together by hook or by crook, with a determination to complete the full sum.

"Yet, what matters!" he said, to himself, as he tossed the gold pieces about in his eager hands, and gloated over them with his greedy eyes; tossing, too, a double louis d'or of the treacherous Le Juste, which he had come across, to the child to play with--"what matters where they come from, how they were gathered together to hide a woman's shame? They are mine now! Mine! Mine! Mine! A capital! A bank! The foundation of a fortune, carefully handled! Come, child; come, Laure; come with me. To the *fournisseur's*, first; then to the dining rooms. Some new, clean clothes for both of us, and then a meal to make our hearts dance within us. We are rich, my child; rich, my little one. Rich! Rich! Rich!"

For, to the whilom beggared outcast and galley slave, five hundred louis' were wealth.

Time passed; in truth it seemed that Vandecque was indeed rich, or growing rich. The garret was left behind; four rooms in the Rue du Paon preceded by a year or so that apartment in the Passage du Commerce at which he eventually arrived. Four rooms, one a dining-room, another a parlour, in which at midnight there came sometimes a score of men to gamble--women sometimes came too--and a bedroom for each. He was growing well-to-do, his capital accumulating as capital will accumulate in the hands of the man who always holds the bank and makes it a stipulation that, on those terms alone, can people gamble beneath his roof.

Meanwhile Laure was fast developing into a woman--was one almost. She was now seventeen, for she was within a year of the time when the exile, Walter Clarges, was to whisper the words of suggested salvation in her ear in the saloon of the demoiselles Montjoie--suggested salvation from her marriage with Monsieur le Duc Desparre, from his embraces. A beautiful girl, too, with her sweet hair bound up now about her shapely head, her deep hazel eyes full and lustrous, calm and pure. Una herself passed no more undefiled amidst the horrors of Wandering Wood than did Laure Vauxcelles amidst the gamblers and the dissolute *roués* who surrounded the court of Philippe le Débonnaire, and who, ere the games began at night--when occasionally permitted to see her--found time to cast admiring glances at her wondrous, fast-budding beauty.

The name Vauxcelles was, of course, no more hers than was that of Laure, which had been given to her by poor Madame Vandecque when first she took the deserted and discarded waif to her kindly heart. But as Vandecque had elected to style her his niece, so, too, he decided to give her a name which would have been that of an actual niece if he had ever had one. He recalled the fact that he had once possessed an elder sister, now long since dead, who had married a man from Lorraine whose name was Vauxcelles, and, he being also dead, the name was bestowed on his *protégée*. It answered well enough, he told himself, since Laure had come to his late wife far

too early in her life to remember aught that had preceded her arrival under the roof of the unhappy woman's earlier garret; and it formed a sufficient answer and explanation to any questions the girl might ever ask as to her origin. In sober fact, she believed that she was actually the child of his dead and gone sister and her husband.

She would have loved her uncle more dearly than she did--she would have loved the grave, serious man who had suffered so for his "religion," as he often told her, but for two things. The first was that she knew him to be a gambler; that he grew rich by enticing men to his apartments and by winning their money; that several young men had been ruined beneath their roof, and that more than one had destroyed himself after such ruin had fallen upon him. She knew, too, that others stole so as to be able to take part in the faro and biribi that was played there; to take part, too, in the brilliant society of those members of the aristocracy who condescended to visit the Rue du Paon and to win their stolen money. For there sometimes came, amongst others, that most horrible of young roués, the Duc de Richelieu and Fronsac, from whom the girl shrank as from a leper, or some noisome reptile; there, too, came De Noailles, reeking with the impurities of an unclean life; and De Biron, who was almost as bad. Sometimes also, amongst the women, came the proud De Sabran, who condescended to be the Regent's "friend," but redeemed herself in her own eyes by insulting him hourly, and by telling him that, when God had finished making men and lackeys, He took the remnants of the clay and made Kings and Regents. Laughing La Phalaris came, too, sometimes; also Madame de Parabère; once the Regent came himself; leaning heavily on the arm of his Scotch financier, and, under his astute mathematical calculations, managed to secure a large number of Vandecque's pistoles, so that the latter cursed inwardly while maintaining outwardly a face as calm and still as alabaster.

An illustrious company was this which met in the ex-galley slave's apartments!

What to Laure was worse than all, however, was that her uncle sometimes desired her to be agreeable to occasional guests who honoured his rooms with their presence. Not, it is true, to the dissolute roués nor the Regent's mistresses--to do the soiled and smirched swindler of bygone days justice, he respected the girl's innocence and purity too much for that--nor to those men who were married and from whom there was nothing to be obtained. But he perceived clearly enough her swift developing beauty; he knew that there, in that beauty, was a charm so fresh and fascinating that it might well be set as a stake against a great title, an ancient and proud name, the possession of enormous wealth. Before loveliness inferior to Laure's, and purity not more deep--for such would have been impossible--he had known of, heard of, the heads of the noblest houses in France bowing, while exchanging for the possession of such charms the right to share their names. What had happened before, he mused, might well happen again.

Laure, the outcast, the outcome of the gutters and the mud, the abandoned child, might yet live to share a ducal coronet, a name borne with honour since the days of the early Capets. And, with her, he would mount, too, go hand in hand, put away for ever a disgraceful past, a past from which he still feared that some spectre might yet arise to denounce and proclaim him. If she would only yield to his counsel--only do that! If she only would!

Suitors such as he desired were not lacking. One, he was resolved she should accept by hook or by crook, as he said to himself in his own phrase. This was the newly succeeded Duc Desparre, the man who a year before had been serving as an officer on paltry pay in the Regiment de Bellebrune, and taking part in the Catalonian campaign--the man who, in middle life, had succeeded to a dukedom which a boy of eighteen had himself succeeded to but a year before that. But the lad was then already worn out with dissipation which a sickly constitution, transmitted to him by half-a-dozen equally dissipated forerunners, was not able to withstand. A cold contracted at a midnight fête given by the Regent in the gardens of Madame de Parabère's country villa at Asnieres, had done its work. It had placed in the hands of the soldier who had nothing but his pay and his bundle of swords (and a few presents occasionally sent him by an admiring woman), a dukedom, a large estate, a great rent-roll.

It was six months before that snowy night on which the Marquise Grignan de Poissy paid her visit to Monsieur le Duc, that Desparre, flinging all considerations of family, of an ancient title and a still more ancient name, to the winds, determined that this girl should be his wife, that he would buy her with his coronet, since in no other way could she be his.

"I desire her. I love her. I will possess her," he said to himself by night and day; "I will. I must marry her. Curse it, 'tis strange, too, how her beauty has bound me down; I who have loved so many, yet never thought of marrying one of them. I, the poor soldier, who had nothing to offer in exchange for a woman's heart but a wedding ring, and would never give even that. Now that I am well to do, a great prize, I sacrifice myself."

Yet he chuckled, too, as he resolved to make the sacrifice, recognising that it was not only his love for and desire of possessing this girl which was egging him on to the determination, but something else as well. The desire to retaliate upon his numerous kinswomen who had once ignored him, but who now grovelled at his feet. To wound, as he termed them, the "women of his tribe," whose doors were mostly shut to the beggarly captain of the Regiment de Bellebrune, but who, in every case, would have now prostrated themselves before him with pleasure--the elder ones because there was much of the family wealth which he might direct towards them and their children eventually, if he so chose, and also because rumour said that his acquaintanceship with the Regent and John Law was doubling and trebling that wealth; the younger ones because there

was the title and the coronet and the great position ready to be shared with some woman. Yet he meant to defeat them all, to retaliate upon them for past slights. The only share which they should have in any wedding of his would be the witnessing of it with another woman, and that a woman of whom no one knew anything beyond the fact that she belonged to the inferior classes, and was the niece and ward of a man who kept a gambling-house.

It would be a great, a stupendous retaliation--a retaliation he could gloat over and revel in; a repayment for all he had endured in his earlier days.

One thing alone stood in the way of the accomplishment of that retaliation. Laure Vauxcelles refused absolutely to consent to become the Duchesse Desparre--indeed, to marry anyone--as Vandecque told Monsieur after he had well sounded his niece on the subject.

"Refuses!" Desparre exclaimed. "Refuses! It is incredible. Is there any other? That English exile to wit, the man Clarges? If I know aught of human emotions, he, too, loves her."

"She has refused him also."

"Yet the cases are widely different. He is a beggar; I am Desparre."

"She avers she will marry no one. She has also strange scruples about this house, about the establishment I keep. She says that from such a home as this no woman is fit to go forth as a wife."

"Her scruples show that she, at least, is fit to do so. Vandecque, she must be my wife. I am resolved. What pressure can you bring to bear upon her? Oh! that I, Desparre, should be forced to sue thus!" he broke off, muttering to himself in his rage.

"I must think, reflect," Vandecque replied. "Leave it to me. You are willing to wait, Monsieur?"

"I must have her. She must be my wife."

"Leave it to me."

Monsieur did leave it to him, and, as the autumn drew towards the winter, Vandecque was able to tell his employer--for such he was--that all scruples were overcome, that the girl was willing to become his wife. One thing, however, he did not tell--namely, the influence he had brought to bear upon her, such influence consisting of the information he had furnished as to her being an unknown and nameless waif and stray, who, as he said, he had adopted out of charity. For, naturally enough, he omitted all mention of the bag of louis' d'or which he had received on her behalf, and also all mention of anything else which he imagined his wife had previously received. So, when his tale was done, it was with no astonishment that he heard Laure Vauxcelles announce that she was willing to become the Duchesse Desparre, since he concluded that, as she had now learnt who she was--or rather who she was not--she was willing to sink all trace of what she doubtless considered was a shameful origin in a brilliant future. It never dawned upon his warped and sordid mind that this very story, while seeming to induce her to compliance, had, in truth, forced her to a determination to seek oblivion in a manner far different from that of marriage; an oblivion which should be utter.

As for Desparre, he asked no questions as to how Vandecque had brought her to that compliance. It was sufficient for him to know, and revel in the knowledge, that the girl, who moved his middle-aged pulses in a manner in which they had never been stirred for years before by any woman, was now to be his possession; sufficient for him also to know that, in so becoming possessed of her, he would be able to administer a crushing blow to the vanity as well as the cupidity of the family which had so long ignored him; a blow from which he thought it was very doubtful if their arrogance could ever recover.

CHAPTER VI

THE DUKE'S BRIDE

The Duc Desparre was making his toilette for his approaching marriage--about to take place at midday at the church of St. Gervais, which was conveniently placed between the streets in which his mansion and Vandecque's new apartments were situated.

Strange to say, Monsieur was in a bad temper for such a joyous occasion, and, in consequence, his valet was passing an extremely bad time. Many things had conspired to bring

about this unfortunate state of affairs, the foremost of which was that there had been a great fall in the value of "Mississippians" or "Louisiana" stock, owing to the fact that adverse accounts were reaching France as to the state of the colony. Some of the settlers, who had gone out within the last two or three years, had but recently returned and given the lie to all the flourishing accounts so assiduously put about. There were, they said, neither gold mines nor silver to be found there, as had been stated; the Indians, especially the Natchez, were in open warfare with the French and slaughtering all who came in their way; the soil was unproductive, marshy and feverous--the colonists were dying by hundreds. Law, the great promoter of the Louisiana scheme, was a liar, they said, while, La Salle and Hennepin, the Franciscan monk who had sent home such flourishing accounts to the late king, were, they added, the same; and so were all who held out any hopes that Louisiana could ever be aught to France but a suitable place to which to send its surplus population, there to find death. It is true these wanderers had been flung into the Bastille for daring to return and promulgate such statements--but, all the same, those statements had their effect on the funds, and "Mississippians" had fallen.

Wherefore the Duc Desparre was a poorer man on this, his wedding morn, than he had been yesterday, by one-half his newly acquired wealth, and he was in a great state of irritation in consequence. While, also, he remembered at this moment that Vandecque had had a deal of money from him, none of which he was ever likely to see the colour of again. So that, altogether, he was in a very bad humour--and there were other things besides to annoy him.

"Have you sent this morning to enquire how Mademoiselle Vauxcelles is?" he asked of his valet, who at this moment was affixing a patch to his face. "She has not been well for four days, and has been invisible. I trust her health is restored. What is the answer?"

"Mademoiselle is better, Monsieur," the man replied, "much better."

"Is that the answer? No message for me?"

"None was delivered to me from her, Monsieur le Duc. But Monsieur Vandecque sent his compliments and said he expected you eagerly."

"Did he? Without doubt! Perhaps, too, he expects a little more money from me." This he whispered to himself. "Well, he will find himself disappointed. If he requires more he may go seek it at the gambling tables, or of the devil; he will get nothing further from me. Henceforth it will be sufficient to have to support his niece."

Then, his toilet being completed, he asked the valet if the company were below and the carriages ready to convey them to the church where the bride was to be met?

"They assemble, Monsieur le Duc, they assemble. Already the distinguished relatives of Monsieur are arriving, and many friends have called to ask after Monsieur's health this morning, and have proceeded to the church," while, as the little clock struck eleven in silvery tones, the man added, "If Monsieur is agreeable it will be well to descend now, perhaps."

"So," said Desparre, rising, "I will descend. Yet, before I go, give me my tablets, let me see that everything has been carried out as I ordered," while, taking from the servant's hand a little ivory notebook, he glanced his eye over it.

"Yes," he muttered. "Yes. Humph! Yes. Rosina's allowance to be paid monthly--ha!--curse her!--yet, otherwise, she would not hold her tongue. The exempt to sell up the widow Lestrangle if she pays not by the 31st. Good! Good! The outfitters to be told that I will not pay for the new furniture until the end of the year; ha! but I shall not pay it then, though." And, so, he read down his tablets until he had gone through all his notes. When, bidding his man perfume his ruffles and lace pocket-handkerchief, he descended to the salon to greet his relatives and guests; those dearly beloved relatives, who, he strongly believed and hoped, were cursing themselves and their fate at this very moment.

In spite of their intense disapproval of the union which Desparre was about to enter into, a union with the niece of a man whose reputation was of the worst--which really would not have mattered much had he belonged to the aristocracy!--those relatives had not thought it altogether advisable to abstain from gracing the impending ceremony with their presence. For Monsieur was the head of a great house, of their great house, he had interest unbounded. And he was the Regent's friend. He was almost one of the most prominent of the roués. What might he not still do for them, in spite of this atrocious misalliance he was about to perpetrate, if only they kept on friendly terms with him? Then again, he was, as they supposed, enormously wealthy, rumour saying that he had made some millions over Law's system--in which case rumour, as usual, exaggerated--and, above all, he was approaching old age; he was, and always had been, a dissolute man; there was little likelihood that he would leave any heirs behind him. And, if so, there would be some fine pickings for the others. Wherefore they swallowed their disapproval and disgust of this forthcoming mésalliance and trooped to his house to wish him that joy which they earnestly hoped he would never experience, notwithstanding that it was a cruel, bitter winter and that, unfortunately, wedding ceremonies took place at an hour when most of them were accustomed to be snoring in their beds.

These relatives formed a strange group; a strange collection of beings which, perhaps, no

other period than that of the Regency, five years after the death of Louis XIV., could have produced. There were old women present, including his paternal aunt, the Dowager Duchesse Desparre, whose lives had been one long sickening reek of immorality and intrigue under The Great King; women who, as she had done, had struggled and schemed for that king's favours--or for what was almost as good, the reputation of having gained those favours. Women who had betrayed their husbands over and over again, women who had sinned against those husbands with the latter's own consent, so long as the deception had aided their fortunes. Yet, withal, their manners were those of the most perfect ease and grace which the world has ever known, and which are now to be found only amongst dancing mistresses and masters of ceremonies.

Amidst them all, however, the battered, half-worn-out roué moved with a grace equal to theirs, he having become a very prince of posturers; while bowing to one old harridan in whose veins ran the blood of crusading knights and--some whispered--even of Henry of Navarre; kissing the hand of another who had tapped the late Dauphin on the cheek with her fan when he asked her if she liked hunting, and had made answer that "innocent pleasures were not pleasure to her;" leering at a younger female cousin in a manner that might almost have made the Duc de Richelieu himself jealous, but which did not disturb the fair recipient of the ogle at all. And he kissed the hand of the Dowager Duchess with respectful rapture (though once she had refused to let the impoverished soldier into her house), while he regretted that such a trifle as his marriage should have brought her forth from her home that morning; he carried a glass of tokay to one aunt and ordered his servant to hand a cup of chocolate to another--the distinction being made because the rank of this latter was not quite so exalted as that of the former.

He was revelling in his revenge! And then, suddenly, his face dropped and he stood staring at the door. Staring, indeed, with so ghastly a look upon that face that a boon companion of his began to think that, after all, an apoplectic fit was about to seize him, and that leeches to his head and a cupping would more likely be his portion than a wedding on that day.

For, at the door, was standing Vandecque, alone--and on his face was a look which told the Duke very plainly that something had happened.

"What is it?" he muttered, as he came close to him, while lurching a little in his gait, as the boon companion thought--as though he had fetters about his feet--and while his words came from his mouth with difficulty. "Speak. Speak. Curse you! speak. Why are you here when--when--you should be with her--at--the--church?"

And all the time the eyes of the old and young members of his family were looking at him, and the Dowager Duchess was wondering if the bride had committed suicide sooner than go to his arms, while the battered hulk who had been drinking the chocolate was raising the wrinkles in her brow as much as she dared do without fear of cracking her enamel, and leering at the other worn-out wreck whose shaking hand held the glass of tokay.

"There is no Duchess yet," she whispered to a neighbour, through her thin lips, "and my boy, Henri, is second in succession." And again she leered hideously.

"Speak, I say," Desparre continued. "Something has happened. I can see it in your face. Quick."

"She--she--is--gone. Escaped. Married," Vandecque stammered. "Married!" And Desparre's face worked so that Vandecque turned his eyes away while he muttered. "Alas! Yes. This morning."

"To whom? Tell me. Tell me. I--did--not--know--she had a lover."

"Nor I. Yet it appears she had. She loved him all the time. That Englishman. Walter Clarges."

There was a click in the Chevalier's throat such as a clock makes ere it is about to strike, and Vandecque saw the cords twitching in that throat--after which Desparre gasped, "And I have called them here to see my triumph!" and then glanced his eyes round his great salon. Then he muttered, "Married!" and, controlling himself, walked steadily out into the corridor and to a chair, into which he sank.

"Tell me here," he whispered, "here. Where they cannot see my face, nor look at me."

"The woman found this in her room when she went to warn her the time was near. She had no maid; therefore, I had engaged one from the person who made the bridal dress. It was on her mirror. Look. Read."

Desparre took the paper in his hands; they were shaking, but he forced them to be still; then he glanced at it. It ran:--

"I refuse to be sold to the man who would have bought me from you. Therefore I have sought a lesser evil. I am gone to be married to another man whom, even though I do not love him, I can respect. An hour hence I shall be the wife of Monsieur Clarges. He has loved me for a year; now, his love is so strong, or, I should better say, his nobility is so great, that he sacrifices himself to save me. God forgive me for accepting the sacrifice, but there was no other way than death."

The Duke's hand fell to his knee while still holding the paper in it, after which he raised his eyes to the other's face.

"You suspected nothing; knew nothing of this?" he asked, his lips still twitching, his eyes half-closed in a way peculiar to him when agitated or annoyed.

"Nothing. I swear it. Do you think that, if I had dreamed of such a catastrophe, I would not have prevented it? It was to you I wished her married--to you."

"Ay," Desparre answered, "no doubt. We have worked together in other things--you--but no matter for that now." Then he raised his half-hidden eyes to the other. "Where does this man live?" he asked. "I do not know. Yet his address can be found. There are many to whom he is known. Why do you ask?"

"Why!" and now there was another look in Desparre's face that Vandecque did not understand. "Why! I will tell you. Yet, stay; ere I do so send those people all away. Go. Tell them--damn them!--there is no marriage to-day, nor--for--me--on any other day. Get rid of them. Bid them pack. Then return," while, rising from the antique chair into which he had dropped in the corridor, he went slowly into another room, feeling that his feet dragged under him, that they were heavy as lead.

"By night," he murmured, "it will be all over Paris--at Versailles and St. Germain--the Palais Royal. The Regent will laugh and make merry over it with La Phalaris--countless women whom I have cast off will be gloating over it, laughing at the downfall, the humiliation of Desparre--the fool, Desparre, who had boasted of the trick he was to play on his kinsfolk. *Dieu!* to be fooled by this beggar's brat. Yet. Yet. Yet--well! let Orleans laugh--still--he shall help me to be avenged. He shall. He must. Or--I will tell my tale, too. Sirac and I know as much as he about the deaths of the Duc and Duchesse de Bourgogne and the Duc de Bretagne--about the Spanish snuff. Ha! he must avenge me on these two--he shall."

Vandecque came back now, saying that the company was departing, but that some of the ladies, especially the Dowager Duchess, were very anxious to see him and express their sympathy. Would he receive them?

"Sympathy, faugh! Let them express their sympathy to the Devil, their master. Now, Vandecque, listen to me. There is but one way of re-establishing myself in the eyes of Paris. By retaliation, punishment--swift, hard, unceasing. You understand?"

Vandecque nodded.

"Good. If you did not understand I should have to assist your memory with reminders of other things--which would have been no more remembered had all gone well--and of several little matters in your past known to me. However, you need no reminders such as those, I think."

Again Vandecque showed by a nod that such was the case.

"Good. Therefore, you will assist me to rehabilitate myself. So. So. Very well. We must begin at once. Because, Vandecque, I am not well, this has been a great shock to me--and--and, Vandecque, I had a--perhaps it was an apoplectic seizure six months ago, when--when--I was falsely accused of--but no matter. I am afraid I may have another ere long. I feel symptoms. My feet are heavy, my speech is uncertain. I must not leave the thing undone."

"What," asked the other, "will you do?"

"What!" Desparre paused a moment, and again the twitching came to his lips; then, when it was over, he went on. "What! Vandecque," speaking rapidly this time, "do you love your niece at all?"

"Passably," and he shrugged his shoulders, "she was beloved of my dead wife, and she was useful. Also, I hoped great things from her marriage."

"Those hopes are vanished, Vandecque. So, too, for the matter of that, is your niece. Therefore, it will not grieve you never to see her again?"

"I shall never see her again. You forget she has a husband."

"No, Vandecque. No! I do not forget. It is that which I am remembering."

"What do you mean, Monsieur?"

"Later on you will know. Meanwhile," and he put a finger out and touched him, "do you love this Englishman, who has spoilt your niece's chances?"

"Love him!" exclaimed Vandecque. "Love him! Ah! do I love him!" while, as he spoke, he looked straight into Desparre's eyes.

CHAPTER VII

MAN AND WIFE

"This," said Walter Clarges, as he thrust open the door, "has been my home for the last four years. You will find it comfortable enough, I hope. Let me assist you to remove your cloak and hood."

It was a large room into which he led his newly-married wife, situated on the ground floor of an old street, the Rue de la Dauphine, in the Quartier St. Germain. A room in which a wood fire burnt on this cold wintry day, and which was furnished sufficiently well--far more so, indeed, than were the habitations of most of the English refugees in Paris after the "15." The furniture, if old and solid, was good of its kind; there were a number of tables and chairs and a huge lounge, an excellent Segoda carpet on the floor, and a good deal of that silver placed about, against the sale of which, for gambling purposes, a strangely stringent law had just been passed in France. On the walls there were some pictures--one of an English country house, another of a horse, a third of a lady.

"That is my mother," Clarges said. "My mother! Shall I ever see her again? God knows!"

She, following him with her eyes as he moved about the room, could think only of one thing; of the nobility of the sacrifice he had made for her that morning; the sacrifice of his life. He had married her because it was the only way to save her from Desparre, the only legal bar he could place between her and her uncle's desire to sell her to the best bidder who had appeared. The law, passed by the late King, which accorded to fathers and guardians the total right to dispose of the hands of their female children and wards, was terrible in its power; there was no withstanding it. Nothing but a previous marriage could save those children and wards, and, even if that marriage had taken place clandestinely, the law punished it heavily. But, punish severely as it might, it could not undo the marriage. That stood against all.

"Oh! Monsieur Clarges," Laure exclaimed, as she sat by the side of his great fire, the cloak removed from her shoulders, her hood off, and her beautiful hair, unspoilt by any wig, looped up behind her head. "Oh! Monsieur Clarges, now it is finished I reproach myself bitterly with the wrong I have performed against you. I--I----"

"I beseech you," he said, coming back to where she sat, and standing in front of her. "I beseech you not to do so. What has been done has been my own thought; my own suggestion. And you will remember that, when I asked you to be my wife a year ago and you refused, I told you that, if you would accept me, I would never force my love on you further than in desiring that I might serve you. The chance has come for me to do so--I thank God it has come!--I have had my opportunity. Whatever else may happen, I have been enabled to save you from the terrible fate you dreaded."

He stood as he spoke against the great mantel-shelf, gazing down at her, and she, while looking up at him in turn, recognised how great was the nobility of this man. She saw, too, and she wondered now why it struck her for the first time--struck her as it had never done before--that he was one who should have but little difficulty in gaining a woman's love if he desired it. She had always known that he was possessed of good looks, was well-made and graceful, and had clear-cut, handsome features. Now--perhaps because of what he had done for her that day, because he had wrecked his existence to save hers--hers! the existence of an abandoned child, a nameless woman--and had placed a barrier between him and the love of some honest woman who would make a home and happiness for him, she thought he seemed more than good-looking; indeed, he almost seemed in her eyes superb in his dignity and manliness. And she asked herself, "Why, why could she not have given him the love he craved for? Why not?"

"There was," she said aloud and speaking slowly, while, with her hands before her on her knees, she twined her fingers together. "There was no just reason why you should have made this sacrifice for me. I--I refused to give the love you craved, therefore you were absolved from all consideration of me. I had no claim on you--no part nor share in your life. Oh! Monsieur," she broke off, "why tempt me with so noble an opportunity of escape from my impending fate; why tempt me to avail myself of so great a surrender by you of all that could make life dear? Especially since I have told you!--thank God, I told you!--that I am a nameless woman. That I have no past."

"Hush," he said. "Hush, I beseech you. I loved you a year ago, and I made my offer--even proffered my terms. You would not accept those terms then; yet, because the offer was made, I have kept to it. Do you think the story of your unacknowledged birth and parentage could cause me to alter? Nay!--if I have saved you, I am content."

Still she looked up at him standing there; still, as she gazed at him who had become her

husband, she felt almost appalled at the magnanimity of his nature. How far above her was this man whose love she had refused; how great the nobleness of his sacrifice! And--perhaps, because she was a woman--even as he spoke to her she noticed that he never mentioned the love which had prompted him to the sacrifice as being in the present, but always as having been in the past. "I loved you last year," he had said once; not, "I love you."

"Now," he went on, seating himself in a chair opposite to her on the other side of the great fireplace. "Now, let us talk of the future. Of what we must do. This is what I purpose."

She raised her eyes from the fire again and looked at him, wondering if he was about to suggest that their life should be arranged upon the ordinary lines of a marriage brought about on the principles of expediency; and, although she knew it not, there was upon her beautiful face a glance which testified that her curiosity was aroused.

Then he went on.

"You know," he said, "that my own country is closed to me. For such as I, who, although little more than twenty at the time--for such as those who were out with the Earl of Mar--there is no return to England, in spite of the Elector having pardoned many. Nor, indeed, would I have it so. We Clarges have been followers of the Royal House always. My grandfather fell fighting against Fairfax and the Puritans; my father was abroad with King Charles II., and returned with him; I and my elder brother fought for the present King whom, across the water, they term 'The Pretender.'" He paused a moment, then said, "I pray I may not weary you. But, without these explanations, the future--our future--can scarce be provided for."

"Go on," she said, very gently. Whereupon he continued. "England is consequently closed to me--for ever. After to-day's work it may be that France will be, too--and then----"

"France, too!" she repeated, startled, "France, too! and 'after to-day's work.' Oh!" and she made a motion as though to rise from her chair, "what do your words mean? Tell me. Tell me."

Her suddenly aroused anxiety surprised him somewhat; he wondered, seeing it, if she feared that, even now, the relief against her fate which he had provided her with was not sufficient; if still she feared other troubles. Then, with a slight smile, he continued.

"I mean that--forgive me if I have to say so--I may be called to account for my share in saving you from the Duc Desparre. He is a powerful man--a favourite with the Regent and the Court--he may endeavour to revenge himself. I have seen an advocate; I took his advice yesterday so that what I did this morning I might do with my eyes open, and there is no possible doubt that I have committed an offence against the law in marrying a ward contrary to her guardian's will, for which I may be punished."

"Oh!" she gasped. "Oh! this, too," and he saw that she had grown very pale, whereupon he hastened to comfort her. "I beseech you," he said, "have no fear. You are, so the advocate tells me, perfectly free from any danger; nothing can happen to you----"

"Monsieur!" she cried. Then, under her breath, she muttered, "So be it! He imagines I fear only for myself. Alas! it is not strange he should."

As she spoke no more after that exclamation, he continued:

"Therefore, since France is now, perhaps, no longer likely to be more of a home to me than England, this is what I have decided to do. To leave France for ever--to find another home in another land. To begin a new life."

"To begin a new life! Yes?"

"Yes. A new life. As you know--who can help but know if they have been in France during the last year or so!--this country is colonising largely in America; there are great prospects for those who choose to go to the Mississippi; Louisiana is being peopled by the French; emigrants, planters are called for largely. If I go there, it is not at all probable that Desparre's vengeance will follow me; nay, a willing colonist can even get exemption for his sins committed in France. I intend to take steps for proceeding to the new world as soon as may be."

She bent her head as though to signify that she heard all he said, yet, even as she did so, there coursed again through her brain the thought of how she had blasted this man's life. She was driving him forth to a place of which she had heard the most terrible accounts, a place overrun by savages who disputed every inch of their native ground against the white man--sometimes, too, with other white men for their allies--the very countrymen of him who sat before her. Of herself she thought not at all; if he could endure the hardships that must be faced, why, she, his wife, could endure them--must endure them--too. She--but his voice aroused her from her thoughts, and it showed that for her, at least, there was no likelihood of such endurance being required.

"I intend," he was saying, "to take steps for proceeding there as soon as may be. But, ere I go, your welfare has to be consulted--provided for. This is what I purpose doing," while, as he spoke, he rose and went towards a large, firmly-locked bureau that stood in one corner of the room, and

came back bearing in his hand a small iron box which he proceeded to open. "This," he said, with a smile that seemed to her as she watched him to be a terribly weary one, "contains all that I have left in the world, except what my mother contrives at various periods to furnish me with. It is not much now--but something. There are some four thousand livres here; enough to provide you with your subsistence for the time being; to assist you in doing what I wish--what I think best for you to do."

"What," she asked, still with her eyes fixed on him, "is that?"

"It would be best," he continued, "that, when I am gone, you should endeavour to make your way to England--to my mother. I shall write to her at once telling her that I am married, that my future necessitates my going to Louisiana, and that, out of her love for me, her last remaining child--for my brother is dead--she will receive you as her daughter. And she will do it, I know; she will greet you warmly as my wife. Only," and now his voice sank very low, was very gentle, as he continued, "one thing I must ask. It is that you do not undeceive her about--the--condition we stand in to one another--that, for her sake--she is old, and I am very dear to her--you will let her suppose--that--there is love--some love, at least--between us. If you will so far consent as to grant me this, it is all--the only demand--I will ever make of you."

He lifted his eyes towards where she sat, not having dared to glance at her while he made his request, but they did not meet hers in return. Unseen by him, she had raised her hood as a screen to the side of her face which was nearest to the logs; that, and her white hand, now hid her features from him. He could not see aught but that hand. Yet she had to speak, to make some answer to his request, and, a moment later, she said from behind her hand in a voice that sounded strangely changed to him:

"As you bid me I will do. All that you desire shall be carried out."

Then, for a moment, no further word was said by either. Presently he spoke again. "Desparre is paid what I owe him--what I lost at play. It will reach him by a safe hand at about the same time he learns that you are--my wife, not his. And I owe no money now in Paris. All is paid; during the past two days I have settled my affairs. As for these apartments, when you desire to set out, do what you will with all that they contain, excepting only those," and he pointed to the pictures of the country house, the horse, and his mother. "Those I should not desire to part with. I will take them with me to a friend. Now, I will summon the concierge; she has orders to attend to all your wants."

She rose as he spoke and turned towards him, and he saw that there was no colour left in her face; that, in truth, she was deathly pale. Her eyes, too, he thought were dim--perhaps, from some feeling of regard or gratitude which might have been awakened in her--and as she spoke her voice trembled.

"Is this then," she asked, "our parting? Our last farewell?"

"Nay. Nay," he said, "not now. Though it will be very soon. But I shall not leave Paris yet. Some trouble might arise; your uncle may endeavour to regain possession of you--though that he cannot do, since you are a married woman and have your lines. I shall stay near you for some days; I shall even be in this house should you require me. Have no fear. You will be quite safe. And, when I am assured that all is well with you, we will part; but not before."

He went towards the hall to ring for the woman, but, ere he could cross to where it was, she stopped him with a motion of her hand.

"Stay," she said, "stay. Let me speak now. Monsieur--my husband--I have heard every word that has fallen from your lips. Monsieur, I think you are the noblest man to whom ever woman plighted her troth--a troth, alas! that, as she gave it, she had no thought of carrying out. Oh!" she exclaimed, raising her eyes, "God forgive me for having accepted this man's sacrifice. God forgive me."

Then, in a moment, before he had time to form the slightest suspicion that she meditated any such thing, she had flung herself at his feet, and, with hands clasped before her, was beseeching him also to pardon her for having wrecked his life. But, gentle as ever, he raised her from the ground and placed her again in the seat she had left, beseeching her not to distress herself.

"Remember this," he said; "what I did I did out of the love I bore you when first I sought yours; remember that, though you had no love in your heart to give me, I had plighted my faith to you. Remember that my duty is pledged to you; that, if I prosper, as I hope to do, you shall prosper too. Or, better still, if in years to come this yoke which you took upon yourself galls too much, and you have no longer any need of it, we will find means to break it. I will find means to set you free."

"To--set--me--free!" she repeated slowly.

"Yes. Now I will go and seek the concierge. Then I will leave you until to-morrow. You will, as I have said, be perfectly safe here--perfectly at liberty. Have no fear, I beg. No one can harm you."

The concierge came at his summons and took his orders, he telling her briefly that the lady

would occupy his apartments for a few days, and that he would use some other rooms at the top of the house which she had for disposal. Then, when he had seen a light meal brought to her and the woman had withdrawn, he bade his wife good-night.

"In the morning," he said, "I will tell you how my plans are progressing. I am about now to visit one who is much concerned with the colonisation of Louisiana, and, indeed, of the whole of the Mississippi--doubtless I may obtain some useful knowledge from him."

"And it is to this exile--this life in a savage land--that I have driven you! You, a gentleman--I, God only knows what," she exclaimed.

"Nay, nay. In any circumstances I must have gone forth to seek my living in some distant part of the world. It could not have been long delayed--as well now as a month or a year later."

"At least, you would have gone forth free--free to make a home for yourself, to have a wife, a--
_"

But he would listen to none of her self reproaches; would not, indeed, let her utter them. Instead, he held out his hand to her--permitting himself that one cold act of intimacy--and said, "Farewell. Farewell, for the present. Farewell until to-morrow."

"Not farewell," she murmured gently, "not farewell No, not that."

"So be it," he answered, commanding himself and forcing back any thoughts that rose to his mind at what seemed almost a plea from her. "So be it. Instead, au revoir. We shall meet again."

And he went forth.

CHAPTER VIII

THE STREET OF THE HOLY APOSTLES

When Walter left his wife it was with the intention of proceeding to the offices of the Louisiana Company, known more generally as Le Mississippi, situated in the Rue Quincampoix. For, at this exact period, which was one of a great crisis in the affairs of the "Law System," as it was universally called, those offices were open day and night, and were besieged by crowds made up of all classes of the community. Duchess's carriages--the carriages of women who had made Law the most welcome guest of their salons, who had petted and actually kissed him--as often as not at the instigation of their husbands, when they had any--jostled the equally sumptuous carriages of the rich tradesmen's wives and *cocottes*, as well as those of footmen who had suddenly become millionaires; while country people, who had trudged up from provincial towns and remote villages, rubbed shoulders with broken-down gentlemen and ladies, who had hoped to grow rich in a moment by the "System." Broken-down gentlemen and ladies who, after a few months of mirage-like affluence, were to find themselves plunged into a worse poverty than they had ever previously known.

For, as has been said, the "System" was breaking down, and France, with all in it, would soon be in a more terrible state of ruin than it had even been at the time of the death of that stupendous bankrupt and spendthrift, "Le Grand Monarque."

The Bank of France had almost failed--at least it could not pay its obligations or give cash for its notes, which had been issued to the amount of two thousand seven hundred million francs, and the Mississippi Company was approaching the same state; it could neither redeem its bonds nor pay any interest on them.

Therefore all France was in a turmoil, and, naturally, the turmoil was at its worst in Paris. Law--the creator of the "System" by which so many had been ruined--had sought safety at the Palais Royal, where the Regent lived; the gates of the Palais Royal itself were closed against the howling mob that sought to force an entrance, the streets were given up to anarchy and confusion. Meanwhile, in the hopes of quelling the tumult, it was being industriously put about all over Paris that fresh colonists were required to utilise the rich products of the soil of Louisiana, and that, so teeming was this soil with all good things for the necessary populating of the colony, that culprits in the prisons were being sent out in shiploads, with, as a reward for their emigration, a free pardon and a grant of land on their arrival in America. And--which was a masterstroke of genius well worthy of John Law--since the prisons were not considered full enough, innocent people were being arrested wholesale and on the most flimsy pretences, and thrust into those prisons, only to be thrust out of them again into the convict ships, and,

afterwards, on to the shores of America.

Many writers have spoken truly enough when they have since said that a light purse dropped into an archer's or an exempt's hands might be made the instrument of a terrible, as well as a most unjust and inhuman, vengeance. It was done that night in Paris, and for many more nights, with awful success. Girls who had jilted men, men who had injured and betrayed women, successful rivals, faithless wives; a poet whose verses had been preferred to another's and read before De Parabère or the Duchesse de Berri and her lover and second husband, the bully, Riom; an elder brother, a hundred others, all disappeared during those nights of terror and were never seen or heard of again. Not in France, that is to say, though sometimes (when they lay dying, rotting to death on the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, and, in their last faint accents, would whisper how they had been trapped and sent to this spot where pestilence and famine reeked) those who listened to them shuddered and believed their story. For many of those who so listened had been victims of a similar plot.

Down the street which led to the Rue de la Dauphine--one which rejoiced in the name of the Rue des Saints Apostoliques--there came, at almost the same moment when Walter Clarges quitted his wife, a band of men. Of them, all were armed, some, the archers and the exempts,^[2] being so by virtue of their duty of arresting troublesome people, especially drunkards and brawlers of both sexes, while two others walking behind wore the ordinary rapier carried by people of position. These two were Desparre and Vandecque. Inclusive of archers and exempts the band numbered six.

"We may take them together," Desparre whispered in his comrade's ear, "in which case so much the best. I imagine the English dog will show fight."

"Without doubt! When was there ever an Englishman who did not? Yet, what matter! These fellows," and Vandecque's eye indicated that he referred to the attendants, "will have to seize on him, we but to issue orders. Now," and he turned to the fellows mentioned, "we near the street where the birds are. You understand," addressing the man who seemed to be the leader, "what is to be done?"

"We understand," the man replied, though the answer was a husky one, as if he had been drinking. "We understand. Take them both, without injury if possible, then away with them to the prisons. She to St. Martin-des-Champs, he to La Bastille. Ha! la Bastille. The kindly mother, the gracious hostess! My faith! Yes."

"Yes," answered Vandecque. "Without injury, as you say, if possible. But, remember, you are paid well for what you may have to do; remember, too, the man is an Englishman; he has been a soldier and fought against the King of England for that other whom he calls the King; he will show his teeth. He is but newly married--this day--he will not willingly exchange the warm embraces of his beautiful young wife" (and as he spoke he could not resist looking at Desparre out of the side of his eye) "for a bed of straw. You must be prepared--for--for--well, for difficulties."

"We are prepared--I hope your purse is. We are near the spot--we should desire to have the earnest before we begin. While as for difficulties, why, if he makes any, we must----"

"Kill him--dead!"

The man started and looked round, appalled by the voice that hissed in his ear. Yet he should have recognised it, since he had heard it before that evening, though, perhaps, with scarcely so much venom in its shaking tones then. And, as he saw Desparre's face close to his, he drew back a little, while almost shuddering. There was something in the glance, in the half-closed eyelids--the eyes glittering through them--that unnerved him.

"Dead," hissed Desparre again. "Dead." And he put forth his hand and laid it on the archer's sleeve, and clutched at his arm through that sleeve so that the man winced with pain, as a moment before he had winced, or almost winced, from a feeling of creepiness.

"Dead," Desparre repeated.

"Mon Dieu!" the man said, raising his hand to his forehead and brushing it across the latter, "we know our business, monsieur; no need to instruct us in it. Though as for killing, that is not our account as a rule----"

"Peace," interrupted Desparre, "here is the reward. Hold out your hand."

The man did as he was bid, and, in the light of a seven nights' old moon that, by now, overtopped the roofs of the houses, Desparre counted out twenty gold louis' d'or (rare enough at that moment, when all France was deluged with worthless paper; coins to be kept carefully and made much of!) into his hand, and twenty more into the hands of the principal exempt. Yet his own hand shook so that each of the vagabonds raised his eyes to his face and then withdrew them swiftly. They liked the look of the money better than the appearance of the features of the man who was paying it.

Then, suddenly, he started as he dropped the last piece into the exempt's palm--while the

latter, looking up again at Desparre, saw his eyes staring down the street to the further end of it--though, at the same time, there was a glance in them as if he were staring into vacancy. Yet, in truth, they were fixed on a very palpable object--the form of a man passing swiftly up the street of the Holy Apostles.

The form of Walter Clarges!

"See," Desparre whispered to Vandecque. "See. He comes. Ha! he has left her alone. So! 'tis better." Then he turned to the Archers and Exempts and muttered low: "There! There is the man. Coming towards us. I would slay him myself--I could do it easily with the secret thrust I know of," he whispered, "but I must risk nothing--till--I--have--seen--her."

While, as he spoke, he moved off to the other side of the street and withdrew into the porch, or stoop, of a door, wrapping his roquelaure around him. Yet, as the fellows drew themselves together and prepared to seize on the man advancing towards them, they heard his voice send forth another whisper from within that porch.

"You know your office. Do it. And if he resists--slay him."

Approaching, Walter Clarges saw the group of men standing in the roadside close up by the footway, while, because of the troubles and turmoils in the streets, as well as because he knew well enough of the lawlessness that prevailed that night, he let his left hand fall under his cloak on to the hilt of his sword, and thus loosened the blade in its sheath, so that it should be ready for his right to draw if necessary. Then, a moment later, he saw Vandecque's figure in front of the others, and, recognising his features in the gleam of the moon, nerved himself for an encounter. Though, even now, he scarcely knew what form that encounter might take.

"So," Vandecque exclaimed, "we have found you! That is well, and may save trouble. Monsieur Clarges, you will have to go with us."

"Indeed! On what authority? State it quickly and briefly. I have no time to spare."

"On the authority of the guardian of the woman whom you have removed from his custody and married. The law has a punishment for that to which you will have to submit."

"Possibly. Meanwhile, your warrant for my arrest and detention."

"The warrant is made out. I---"

"Show it."

"I shall not show it. It is sufficient for that later on. Meanwhile, I warn you--come without resistance or we must resort to force. These men are archers and exempts, if you resist them they will seize upon you."

"Let them begin. I am ready," and, as he spoke, his sword had leaped from its sheath and was glittering before their eyes in an instant.

"Begin," he repeated, "or stand back. My time is precious."

"It is against the law that you contend. I warn you," Vandecque called out excitedly.

"So be it. It is for my freedom I contend. Whether it be either the law or Vandecque, the sharper and swindler who embodies that law, I care not. Let me pass, fellow," speaking impatiently, "or 'tis I who will commence."

"Fall on," exclaimed Vandecque, "and do your duty. Seize on him."

'Twas easier said than done, however, as those five men found when once they were engaged with the Englishman--well armed as they were. The rapier wielded by Clarges seemed to have, indeed, the power of five swords; it was everywhere--under their guard, perilously near their lungs, through one man's throat already--a man who now lay choking on the ground. Moreover, Clarges had had time to wind his cloak swiftly round his left arm, and, with that arm bent, to ward off several of their attacks. Nor was this difficult, since all were not armed as well as he. The exempts had short swords of the cutlass order, which would cut heavily but administer no thrust; the archers had rapiers, or, rather, long thin tucks, which were more deadly--Vandecque had a weapon as good as Clarge's own. Already it had lunged twice at his breast--and hate had added, perhaps, an extra force to those thrusts (for Vandecque was undone by the marriage that had taken place that morning), and had twice been parried. Yet as Clarges knew, he was spared but for a few moments; his fate was but postponed. Against that rapier and the remaining blades--unless he could kill the wielders of the latter, and so stand face to face with Vandecque alone--he had no hope. The swordsman never lived yet who could encounter four others--for the man on the ground was disposed of--and keep them at bay for longer than a few moments.

He knew his end was at hand; at every moment he expected the sharp thrust of the rapier through his body, or the heavy swinging blow that would cleave his head in half. He knew one or the other must come, yet he fought hard against the odds, with his back against the house behind him, his teeth clenched, his breath coming faster and faster from his lungs. And, all beset as he

was, knowing that death was near at hand, he whispered to himself "for her, for her."

Though once he thought, "'Tis better so, far better. Thus her way is clear, and she is free of me."

He forgot--he was mercifully permitted to forget for a moment that, free of him, she would still be open to Desparre's designs again, and might still be forced to marry him.

Yet, a moment later, the recollection of this sprang swiftly as a lightning flash to his mind. He must live for her, he must not be slain and thereby set her free for Desparre.

Nerved afresh to his task by this memory, he fought with renewed energy--fought like a tiger at bay, determined that, even though he fell, he would not fall alone; that he would have some more companions on the dark road he must go, as well as the man now dead at his feet.

"Two," he muttered through his set teeth as, darting like an adder's fang, his rapier passed through a second man's breast-bone when, with a yell of agony, the archer fell at his feet. "Two. Who next?"

But still there were three to contend with, Vandecque, an archer, and an exempt. And these two were raining blows at him, while the gambler's sword was making pass after pass--it being caught once in the folds of the cloak over his left arm and missing once his left breast by an inch, while ripping open the coat and waistcoat as it darted by. Then, as he warded off another swinging blow from the archer's weapon, he knew the time had come. His rapier was cleft in twain by the heavier metal of the other blade--his hand held nothing but the hilt and a few inches of sundered steel.

With a fierce exclamation he flung himself full at the man who had disabled him, seized him by the throat ere he could swing his cutlass again, and dashed with awful force the remnant of his sword in his face, inflicting a frightful wound and battering the features into an unrecognisable mass.

Yet, as he did so, he uttered a terrible moan himself and reeled back heavily against the wall, sliding a moment after down it and rolling to the ground. Vandecque's rapier was through his left lung, an inch below the shoulder. The fight was finished.

"Is he dead?" that ruffian heard a harsh, raucous voice whisper as he drew his sword from the other's body. "Is he dead?" while, turning, he saw the cadaverous face of Desparre peering over his shoulder at their victim.

"Dead," he replied breathlessly. "Mon Dieu! I hope so. Were he not, we should all have been dead ourselves ere long. And then--then--he might have found you out in your hiding-hole."

CHAPTER IX

ALONE

Laure scarcely moved for an hour after Walter had left her, but still sat upon the couch, gazing into the wood fire--musing always.

Sometimes on the sacrifice this man had made; more often on the profound depths of that sacrifice.

For it had in its depth that which she had never dreamed of; it had taken a shape she had never looked for.

When he brought her to this apartment she had supposed that, from this day, there was to commence a loveless life such as was so often witnessed in the marriages of convenience with which she was familiar enough in Paris; she had, indeed, told herself that she had escaped one sacrifice only to become the victim of another.

She had escaped Desparre, only to become tied to this Englishman for ever; an escape for the better, it was true, since he was young and manly, while Desparre was old and--worse--depraved. But, still, a sacrifice.

Yet, never had she dreamt of aught like this: of a marriage gone through by him which was, in truth, all a sacrifice on his part but none on hers. For he was bound to her for ever, and he asked

nothing from her in return. Not so much as a word of love, a look, a thought; nothing! Nothing, though he knew by her confession that she was a nameless, an abandoned child: the offspring of Shame! Yet he had taken her for his wife.

As she meditated upon it all, her eyes still watching the logs as they smouldered on the hearth, there rose into her mind a reflection which--because she was a woman--was more painful than any that had previously possessed it. The thought that this was no marriage of love on his part, no clutching by him at the one opportunity that had arisen of gaining her for his wife, and, with that gain, the other opportunity of, in time, drawing her to him, but, instead, was simply the fulfilment of a word promised and given a year ago, the redemption of that which was in his eyes as a bond. He had told her once--a year ago--that all he asked was to be allowed to be her servant, her champion, her sentinel; and now the opportunity had come to prove his word. That was all! And she, reflecting, recalling other Englishmen whom she had met or heard of, who were living a life of exile in Paris, remembered how they all prided themselves above aught else upon the sacredness with which they regarded their word when once passed--how, amongst all other men, they were renowned for keeping that word. He would have kept his, she thought sorrowfully, with any other woman as equally well as with her, simply because he had given it.

Why the tears dropped from her eyes as she still mused and still gazed into the dying embers, she could scarcely have told herself; all she did know was that, gradually, a resolve was forming in her heart, a determination that all the nobility should not be with him alone. On her side also there should be, not a sacrifice--remembering what she was, she dared not deem it that--but, at least, a reciprocity. If he loved her still, if what he had done had not been prompted alone by that sense of honour which governed all his countrymen's actions, then he should have the reward that was his due. True or false as the statement might be, she would declare that she loved him.

"Why not?" she whispered to herself. "Why not? Whom have I ever seen or known more worthy of my love? Ah!" she murmured, "return, return, my husband, that I, too, may make confession."

The winter night was come now, though from the churches near by the hour of five was but striking. The Rue de la Dauphine was very still, while yet, from a distance, there came the hum of many noises. She knew that Paris was in a feverous state at this time, that Law's bubble was bursting, that the Regent's popularity was gone, that the boy-king's throne was in danger. And the archers, and the exempts, and provost-marshal's guards were in these streets, carrying off the turbulent ones to the many prisons of Paris, shooting them down sometimes--as the report of a discharged carbine now and again testified--clubbing them and beating out their brains as the most sure way of preventing resistance.

Yet, amidst this distant noise which sometimes disturbed the quiet street at intervals, her ears caught now a footstep outside the door--the footsteps, indeed, of more than one person, as well as a whispering that mixed itself and mingled with her own murmur of "Return, my husband." So that she wondered if her wish was granted, if he had returned, and was giving the concierge further orders in a low tone that she might not be disturbed; or if he was saying "Good night" to some friends--perhaps to those two other Englishmen who that day had witnessed their marriage.

Then the door opened, and a man came in. A man who was not her husband, but, instead, he who expected to have been that husband--the Duc Desparre!

With a cry--a gasp that was half a shriek--she rose and stood facing him, the table, to one side of which he had advanced, being between them. Facing him, with her hand upon her heart,

"You!" she exclaimed. "You here?"

Even as she spoke she wondered what possessed, what ailed the man; he was so changed since the time when last she had seen him. He had thrown back the cloak in which he had been muffled against the wintry air; while, because the habits of the courtier and the gentleman--or, at least, the well-bred man--were strong upon him, he had also removed his hat. He had come, he stood before her, she knew and felt, as an avenger; but he had been of the great Louis' time and the instincts of that period could not be put aside or forgotten.

Yet his appearance, the change which she noticed in him since they had last met and she had listened to his hateful wooing, was terrible. His face was white and drawn; the lines left by a dissolute life, perhaps also by the rough life of a soldier--lines which had always been strong and distinct--showed more plainly now; the eyes glistened horribly. But, worse than all, more terrifying to behold than aught else, were the twitchings of the muscles of his face and the shaking of the long brown hand which was lifted now and again to that face, as though to still the movement of his lips.

"Yes," he said, and she started as he spoke, for the voice of the man was changed also; had she not stood before him she would scarce, she thought, have known to whom it belonged. "Yes. We had to meet again, Laure--Madame Clarges. To meet again. Once. Once more."

"Why?" she gasped. In truth, the girl was appalled, not only by his presence there, but by his dreadful appearance, his indistinct, raucous voice and shaking hands.

"Why! You ask why? Have you forgotten? We--were--to--have--been--made--man and wife--this morning. Yet---"

"By no consent of mine," she cried, interrupting him and speaking rapidly, "but of him--my uncle, my guardian. God! my guardian! My guardian!" Then she continued, more calmly, "Yes, we were to have been married thus: I to be sold; you to buy. Only, I did not choose it should be so. Instead----"

"Instead," he replied, interrupting in his turn, "you married another--thereby to escape me. I--I--hope--you do not love him very dearly. Not, for--instance, more than, than you loved me?"

For a moment she paused ere answering, wondering dimly what lay beneath his words, what threat was implied in them; but, still, with a feeling of happiness unspeakable that now, at this moment, her opportunity had come to fulfil some part of that reciprocity she had resolved on. Even though he, her husband, could not hear the words, she uttered them plainly, distinctly.

"Your hope is vain. I love my husband."

His shaking hand, clutching now at the table, shook even more than before. For some time he essayed ineffectually to speak. Then, as once more he appeared to be obtaining the mastery over his voice, she resumed:

"Why do you come here? What do you require? Between us there is nothing in common. Nothing. You had best leave me."

"Not yet. There is something further to be said--to be done."

And now he mastered himself with some great effort, so that, for a time, he was coherent, intelligible; and continued:

"Listen," he said. "You did not love me. I knew that well enough, I cared little enough upon that score. Yet I needed a wife; it pleased me--for a reason other than your beauty--to select you. I announced to all whom it concerned that I had done so. As for love, that had little part or parcel in the matter. There was no more love--passion is not love--in my heart for you than in yours for me. I have passed the time for loving any woman; but----"

"Why, then," she asked, gazing at him, "seek me?"

"Because I am the bearer of a great name, a great fortune. Because I despised the members of my family--they are all intriguing harridans who formerly despised me. Because I sought a woman at once beautiful, yet lowly, who should arouse equally their envy and their hate; who should sting these women to madness with mortification. That is why I selected you."

"You may now select another," she replied coldly. "Doubtless there are many to whom the holder of so great a name, so great a fortune, will prove acceptable."

"I shall not select another. Meanwhile, you have flouted me, exposed me to the ridicule of the whole court--me, Desparre--of the whole of Paris! Do you think that is to be quickly forgotten, overlooked? Do you think that I, Desparre, will do either?"

"You must do what seems best to you," she said, still coldly. "Monsieur le Duc, I am not your wife. What you may choose to do is of absolute indifference to me."

He became, if such a thing were possible, more white than before. Once his eye glanced at a chair close by as though he felt he must drop into it; yet he forbore. Instead, planting both his shaking hands on the table, he said:

"The trick was clever that you played. Yet--as you should know, you who haunted the gambling-hells of Paris with your precious guardian--you should know that, however clever a trickster may be, there is generally one to be found who is his master. Always. Always. He always finds his master, does that trickster. Shall I tell you of a cleverer trick than yours?"

"What--what do you mean?"

"Attend. You hear that noise in the next street; do you know what it is? It is the archers and the exempts carrying of people to prison who are supposed to be insurgents, uprisers against the King, the Regent--the 'System.' Many of those persons are quite innocent, they are simply passers-by seeking their homes. Still, they have, some of them, enemies, people whom they have wronged, perhaps even inadvertently; yet the wronged ones have now their hour. A purse--a very light one--dropped into an archer's or an exempt's hands--a hint--a name--an address--and--that is all! To-night the prisons, La Force, La Pitié, La Tournelle--the Bastille; to-morrow the false accusations--a month later the wheel, or, at best, the Mississippi, the Colonies. And--and--my purse is not light."

"Devil!" she murmured. "Devil incarnate!"

"Ay, an aroused one. Yet, 'tis your own doing. You should have thought, you should have reflected. Desparre's name was known in those choice circles which you and Vandecque affected--in your own gambling hell. Had you ever heard it coupled with so weak a quality as forgiveness for an insult, a slight? Nay, madame, nay! None can prevent either insult or slight being offered--it is only the weak and powerless who do not retaliate. And I, Desparre, am neither." While, once

more, as he spoke, the twitchings of his face presented a terrible sight.

"You mean," she said, staring at him as one stares who is fascinated by some horror from which, appalling as it is, the eyes cannot be withdrawn, "you mean that this retaliation is to be visited on me. On me--or, perhaps, one other. The man who enabled me to escape you--on my husband?"

"I mean precisely that. On you. Yet without my purse's weight being much tested, either. For against you, madame, I have legal claims that will, I fear, prevent you from enjoying your new-found happiness for some time, even were your husband able to share it with you, which he is not----"

He stopped. For as he uttered those last words, "which he is not," she had moved from the position in which she had stood all through the interview; she had quitted that barricade which the table made between them; she was advancing slowly round it to him. In her eyes there was a light that terrified him; on her face a look at which he trembled more than even his rage and unstrung nerves had previously caused him to do. For, now, he saw that the victim was an equal foe--that the aroused woman had changed places with him and was calling him to account, instead of being called to account herself.

"Speak!" she said; her voice low, yet clear, her eyes blazing, her whole frame rigid, "speak. Have done with equivocation, with hints and threats. Speak, villain. Answer me." While, as she herself spoke, she raised her hand and pointed it at him. "You say he cannot share my new-found happiness with me. Answer me! Why can he not? Two hours ago he was here, with me, in this room. Where is he now?"

Standing before her, his eyes peering at her--ghastly, horrible; upon his face a look that was half a leer and half a snarl, he essayed to tell her that which he had come to say. Yet, at first, he could utter no word--almost it seemed to him as though he was suffocating, as though his gall were rising and choking him. Yet, still, there was the woman before him, close to him, her hand outstretched, her eyes glaring into his. Again, too, he heard her words:

"My husband! Villain! Scoundrel! Answer me. Where is my husband?"

Then his voice came to him, though it seemed to her as though it was the voice of one whom she had never known. At last he spoke.

"He is dead," he said, "Half an hour ago. Slain by my orders. Dead. My wrong, my humiliation is avenged."

With a cry she sprang at him, frenzied, maddened at his words; her hands at his throat, as though she would throttle him.

"Murderer!" she shrieked. "Murderer! By your orders--By your orders--By----"

Yet, even as she spoke, the shaking assassin before her seemed to vanish from her sight, the room swam before her and became darkened; with a moan she sank swooning to the floor, forgetting, oblivious of, all.

"Come in," said Monsieur le Duc a moment later, as he opened the door and showed a white face to those waiting without. "Come in. She is quite harmless. Now is your time."

CHAPTER X

THE PRISON OF ST MARTIN DES CHAMPS

The agreeable ceremony of marrying the prisoners to one another, ere despatching them to Louisiana as convicts, was going on rapidly in the yard of the Prison of St. Martin des Champs on a sunny morning of the May which followed the ruin of Law's system; the paternal government being under the impression that it was far better for moral purposes--always matters of great importance in France!--that the new tillers of the soil should go out as married couples.

Moreover, the Government were a little embarrassed as to what they should do with all the convicts with which the numerous prisons of Paris were stuffed, since, at this period, there was no opportunity of drafting the men off into regiments, nor of utilising the services of the women. France was ruined--consequently she was not at war just now with any Power--while she had no money with which to keep her convicts hard at work. But (the idea having entered Law's fertile

brain ere he prepared to flee) it was thought that Louisiana might still be made of some service to the Mother Country if her soil could be utilised, and, since there were no capitalists left of the original order and, if there had been, none who would embark their capital in that region, the Government had decided on peopling the place with fresh batches of convicts. Thus they attained a double object; they emptied their prisons and they provided a population for New France--a population which, since it was free and absolved from all further punishment of its past crimes, might, on reaching the shores of the Gulf of Mexico, flourish and do well, or, since both the Indians and the neighbouring English colonists were very troublesome, might be swept off the face of the earth. But, even in the event of such a lamentable catastrophe as this, they would, after all, be only ex-convicts whose loss could be supplied by fresh relays.

Now, on this morning, it had come to the turn of the Prison of St. Martin des Champs to be relieved of some of its inhabitants, while, previous to their despatch to La Rochelle, and, in some cases, even Marseilles, Toulon, and Cette (to which places they would have to walk in chain-gangs, thereby to reach the convict transports), the marriage ceremony was taking place between those who were willing to be united together, and the governor and the chaplain were both in the yard ready to officiate at the ceremony.

"Listen," said the chaplain, addressing the gaol birds who were blinking in the rays of the bright morning sun--an unaccustomed sight to them, since many of their numbers had been for months buried in dark underground cells, attached each to a block of wood by the humane process of having a chain passed round their throats which was stapled on to the beam behind. "Listen, while I expound to you the law by which you now practically become free men and women once more." While, as he spoke, he turned his eyes and bobbed his head to the right where the men were huddled together, and to the left where the women were. "Free to become wealthy colonists and planters; married men and women instead of cutpurses and outcasts, or lost women. Listen, I say."

"*Ohé!*" muttered one of the women, while almost all the others laughed and grimaced, except two or three who scowled at the chaplain and the governor and ground their teeth savagely together. "*Ohé!* hark to him. Lost women! Think of that! The rogue! Who knows more of such unhappy ones than the reverend father? Mon Dieu My sisters! You remember?"

"Silence," bellowed the chaplain, who seemed a more important man than the governor at this juncture, "silence, and listen to the law as expounded by me and passed," the latter part of the sentence being delivered as though of secondary importance--"by his Highness the Regent. This is it."

Then, having cleared his throat, he began again:----

"All who leave by the transport ships from La Rochelle, Marseilles, Cette, Toulon, Dunkirk, or Brest go forth as prisoners already pardoned and absolved from a shameful yet well-deserved death; absolved and pardoned from that most meritorious penalty, I say, yet still prisoners and convicts. Yet, now, see what a noble and forgiving Government does for you all, fruit of the Abbey of Mount Regret^[3] as you are. As you step upon the shores of New France your chains will fall away from you; you will be free; you will become honourable citizens once more of the noblest country in the world, with a vast continent before you on which Nature has poured out her most bounteous treasures--all for you."

"But how to obtain them, Roger, my friend?" screamed a bold-faced, black-eyed young woman, who had evidently known the chaplain under other circumstances than the present. "Tell us that," and she laughed a strident laugh.

"Silence, wretch," again bawled the chaplain, whereat the woman laughed once more derisively. "Silence, creature. It is to tell you this--and for other things--that I am here after a night of fasting and prayer. On landing, to each man will be allotted plots of the most excellent fertile ground, either on the banks of the Mississippi, the Fiore, the Ste. Susanne, the Trinité, or the Boca-Chica rivers." All these names he read from a paper in his hand. "To each married couple--remember this, you abandoned ones, who have hitherto despised and scoffed at the holy bonds of matrimony, into which I now invite you who are still unwed to enter--a treble plot. Also tools for husbandry and the building of houses, barns, and sheds. Also," he went on with great volubility, still glancing at the paper in his hand, "a musket to each man, a sufficiency of powder and shot for the slaying of wild beasts; though not those of your own kind," he added, remembering, doubtless, their proclivities. Then, his recollection of their lawless natures prompting him again, he also added. "For if you slay one another you will undoubtedly be executed. Therefore, take heed, and if the beasts of the forest offer not sufficient killing to your murderous and unregenerate natures, why! assist in exterminating the natives who, being not yet baptised and received into the bosom of our Holy Mother Church, are not to be accounted human. Then, there are the English from neighbouring settlements who war with and dispute the power of France in their insolence. Those, too, you may slay and despatch--if--if they give you fair cause, which undoubtedly their fierce and brutal nature will prompt them to do."

"But how to live?" asked one man, an enormous and cruel-looking ruffian; "how to live, Father Roger, until the land yields the wherewithal?"

"Listen, and you will learn. On arriving, you will be sent to that noble town now rising as a

monument of France's greatness; the town of new Orleans, so named after our pious and illustrious Regent. 'Tis but eighteen miles from where you will land, if the captains of the transports arrive at the proper spot; a morning's walk. There you may earn money by assisting in laying out the streets, building the houses, making yourself useful. Work half the day at this, devote the other half to attending to your allotted settlements, if they are near at hand; otherwise, if they are afar off, work one week at New Orleans, another at your plantations; and, thereby, shall you grow rich and prosperous. 'Tis not hard to do, and, if it is, why, 'tis better than a roadside gallows, a prison cell, or the wheel--any of which you have all deserved."

Whether he knew what he was talking about, or whether he knew how impracticable were the schemes he propounded, cannot be told. It was sufficient that, at least, the vagabonds before him knew no better than he did, and, at any rate, he spoke truly in one particular--to whatever life they went forth, it must be better than death on the gallows or the wheel. And as they listened, they told each other that, at the worst, they would be free and at liberty to commence a new life of preying on their fellow creatures, if there were any worth preying on.

"Now," the chaplain continued hastily, for a glance at the prison clock showed him that the time for his midday meal was approaching--a meal at which he generally ate heartily, since, from various causes, he was ever a poor breakfaster; "now for the holy and irrevocable bond of marriage to which I invite you to enter, so that, thereby, you shall all lead a life of propriety and decency--which, as yet, none of you have ever done!--and shall also increase the population of New France. Therefore, stand forth, first, all you who are agreed on marriage; after which those who are not yet affianced unto one another can select spouses according to their tastes. Stand forth, I say, you who are agreed."

Forth, at his bidding they came, many of them having already decided on becoming united, since it seemed that those who were married might derive more advantage from their emigration than those who were single; and because, also, all in their own minds had decided that, once in the foreign land to which they were going, the tie might easily be broken if they got sick of it. Therefore they stood before him, ready.

They were a strange, vile-looking crowd, such as, perhaps, no other state of society but that which prevailed in the last days of the Regency of Philip of Orleans could have produced. All were not of the lowest orders; some there were who had commenced life in circumstances which should almost have warranted them against ever coming to such case as they were now in. The chaplain's list contained their names--or such names as they chose to be known by--as well as their prison numbers; it contained, too, information as to where other particulars could be gathered. And in that list was an account of what crimes they were condemned for.

Among the men, most had been convicted of robbery, accompanied generally with violence; one had slain a youth in a gambling hell, or tripot, after cheating him; another had drugged a friend and robbed him; a third had broken into a church and stolen the sacred vessels; a fourth had beaten a priest; a fifth had throttled his wife. While, also, there were others convicted and sentenced to the gibbet or the wheel for crimes which, besides these, seemed trifling: a shop boy who had robbed his master: a master who had starved his shop boy to death; a vicomte who had embezzled the trust money of a ward and lost it all in the "System;" a clerk who had stolen money to indulge in loose pleasures, and a literary man who had written against the doctrines of Rome and had called her Babylon, he being prosecuted by the Cardinal Dubois of pious life!

The women were, however, the greater sinners, besides being also better educated in most cases, and, likewise, more hardened and defiant. One was beautiful, her golden hair being knotted now behind her head--wigs in the Prison of St. Martin des Champs were, naturally, superfluous!--her eyes as blue as the cornflower, large, limpid, and full of innocence; yet she had murdered her husband and her husband's mother to marry a man who, from the moment she was arrested, had never come near her nor sent her word nor message, nor money for her defence. She was now about to marry the embezzling vicomte. Next to her there stood, ready to bestow herself on the literary man, a woman who was her exact opposite, a creature black and swarthy, yet with the remains of magnificent florid beauty in her dissolute face; a woman born beneath the warm sun of Hérault. She, too, had committed secret murder on one who had wronged her; yet now she was to be married. And, sometimes, as he glanced at her who in a few moments would be his wife, the literary man who boasted that he had made Pope Clement tremble trembled himself.

The others were all more or less alike; lost women, as Roger, the priest had said--one of them was about to espouse the shop boy--young viragoes, robbers of drunken men, and so forth. And all meant to lead a new life in a new land, though not perhaps the manner of life which the priest had so unctuously described.

"Stand forth," he said again now, for the clock had struck twelve and his onion soup and stewed mutton were ready.

"Stand forth in front of me. Prepare to enter the Holy State." Whereupon he rapidly ran his eye over the paper in his hand, compared the numbers by which the convicts were known in the prison with the names they had been tried under, and then, exhorting them to attend to the ceremony in a decent and reverent attitude, he proceeded to make each two into one.

Yet before he did so he gave them one last salutary admonition, one paternal warning. "Remember," he said, "that this is no idle ceremony to be gone through carelessly, but an entrance into the honourable state of matrimony; an espousal of each other as binding on you by the laws of the land as though it had taken place at the altar of Notre Dame, and been performed by Monseigneur the Archbishop. Pause, therefore, ere it is too late; before you pledge yourselves to one another; ransack your memories; be sure that none of you men have wives anywhere else; that none of you women--though, in truth, most of you have taken steps to make yourselves widows without the assistance of Fate--have husbands. For if any of you have such ties and the fact is ever discovered, nothing can save you again. Wherever you are, in France or her colonies, you will most assuredly be executed, for such is the punishment of bigamy as laid down by his late most sacred Majesty, urged thereto by the pious Madame de Maintenon. I have warned you. Turn your eyes inwards," and as he spoke he cast his own eyes over the convicts before him to see which of them trembled or turned pale. Doubtless there were some to whom the warning came home--amongst them there must of a surety have been some dissolute wives who had deserted their husbands, and selfish husbands who, having grown tired of supporting wives of whom they had sickened, had long disappeared from their knowledge--yet all were hardened and gave no sign of meditated bigamy. The New World was before them; their imaginations were inflamed with the hopes of, a fresh and more free life in New France, or elsewhere, if they could escape from the old world. If they had deserted a dozen wives, or husbands, each was now willing to accept another.

Therefore they gave no sign, and, after one more glance at their brazen faces, the chaplain married those who stood before him to each other.

Then he gave them his blessing and his hopes that their union might be prosperous and fruitful, and also--this he did not forget--passed in a sober and righteous manner, after which he dismissed them and exclaimed--

"Now for the undecided ones. Come, you," and he advanced towards where three or four men were making proposals to as many women. "Come you, time runs apace; are you agreed?"

Two men and two women were agreed, the third man was unpropitious in his suit. The woman to whom he offered himself refused to listen to him, to even heed his words or to give any sign that she heard him.

"What is her number?" the priest asked, while the governor by his side bent down and twitched at her coarse prison cloak, which she had drawn close round her shoulders and the lower part of her face, thereby probably to conceal the latter. "What is her number? Let us see," and he looked at his notebook.

"54," the governor said, pointing to the figures sewn on her shoulder.

"54," muttered the chaplain, referring to the paper in his hand and, after that, to a small memorandum book he drew from beneath his cassock. "54. Humph! Ha!" Then, after reading from the book for a few moments, he turned to the rejected suitor and said: "Young man, you do not lose much. She is almost the worst, if not the worst, of all in the list--she is----"

"She may reform--and--and--you see? She is beautiful."

"I see," murmured the chaplain, "that is true. Yet a dower you are best without. What, my son, was your crime?"

"Oh as for that," the fellow stammered, "but little. My uncle was rich; he would give me nothing--a--miser----"

"Precisely. Wherefore you helped yourself. Yet you were an innocent beside this woman whom you now seek to wed. An innocent! She was affianced to a rich man of illustrious family. On the day that was to witness their wedding, on that very day she jilted him and married an English vagabond--a swindler--who, report says, shortly deserted her. But before he did so, they inveigled the one who should have been her husband to their dwelling at night on some vile pretence, and then attempted to strangle him, she doing the deed herself with those hands," and he pointed to the thin white hands of the woman which held the coarse hood about her face. While he continued: "Her victim was found almost throttled at her feet--the exempts swore to it--part of his cravat was in her hand when they rushed in. My man, you are well free of the creature, even if you could by law have wedded her, which is doubtful. The brigand, her husband, may be still alive, plundering, robbing elsewhere."

He finished speaking, and the miserable creature who would have united himself to the woman, shuddered at the escape he had had. Shuddered, too, at the look of despair upon the woman's face, which he took for the fury of a spitfire, as she, lifting her hood, stared up with large, grief-stricken eyes from where she crouched, and said to the chaplain:

"It is a lie! A lie! My husband was no adventurer, while, for that other, would to God he were truly dead. He merited death."

CHAPTER XI

THE CONDEMNED

The prisons had not emptied quite as swiftly as the authorities desired after they had been stuffed full of real and imaginary criminals who were to people New France, with a view to proving that the Mississippi scheme was not such a falsehood as had been stated. The principal cause of this was that trustworthy galleys which could cross the ocean from the western coast of France to the Gulf of Mexico were not obtainable, while of the transports, only three, *La Duchesse de Noailles*, *La Victoire*, and *La Duchesse de Berri*, were fit to make the passage. The consequence was, therefore, that but one prison emptied itself at a time, and that the month of May had come ere, for the detained of the two remaining gaols, La Tournelle and St. Martin des Champs, vessels had been provided for their reception, while even these had to be hired from private owners by the Government.

On the unhappy creatures, whether actual or supposititious malefactors, who had lain in damp and unclean dungeons during the months which had now passed since the period of the great frost, this fact fell with an even greater force of cruelty than anything which the other evil-doers--incarcerated in La Pitié, La Salpêtrière, Bicêtre or Vincennes--had had to undergo, since the incarcerated ones of the latter places had to proceed only to La Rochelle or La Havre or St. Malo, while those of the former had now to set out on a far more terrible journey. They were to march, chained together, to Marseilles, a distance, roughly, of 350 miles from Paris; to cross mountains and vast plains beneath a sun which would be a burning one ere they had accomplished half the distance, and to do so upon nourishment which would scarcely suffice to keep alive those who had to make no exertions whatsoever. The reason for this was that the private owners of the vessels which were to be hired for the purposes of their transport would only consent to let them be chartered for such use on condition that Marseilles was made the port of embarkation. Their ships belonged to, came into, that port; they would be there in the beginning of June, and, if the Government chose to have their convicts ready to proceed on board at that time, they were willing to undertake their transportation to the Gulf. If not, then those vessels must be used for the ordinary business they were employed upon, and, in no circumstances, would they contract to proceed to any other port of France, and certainly to none on the western coast, to await the arrival of the convicts.

Marseilles was, therefore, decided on as the place to which the miserable wretches still inhabiting La Tournelle and St. Martin des Champs were to proceed. Three days after the marriages which the chaplain of the latter place had performed (as the chaplain of the former had also done) the chain gangs were ordered to set out. The day was fixed--May 15--so, too, was the hour--that of eight o'clock in the morning.

It is possible that upon this earth--beneath the eyes of God--no more horrible nor more heart-rending sight has ever been witnessed than the preparations for the departure, and the actual departure itself, of a chain of galley slaves of both sexes towards the sea coast. And that which was taking place on this 15th of May in the prison of St. Martin des Champs might have wrung the hearts of even those persons who were marble to the core; of even human fiends. Yet, however much the process might be calculated to distress those who looked on, there was a sufficiency of observers to cause the exit from the gaol to be so surrounded that scarcely could the prisoners come forth, and the roads and streets leading to the open country to be so stuffed and congested with lookers-on as to be almost impassable. For to see the "strings," as they were called, depart was ever one of the spectacles of Paris.

Inside the prison, in its huge, vast yard, all were assembled at daybreak--all who were to set out upon that horrible journey on foot which was to know no end until the burning shores of the Mediterranean were reached; the end of a journey which was then to give place to a life of hell passed between close decks in ships none too seaworthy. A life of weeks spent under the eyes of sentries with loaded muskets, of overseers armed with whips coated with hardened pitch; of blasphemous and brutal guards ready to strike with sticks, or the flats of sabres, upon the backs of either men or women who disobeyed their orders and injunctions; a life of horror to be endured until they were set ashore free men and women in the New World. Perhaps the knowledge of that impending freedom enabled some to look forward calmly to what they had learned they would have to endure; perhaps--which was far more probable--none among the murderers and murderesses, the thieves and rogues and lost women, and innocent, guiltless victims, knew or dreamt of what was before them. Far more probable!

All were in the courtyard at daybreak. And now began the ceremony of preparing, of making the *toilette de voyage*, as it was brutally termed, of the travellers ere they set out upon their journey. Into the vast gaol-yard--called in bitter mockery and spite by generations of convicts who

had quitted it on their road to the galleys, the "Court of Honour"--there came now three waggons filled with chains and fetters; *carcans*, or iron collars, to be fitted on to the necks of men and women alike; iron bolts to join together the chains which attached each of those prisoners to one another. To be rivetted on here in Paris; to be never struck off again until the journey of 350 miles was accomplished, and the human cattle stood upon the crazy decks of the hired transports which were eventually to land them, free at last, amidst the raging surf of the Gulf of Mexico.

Free then, but, until then, condemned convicts in actual fact as much as if, instead of being on their way to the New World, there to begin a new life, they were to step on board the galleys themselves and there begin the hideous existence which France enforced on all those who offended against her laws.

Before, however, these fetters and those chains were rivetted upon their necks and wrists and ankles--rivetted cold, and thereby causing awful agony to all the culprits--one thing had to be done. Those women who, in the course of the months in which they had lain in prison, had given birth to children, were now to be separated from them; separated from them for ever in all likelihood, since it was certain that the mothers would never return to France, and almost equally certain that the children would never be likely to make their way to New France when they grew up. Separated also--since the lawgivers of France boasted that they punished but never persecuted--because these babes had committed no crime; because, too, the Government paid no passage money for children, nor arranged for their sustenance.

Three women had given birth thus to children during the time they lay in the vaults of St. Martin des Champs, which was one of the places of reception for these galley slaves who now figured under the name of colonists; and, not knowing that their babes would ever be torn from them, had rejoiced exceedingly over their birth. For they had hugged the little creatures to their bosoms to keep them warm and to warm themselves; they had kissed and fondled them and crooned strange phrases of maternal love over them; had even looked forward with joy unspeakable to the extra burden which they would have to carry on the long march that they suspected, truly enough, lay before them. And they had passed the helpless things round at night to other women who had been torn, shrieking, from their own offspring, or had been spirited off to gaol ere they could utter one last farewell to them, or give them one last mad embrace; they had passed these newborn babes round surreptitiously in the dark, and when the warders slumbered, to these poor bereft mothers, so that they might pet them a little, call them by the names of their own deserted and lost children, and bring, thereby, some sort of comfort to their aching hearts in doing so. While the women, these other women who had been wrenched away from their offspring, had arranged with those happier ones to assist in the carrying of the infants on the weary march and to help those who owned them, their reward to be that they should hold the little mites within their arms sometimes and, thereby, delude themselves into the belief that it was their own flesh and blood which they were clasping to their aching breasts.

Yet now--now!--those mothers who had been made happy by the coming of the children were to be parted from them for ever. There strode towards one of these mothers who was seated on the stone bench which ran all round the Court of Honour, the Governor of St. Martin des Champs (a stern man who had never possessed either wife or child, nor anything of a home but tents and barracks, during a long life of soldiering) accompanied by a woman from the Hospital of Charity--which preceded by some years the Hospital for Foundlings--a nurse. And she, that mother smiling there, had no idea, no suspicion, of aught that was about to befall her. If any other of the convicts knew--which was doubtful, since few had ever travelled the road before that all were now to set out upon--not one spoke a word or gave a hint of the sorrow that was to light upon the unhappy woman.

"Say farewell to your child," the governor exclaimed. "Quick! there is no time to lose. Bid it adieu; then give it to this good nurse," and he indicated that other woman who accompanied him.

The mother looked up at him with staring eyes. There was, in truth, a half smile upon her face, as though she doubted if she heard aright and was almost amused--if one so wretched as she could ever be amused again!--at the strange, impossible form which the words he must actually have uttered had taken to her ears. Then she said, quietly, "What did monsieur say?"

"Bid your child adieu. Quick!" the governor repeated impatiently; "or it will be taken without your farewells. Quick! I say. There are two others to be dealt with."

"Bid my child--farewell!" she murmured, understanding his words at last. "Bid it farewell. You mean that?" And, now, her eyes stared with a horror that was awful to see. A horror that appalled even this man, whose life had been passed amidst, first, the turbulence of years of rough campaigning, and, next, amidst all the most depraved and savage wild beasts of Paris humanity.

Above the roar of clanking cold iron being fastened upon the chains of men and women, the rivetting and fitting of *carcans* upon different throats--the white throats of erring women, the knotted, corded throats of men who had worn them before and slaved out portions of their evil lives with those cursed iron bands swathed fast about them--amidst, too, the cheers of the populace outside, through whose ranks, by now, the first chain--that of some men--was passing, that woman's shriek was heard. It rose above all; above hoarse curses from the male savages at the pain caused by the hammer as it struck the edges of their collars together; above yells from the female savages as the same process went on; above, too, the trumpets of the gendarmerie,

which, a merciful Government allowed to bray outside the prison gates as an encouragement to the unhappy wretches setting out upon that journey; above everything else that shriek arose.

For she understood now! She knew that the little helpless mass of human life which had lain so warm and snug within her arms for two or three months was to be torn away from her for ever.

"No! No! No!" she moaned, ceasing at last to shriek. "No! No! No. Ah, monsieur, see how small, how helpless it is. My child! My child! My little child! And--monsieur--it is not well--it-it--oh--oh! God, how I have watched over it; cared for it. I have prayed to Him--I, who never prayed before; I, who scarce knew how to form a prayer. It is not well. It cannot live without me. It cannot; it cannot. It is death to part us; death to it and me. And it is so--so helpless--and--so--innocent."

The governor had turned his back upon her. Perhaps her pleading had wrung even his heart! Then the nurse spoke. The nurse, who, because she was a gentle woman, wept.

"Fear not, poor girl," she whispered, even as she strove to take the child from the arms which clasped it so tightly. "Fear not. It shall be well attended to. And, see, here is a number," whereon she gave the unhappy mother a piece of paper, on which she hastily scrawled some figures. "If you ever return you may find it thus--when it grows up--it--what is your name?"

"Le Blanc. I shall never return. Never." Then she moaned again. "My child! My little child! And," she sobbed forth, "see, I had made a sling wherewith to carry it--so--that--it should lie more easily upon my breast. Oh! God--that I--that it--were dead."

Many women had watched this scene, amongst them the two other newly-made mothers, who saw in it what was to be their own fate and the fate of their babes. So, too, had Laure Vauxcelles, herself bearing a collar now around her beautiful neck--a light one, it is true, since the warder whose duty it was to attend to these matters, among other things, had observed that she was young and handsome, and, being himself young, or, at least, not old, had spared her as much as possible. On her left wrist there was fastened a great iron loop--great for so small a wrist!--through which was to run the chain that would attach her to those before and those behind her. To her right wrist was an iron bracelet with a short chain hanging to it, which, a few moments later, would couple her to the woman who would march by her side from Paris to Marseilles--if she ever reached the latter place, which she prayed fervently she might never do.

The chain composed of men was already gone by now; out into the street, beyond the prison gate, it had already passed; out into the bright, warm sun, so cheering to those who had lain in that prison for months--cheering now, but, ere long, to become an awful torture as the days grew hotter and the south was neared. The chain composed of women was about to follow. Of women, amongst whom, perhaps, were others as innocent of guilt as Laure herself; women whom a relentless rival, a rejected lover possessed of power, a suspicious, jealous husband also possessed of power or--which was the same thing--of money, may have consigned to this hellish doom. Women, too, who, although they were the guilty things that Roger, the chaplain, had described them as being, had possibly never walked three consecutive leagues in their lives. Women who, instead, had in many cases ridden in carriages and sedan chairs and coaches provided by their admirers. Yet now--now they set forth to march to Marseilles, nearly 350 miles away by road; to Marseilles, where, in the summer, the sun burned like a flaming furnace, and to which the breeze of the southern sea came hot and sultry as the breath from out of the mouth of a panting dog.

The trumpets of the gendarmerie pealed louder, the mob outside was screaming frantically, people were hanging half-way out of the windows; some boys who had climbed a tree which grew in the dusty place beyond the prison gates, were waving their ragged caps and chattering and grimacing. "The female cord" was passing forth. Ahead, went four mounted gendarmes, then, next, four waggons, destined to occasionally give a lift to those women who fell by the wayside, yet did not die at once. They who did so were left behind for the Communes to bury! Now, in the waggons, were seated the galley sergeants. There was no reason why they should walk; they were neither criminals nor women.

Then *la Châim* issued from the gates, the two leading couples of the double string, as the mob and the boys in the trees called them, passed out. Amidst further roars, hurrahs, encouragements, low jeers and fingerpointings, they came forth; amidst, too, exclamations from some who recognised them. With, also, a woman's shriek issuing now and again from out the mob's tight-packed density--a mother's heartbroken cry perhaps, perhaps a sister's, perhaps a daughter's. Yet, with no sign of sympathy from one set of beings who were witnessing the spectacle; who had paid, and paid well, to thus witness it. Beings--fashionable, well-dressed men and women, who had hired windows at which to sit and see the chains go by, and who drank chocolate and ate chipped bread and cakes and dainty butter brought from the cool north; and laughed and chatted, and made appointments for the Gardens of the Tuileries that night, or for boating parties on the Seine when the evening air was cooling the atmosphere.

Laure passed out, too, at last, manacled, shackled to the dark southern woman who had married the literary man. Passed out with her head bent down, her feet dragging like lead beneath her, her heart beating as though it must burst.

Passed out to what she knew and felt would be her death. To what she prayed might be her death.

CHAPTER XII

MARSEILLES

The chain gangs--the men a mile ahead of the women--marched but slowly on their way; indeed, it was impossible that they should progress very fast. Some, as has been said, especially among the female prisoners, had never been accustomed to walking at all; others, amongst both women and men, soon became footsore. The months passed in the dungeons of the prisons, with their bodies chained by the neck to the beam behind them, had given their feet but little opportunity of exercise, that only being obtainable which they got from stamping on the ground to drive out the cold they suffered from during the winter period. No wonder that all became footsore ere a fiftieth part of their toilsome journey was covered.

Yet they went on; they had to go on. Marseilles was, to be exact, 356 miles from Paris by road, and they were timed to do the distance in thirty days; must do it according to the contract made by the Government with the owners of the ships which were to transport the "colonists," the "emigrants," to New France. Thirty days for 356 miles.

About twelve miles a day! Not much that for pedestrians, for hardy walkers, for people used to journeying on foot day by day. A thing to be accomplished easily, and easily to be surpassed, by the countless pedlars who swarmed over the face of France; by itinerant monks, by wandering ballad-singers, strolling players and troops of showmen; yet not easy for women or men who, even if they had ever walked at all, were now quite out of practice; who, also, were ill-fed and, in many cases, were sick and ailing. Yet they had to do it. It must be done.

Each morning, therefore, they set forth again on their route, no matter whether the sun was beating down fiercely on their heads--they being protected only by hats which they had been allowed to plait from the prison straw, in anticipation of the forthcoming journey--or whether the rain was falling in torrents. Each night they lay down wherever the chain halted, which it generally did near some village or hamlet, partly because there the colonists might be allowed to lie and sleep beneath the shelter of barns and outhouses, but more particularly because, thereby, the guards and the galley sergeants and mounted gendarmes could find drinking shops and *pants* wherein they might rest and refresh themselves. And, gradually, as they went on and on along the great southern road, through Montargis and Cosne, and by Nevers, and on to Moulins and Montmarault, their numbers became a little diminished nightly. Women dropped by the wayside, or, rather, amidst the dust and mud of the high road; it was useless to place them in the carts and carry them further; therefore they were left beneath the hedges and the sparse bushes that bordered the route--left with their coarse prison petticoat thrown over their dead faces to save them from the flies--left there for the villagers to bury when they were found. And, because the women passed along behind the men, they saw--they could not help but see!--unless they were blinded by staggering for league after league through heat and dust, that, with the chain of men, the same thing had happened. Their bodies--some of their bodies--were also to be seen lying beneath the hedges and the bushes, but with no protecting rag over their faces.

Yet, still, those who were not dead went on and on, stumbling, falling, being dragged up by the companion manacled to them, or by the guards (kind in some cases, brutal in others) on and on, like women walking in their sleep; their lids half closed over their glistening, fever-lit eyes, their senses telling them they were suffering, even as the dumb brutes' senses tell them that they are suffering. But no more!

Shackled to the dark handsome woman of the south who had espoused the writer who hated Rome and her customs, was Laure, alive still, though praying that every day might be her last. That she would have ever reached Clermont, to which they were by now arrived, had it not been for this woman, was doubtful. For she, brought up by Vandecque in all the luxury he could afford--partly from love of her, partly because she was a saleable article that, carefully cherished, might fetch a large price--was no more fitted to walk day by day a distance of from ten to fifteen miles than she was fitted to sleep on the ground in barns and outhouses, or to exist on bread and water and anything else which her comrade could procure by stealing or begging from the compassionate landlords of those inns where sometimes the chain halted.

Yet she had done it, she had survived, she was alive; she could feel the cool mountain air of the Dômes sweep down upon and revive her. She was still alive.

It seemed to her as if a miracle alone could have kept her so; a miracle that had for its instrument the woman Marion Lascelles (Lascelles being the name of the man the latter had espoused, but from whom she would be separated until they stood free in Louisiana). For Marion, however vile her past had been, or whatever crimes she might have steeped her hands in, was, at least, an angel of mercy to Laure, though at first she had not been so. Instead, indeed, she, in her great, masterful strength, which neither dungeon nor starvation had been able to subdue, had strode fiercely along the baked roads which led, as she muttered to herself, to the sea-coast first, and then to freedom, though a freedom thousands of miles away. And, as she so strode, she dragged at the chain which fastened Laure to her, until once, in doing so, she brought down on her the eye of the officer, or guard, who rode near.

"What ails her?" he asked, guiding his horse up close to them, while Marion saw his hand tighten on the whip he held as though about to administer a blow. "What ails her? Does she want a taste of this?" and he shook it before their eyes. The fellows in charge of the chain gangs were indeed officers, but, since none but the most brutal, or those who had risen from the lowest ranks, would condescend to accept this employment, to which they were regularly appointed for periods, their savageness was not extraordinary.

"Nay," replied Marion; "it is my fault. I am too rough with her. And you can see that she is a gentlewoman, delicately bred. If," and her black eyes flashed at him, "you are a man, strike not one as helpless as she is."

"Oh! as for that," the fellow answered, "there are no delicately-bred ones here. Sentenced convicts all, while you are in our hands. Yet, since you are the best-looking women in the gang--I love both fair and dark myself!--I will not beat her this time. But there must be no lagging; the transports sail under three weeks from now if the wind is fair. We must be there--at Marseilles."

"She shall not lag," Marion replied. "If she fails I will carry her."

"God bless you," Laure said to her that night, as, still chained to each other, they lay down together in a shelter for sheep outside Issoire, since the dreary march was now almost half compassed though many leagues had still to be accomplished. "God bless you, you are a true woman." Then she put out her hand and touched the dark one of the woman at her side, and called her "sister."

With this began their friendship; with it began, too, a revolution in the hot, fiery blood that coursed through the veins of Marion Lascelles. She scarcely knew at first what crime the woman next to her had been condemned for, though she had caught something of what the chaplain of the prison had said to the fellow who desired to marry Laure; but one thing she did know, namely that, besides herself, this was an innocent, suffering creature. And this weakling had called her "sister"; had prayed God to bless her--to bless her! "When," she mused, "when, if ever, had such a prayer gone up to heaven for her; when, when?" Not, she thought, since she was a simple, innocent child, roaming about the sandy, sunburnt beach of Hérault with her hand in her mother's--a fisherman's widow, now years since dead. And from that day she was no longer the fierce companion, but instead, the protector of Laure, striving always to give the latter some portion of her own sparse allowance of food; stealing bits of meat out of the *pots-au-feu* if the chance ever came her way, sharing all with her; walking with her arm round her waist, while Laure's head reclined on her shoulders.

"I shall die," the latter said more than once, "I shall die ere we reach Marseilles. Oh! Marion, let them not leave me by the wayside."

"Bah!" Marion answered, "you shall not die. I will fight death for you, wrestle with him, hold you back from him. You have to live."

"For what?" the other would ask. "For what?" and her soft eyes would look so sad that Marion, still unregenerate, would swear a fierce southern oath to herself, while she folded Laure to her bosom and strained her to it with her strong arms. "For what?" Marion would repeat. "Why, for freedom, first; for justice. That poor imbecile marching ahead of us" (she was referring to her newly-espoused husband) "has it seems the gift of writing, at least, since it has brought him to this pass. We will tell him your history" (for Marion knew it all now): "then he shall put it into words, and so, somehow, it shall have its effect. In this new land to which we go there must be a governor, or vice-regent, or someone in power. He will surely help you, especially after he has seen you! And there are two other reasons why you should live."

"I do not know them," Laure faltered.

"You love your husband?"

"Ah!" the other gasped.

"You love him, I say. My God! do I not know what love is!" and she smote her breast as she spoke. "You love him. You have told me all. You loved him; you came to love him on the day you married him, the day he saved you from that--that animal!"

"He is dead!" Laure wailed. "He is dead!"

"I doubt it. Men do not die easily." Possibly, here, too, she was speaking from experience. "I doubt it. More like, those animals, Desparre and your uncle, caused him to be arrested and thrown into prison; remember, they may have encountered him on their road to you. He may be--who knows?--in the chain that is now on its road to Brest or Dunkirk."

Laure wrung her hands and shook her head at this, while Marion continued:--

"Or suppose Desparre lied to you; suppose they had not encountered him at all. Suppose, I say, he came back to you that night, the next morning, and found you gone; with none to tell where--you say yourself that no servant appeared on the scene ere the exempts dragged you away. Suppose he came back. What then?"

"I do not know; I cannot think."

"I can. He will find out what has become of you, follow you. *Mon Dieu!*" as a sudden thought flashed into her mind. "Did he not tell you he meant himself to emigrate to Louisiana, the very place to which we go. Courage; courage; courage."

"Oh!" Laure gasped, "if-if I dared to hope that."

"Dared to hope! There is nothing else to be supposed but that. He will be there. Surely, surely, Laure, you will meet your husband in this colony, big as they say it is. All will be well."

"Nay," she said, "nay. It will never be well. He married me to save me from Desparre; he had ceased to love me. Yet--yet, if I could see him once again, only once, I would tell him----"

"What?"

"That I surrendered; that I had come to love him. Yet of what avail would that? He will be a gentleman planter; I--I a released convict, a woman earning her bread by labour. Also, he knows--that--I have no origin."

"He knew it before he married you. And, knowing it, be sure he loved you." And Marion Lascelles, whether she believed the comforting hopes she had endeavoured to raise in the other's breast, or whether she had only uttered them in the desire to put fresh strength into her sad heart, would hear no word of doubt.

But still the chains went on, the men a mile ahead, the women following behind. But ever on, and with the journey growing still more toilsome to these poor creatures worn by this time to skeletons; more toilsome because they were passing through Haute Loire and Ardèche now and the mountains were all around them, and had to be climbed by their bleeding, festering feet. Ascents that had to be made which lasted for hours, followed by descents as wearying to their aching limbs.

In truth, it might have seemed to any who had observed that chain of women that it was a small army of dead women which was passing through the land. An army of dead women who had been burnt black and become mummified, whose bony frames were enveloped in prison garments, foul--even for such things--from rain and the mud they had slept in and the white powdery dust that had blown on to them. Dead women, who, when they halted, fell prostrate and gasping to the earth, or reclined against rocks and trees rigidly, with staring, glassy eyes--eyes that stared, indeed, but saw nothing. Women, in fact, to whose lips the guards and the sergeants of the prisons--themselves burnt black, though not worn to skin and bone by constant walking, since they had their horses and the carts--were forced to hold cups of water, as otherwise the prisoners must have died of thirst, not being able to fetch or lift them for themselves. But still--with now half their number left behind dead, amongst which were two of the women whose children had been taken from them--they went on. Down by where the Rhone swept and swirled; past Beaucaire and Tarascon, past Orgon and Lambèse; past Aix, sacred twenty years before to the slaughter, and the murder, and the mock trials of many Protestants still toiling at the galleys, hopeless and heartbroken. On, on, on, until, beneath a lurid evening sky, the eyes of the guards--but not the sightless eyes of the women--discerned a great city lying upon the shores of a limpid, waveless sea.

Marseilles! It was there before them, before the eyes of those men on horseback and in the carts, only--what was happening, what was doing in it? That, they could not understand.

For, beneath that lurid and gleaming sky, which had succeeded to an awful thunderstorm that had passed over the unhappy chain gang an hour before and drenched them afresh, as they had been drenched so many times in their long march, they saw fires blazing from pinnacles and towers, as well as upon the city walls. They knew, too, that similar fires must be blazing in the streets and market-places and great open spaces--they knew it by another fierce red light that rose up and mingled with the red flames and flecks which the sun cast upon the purple, storm-charged clouds.

"What is it?" a mounted gendarme whispered to a comrade. "What! Can the storm, the lightning, have set the city in flames? Yet, surely not in twenty places at once!"

"Nay, nay," the other muttered, his eyes shaded by his hands as he glanced down to where

those flaming lights were illuminating all the heavens with their glare as the night grew on, and the fires burnt more fiercely. "Nay; they burn fuel for some reason, they ignite it themselves."

"What! What! What! For what reasons?"

"God knows," muttered the gendarme, becoming pious under this awe-inspiring thing which he did not understand. "They did it once before," the other whispered. "Once! nay, oftener. My grandam was a Marseillaise. I have heard her tell the tale. They feared the pest."

"The pest--my God! Ere we left Paris people whispered that it had broken out in the Levant. The Levant! Marseilles trades much there. What if-if----" he stammered, turning white with fear and apprehension.

"What if," said his comrade, taking him up, "it should be here!"

CHAPTER XIII

"MY WIFE! WHAT WIFE? I HAVE NO WIFE."

Two months before the chain-gangs set out for Marseilles from the Prison of St. Martin des Champs, namely at the end of March, Walter Clarges descended from a hackney coach outside the house in which he had lived in the Rue de la Dauphine, and entered its roomy hall, or passage. Then, taking a key from his pocket, he was about to open the door of his own suite of apartments on the right of the hall, when he saw that, attached to the door, was a great padlock which fastened a chain into two staples fixed in the outer and inner framework. He saw, too, something else. A spider's web that had been spun above the chain itself by the insect, which, at the present moment, was reposing in its self-made house.

For a moment, seeing this, he stood there pondering while looking down upon the creature in its web--accepting, acknowledging, the sign of desolation which this thing gave--then, ever so gently, he shrugged his shoulders with a gesture that might have brought the tears to the eyes of any woman--nay, of any man--who had observed him.

"Scarce," he muttered, "could I have expected aught else. After so long. After so long." Then, turning away, he went to the back of the long hall where, opening a small door, he called down some stairs to the woman who had been the housekeeper three months before--at the time when he brought Laure to his rooms.

Presently, after answering him from where she was, she appeared, her sleeves turned up and her hands wet, as though fresh from some simple household work, and, seeing him, exclaimed--

"In truth! It is Monsieur Clarges. Returned--at last! Monsieur has been away long. Perhaps to his own land. No matter. Now he is back. Yet--yet----" she said, looking up at him in the gleaming light of the spring sun: "Monsieur has not been well. He is white--oh, so white! Evidently not well."

"I have been close to death for months. At death's door. In the hospital of the Trinity. No matter for that. Instead, tell me where the lady is whom I left here on--on--the night I brought her. When did she cease to occupy these rooms; when depart? As I see she must have done by this." And he indicated with his finger the spider in its web. "Also, what message, what letter has she left for me?"

For answer the woman glanced into his face with wide-open eyes--eyes full of astonishment, surprise. Then she said:

"Monsieur asks strange questions. Letters! Messages! From her?"

"From her. Surely she did not go away and leave none behind."

"But--but----" the other stammered, she being appalled by the look in his eyes; "beyond doubt she went with Monsieur. Upon that night. I have ever thought so. I----"

"She went away upon that night!" he said, his voice deep and low. "Upon that night?"

"Why, yes, Monsieur," the woman replied. "Why, yes." And now she found her natural garrulity; she began to tell her tale, such as it was. "I have always thought that, after Monsieur had given his orders as to Madame's occupation of the rooms, he and the lady had changed their

minds and had decided to go away together. Especially since a compatriot of Monsieur's called a few days later and said that Madame was Monsieur's wife--that--that--the marriage had taken place on the morning of that day."

"My compatriot told you that?"

"He told me so. As well as that he himself had assisted at the wedding. Therefore, I felt no surprise at the absence of Monsieur and Madame."

"What?" asked Walter Clarges, still in the low deep voice that was owing, perhaps, to the thrust through the lungs he had received in the Rue des Saints Apostoliques three months ago, perhaps to the tidings he was now gleaning--"what happened on that night? How did she go away? Surely, surely, you must have known she did not go with me."

"Alas!" the woman answered. "I knew nothing; saw nothing. I knew not when she went, and deemed for certain that Monsieur had returned for her. That he had taken her away with him."

"You mean, then, that she went alone? Walked forth from this house alone. Leaving no word--no message. Has--never--since--sent--one. You mean that?"

"Monsieur, I know not what I mean. Oh! Monsieur, listen. That night was a night of horror. Awful things were being done outside. Monsieur knows. Hideous, heart-rending things! A neighbour of mine, Madame Prue, came in, rushed in in the evening, and said that the archers and exempts were seizing people in the streets who had committed no crimes, yet had been denounced by their neighbours as criminals. Her own son, she said, was abroad in the streets, and he was so wild, as well as hated by all in the quarter because he was a fighter and a brawler in his cups. She feared--she feared--she knew not what. That he might resist and become quarrelsome. Thereby, he lost and sent to the prisons--the galleys; even, some whispered, to foreign lands, exiled for ever. And she, Madame Prue, begged me to go with her, to assist in finding him--to--to----" and the woman paused to take breath.

"Go on," said Walter Clarges. "Go on. You went. When did you return?"

"Not for three hours. We could not find the son--he has never been found yet. God alone knows where he is. His mother is heartbroken. They say--they say there are hundreds in the prisons being transported to foreign lands--to----."

"You came not back for three hours! And the lady--my--my--wife?"

"Monsieur, she was gone. And I thought nought of it. The streets were in turbulence, shots were heard now and again; even houses, apartments entered. I deemed you had returned for her, dreading to leave her alone; that you had taken Madame away, dreading also to keep her in this quarter. That you had, perhaps, sought a better one, or the suburbs, and were enjoying--well! your honeymoon."

"My honeymoon," he whispered to himself. "My God!" Then he said aloud. "And there was no message? No letter left in the room? You are sure?"

"There was nothing. I entered the room meaning to offer Madame some supper--it was vacant. No sign of aught. The fire was gone out. The lamp was extinct. There was--nothing."

"Nothing!" Walter repeated. "Nothing! No sign of aught. Not a line of writing. No letter left then or come since."

"Oh," exclaimed the woman, "as for 'come since'--there are several----"

"And you have kept me thus in torture! Where are they? Where? Where? Doubtless one is from her?"

"I will go and fetch them. Since Monsieur has been away I have not opened the rooms. Not since I cleaned them during the first days of Monsieur's absence."

"Fetch them at once, I beseech you. Yet, ere you go, give me the key of this padlock. Let me enter the rooms. Bring the letters here at once."

The woman sped on her way to the back of the house, and, while she was gone, Walter applied the key to the padlock--brushing away the spider and its web as he did so--then turned the other key of the door and entered his sitting-room while he muttered, "She will have gone to England, as I wished her. She has written from there. All will be well. All. All. Yet why did she go so soon? Why leave this house the moment my back was turned?"

And, even as he remembered she had done this, he felt a pang at his heart.

Why! Why I Why had she acted thus? Why before seeing him again; before waiting for his return?

The rooms looked very lonely and desolate as he glanced around them, while throwing open the wooden shutters ere he did so--lonely and desolate as all rooms and houses invariably appear

which have remained unused and shut up for some considerable space of time. And they seemed even more so than they would otherwise have done, because of her whom he had left sitting by what was now a cold and empty hearth. Where, he asked himself, where was she? Yet he would soon know--in an instant; he could hear the woman's pattens clattering up the bare cold steps of the stairs and along the hall--he would soon know.

She came in a moment later, one hand full of kindlings and paper to make a fire, the other grasping some letters--half a dozen--a dozen. And amongst them there must be one--more than one from her--he could see the English frank--also the red post-boy stamped in the corner. She had written.

He snatched as gently as might be the little parcel from the woman's hand, ran the letters rapidly through his own--and recognised in a moment that there were none, was not one, from her. Not one! Three were from his mother, another was in a woman's writing which he did not recognise, another from his compatriot, from him who had witnessed his marriage. But from her--nothing!

He let the servant lay and light the fire while he stood by looking down into the fast kindling flames and holding the letters in his hand listlessly, then, when she rose from her knees and glanced at him inquiringly, he shook his head gently.

"No," he said, in answer to her questioning eyes. "No. She has not written yet. Not yet. Leave me now if you will. These at least must be attended to."

When she had gone from out the room, after turning back ere she did so to cast a swift glance at him, a glance which led her to passing her apron across her eyes after she had gained the passage, he sat down in the deep fauteuil by the fire in which he had so often sat since he had lived there--the fauteuil in which his wife of a day had sat before him on their wedding night--and brooded long ere he opened the letters which lay to his hand.

"What does it mean?" he murmured to himself. "What? Were Vandecque and that creeping snake, Desparre, whom I saw lurking in the porch of a house ere I was vanquished, on their way here when we met? Did they come on here afterwards? Yet, even so, what could they do to her? Nothing! The law punishes not those women who disobey their parents or guardians by marrying against their wish, but, instead, the man who marries them. It could do nothing to her. If she went from here she went of her own free will, even though cajoled by Vandecque into doing so. As for Desparre, what harm could he do? She hated him; she married me when she might have married him. No! No! It is Vandecque I must seek. Vandecque! At once. At once. Now. Yet, to begin with, these letters."

Those from his mother were the first to which he turned; before all else he, this married yet wifeless man, sought news of her. Her love, at least, never faltered; never! And, he reflected sadly, it was the only woman's love he was ever likely to know. There could be no other now that he was wedded to one who had disappeared from out his life an hour after his back was turned.

"Yet, stay," he mused, as these thoughts sped swiftly through his troubled mind. "Stay. She may have followed my injunctions and have made her way to England. The news I seek may be here, in these."

But, even as he so thought, something, some fear or apprehension, told him that it was not so, and that his mother had no information to give him of his wife.

Swiftly he ran through his letters after opening them, putting away for the moment all consideration of his mother's anxiety as to what might have happened to him, since she had not heard from him for so long. Swiftly only to find that, beyond all doubt, she had neither seen nor heard aught of Laure. There was no mention of her. No word.

"I have no wife," he murmured. "No wife; nothing but a bond that will for ever prevent me from having wife or child, or home. Ah well! so be it. I saved her; saved her from him. Of my own free will I did it. It is enough."

Yet, though she had gone away thus and had left him without word or sign, he remembered that there was still one other thing--two other things--for him to do. Things that he had mused upon for weeks as he lay in the hospital in which he found himself on emerging from a long delirium, and while his wounded lung was slowly healing--the determination to find both Desparre and Vandecque, and, then, to slay both.

To kill Vandecque as he would kill a rat or a snake that had bitten him; to force Desparre to stand before him, rapier in hand, and to run the villain through the lungs, even as his jackals had done to him while their employer looked on from out the shelter of the porch.

This he meant to set about now, at once, to-day; but, first, let him read his mother's letters and write one in reply.

Those letters were full of the distress she was in at gleaning no news from him, full of tender dread as to what might have befallen him in Paris, which, she had heard, even in her country seclusion, was in a terrible state of turmoil in consequence of the bursting of the Mississippi

bubble and the ruin following thereon; also, they expressed great fear that, in some manner, his Jacobite devotion might have led him into trouble, even though he was out of England.

Thus the first two ran. The third contained stranger and more pregnant news; news of so unexpected a nature that even this gentle, anxious mother put aside for the moment her wail of distress over the lack of tidings from her son to communicate it.

His distant cousin, she wrote, Lord Westover, was dead, burned to death in his own house in Cumberland, and with him had also perished his son; therefore Walter Clarges, her own dear son, had, unexpectedly to all, inherited the title as well as a large and ample fortune. He must, consequently, she said, on receipt of this at once put himself in communication with the men of business of the Westover family, the notary and the steward; if, too, she added, he could see his way to giving in his adherence to the reigning family his career might now be a great, almost an illustrious, one. The Hanoverian King was welcoming all to his Court who had once espoused the now utterly ruined Stuart cause. All would be forgotten if Walter but chose to give in his allegiance to the new ruler of England. And, perhaps with a view to inducing him to think seriously of such a change, she mentioned that she had heard from a sure source that, not six months before he met with his terrible death, the late Earl had seen King George, and had been graciously received by him. There was, she thought, no doubt that he at least had made his peace with the reigning monarch.

To Walter Clarges--or the Earl of Westover, as he now was--this news seemed, however, of little value. Titles, political principles--which he felt sure he should never feel disposed to change--even considerable wealth, were at the present moment nothing to him; nothing in comparison with what he had to do, with what he had set himself to do.

This was to seek out and wreak his vengeance on those two men, Desparre and his tool and creature, Vandecque. As for her, his wife--now an English aristocrat, a woman of high patrician rank by marriage--she had gone; she had left him without a word, without a message as to what life she intended to lead henceforward, or what existence to pursue. Yet, he had no quarrel with, no rancour against, her; he could have none. He had offered himself to her as a man who might be her earthly saviour, though without demanding in return any of the rights of a husband, without demanding the slightest show or pretence of affection; and she had taken him at his word, she had accepted his sacrifice! That was all. Upon her he had no right to exercise any vengeance whatsoever.

It was on Desparre first; on Vandecque next; or rather, on whichever might first come to his hand, that the punishment must fall; and fall it should, heavily. Of this he was resolved.

Pondering thus, he picked up the letter addressed to him in a woman's handwriting, and, opening it, began its perusal.

Yet, as he did so, as he read through it swiftly, his face became white and blanched. Once he muttered to himself, "My God, what awful horror have I saved her from!" And once he shivered as though he sat on some bleak moor, across which the wintry wind swept icily, instead of in his own room, on the hearth of which the blazing logs now roared cheerfully up the great open chimney.

CHAPTER XIV

WHERE IS THE MAN?

When Walter Clarges was left lying on the footway of the Rue des Saints Apostoliques, on that cold, wintry night after Vandecque's rapier had struck through his left lung, there was not an hour's life left in him if succour had not been promptly at hand. Fortunately, however, such was the case, and, ere he had been stretched there twenty minutes, his prostrate form was found by a number of soldiers of the "Regiment of Orleans," who happened to pass down the street on their way to where their quarters were, near the Hôtel de Ville. All these men had been drinking considerably on this night of lawlessness and anarchy, they having, indeed, been sent forth under the charge of some officers to restore, if possible, peace and tranquillity to the streets, and to prevent the archers and exempts from continuing the wholesale arresting and dragging off to prison (after first clubbing and beating them senseless) of many innocent persons. And, for the rescues which they had made of many such innocent people, they had met with much gratitude and had been treated to draughts of liquor strong enough and copious enough to have turned even more seasoned heads than theirs, and were now reeling back to their quarters singing songs, yelling out vulgar ribaldries, and accosting jocosely, and with many barrack-room

gallantries, the few women who ventured forth, or were forced to be abroad on such a night.

"Body of a dog," said one, a big, brawny fellow, whose magnificent uniform shone resplendent under the rays of the now fully risen moon, as they flashed down from the snow upon the roofs, "is our Regent turned fool? What will he gain by this devil's game of arresting all the people who object to lose their money in his cursed schemes. 'Tis well De Noailles sent us out into the streets to-night to stop it all, or the boy-king might never sit on the old one's throne. By my grandmother's soul, our good Parisians will not endure everything, and Philippe, who is wise, when he is not drinking or making love, should know better than to play such a fool's game. 'Tis that infernal Dubois, or his English friend, the financier----"

"La! la!" said another, equally big and brawny, "blaspheme not Le Débonnaire. He is our master. Ho! le Débonnaire!" Whereon he began to sing a song that everyone sung in Paris at this time, in which he was joined by all his comrades:

"Long live our Regent,
He is so débonnaire."

Then he broke off, exclaiming while his comrades continued the refrain, "Ha! What have we here? Ten thousand thunders! Is it a battlefield? Behold Look at this Dead men around! The house-wall splashed with blood! How it gleams, sticky and shiny, in the moon's rays! Poor beasts!"

"Beasts in truth!" exclaimed a third. "Archers, exempts! *Fichtre!* who cares for them. Dirty police, watchmen essaying the duties of soldiers--of gentlemen, of ourselves. Bah!" and he kicked a dead archer lying in the road with such force that the thud of his heavy-spurred riding-boots sounded hideously against the corpse's ribs. "Let them lie there till the dogs find them."

"Ay! ay!" exclaimed the first of the speakers. "Let them lie. But this other, here; this is no exempt nor archer--instead, a gentleman. Look to his clothes and lace, and his hands. White as De Noailles's own. Also, he is not dead yet."

Meanwhile, he who thus spoke was bending over Walter Clarges and had already run his great muscular arm beneath the wounded man's shoulders, thus lifting him into a sitting position, whereby a stream of blood issued swiftly from his lips, and, running down his chin, stained the steinkirk and breast lace beneath.

"That saves him," he exclaimed, "for a time, at least. The red wine was choking the unfortunate. And observe; you understand? This is a gentleman. Set upon by these sewer rats either for robbery--or--or--or," and he winked sapiently, "by some rival."

Whereon, as he spoke, the man who had kicked the dead fellow lying in the road looked very much as though he were about to repeat the performance. Yet he was arrested in the act by what the other, who was supporting Walter's still inanimate form, said:

"Nay, fool, kick not the garbage. They cannot feel. Instead, scour their pockets. Doubtless the pay of Judas is in them. And, if so, 'tis rightly ours for saving this one. To the soldier and gentleman the spoils of war. To the gentlemen of Monseigneur's guard the perquisites of those wretches."

Meanwhile, even as he spoke, the gentleman of Monseigneur's guard was doing his best to restore the victim of Desparre and Vandecque to life. Half a handful of snow was placed on the latter's burning forehead; his vest was opened by the summary process of tearing the lace out of it and wrenching the sides apart. Gradually, Clarges unclosed his eyes, understanding what was being done.

"God bless you!" he murmured as well as the blood in his mouth would let him. "God bless you! My purse is in my pocket. Take----" Then relapsed into insensibility.

"Bah! for his purse. This is a gentleman. We do not rob one another. The dog eats not dog, as the Jew said to the man who unhappily looked like one. Instead, despoil those carrion, and, you others, help me to bear him to the Trinity. 'Tis close at hand. Hast found aught, Gaspard?"

"Ay!" the other gentleman of the guard replied. "A pocketful of louis-d'ors. Ho! for Babette and Alison and the wine flask to-morrow."

"Good! Good!" the first replied. "The wine cup and the girls to-morrow. Yet, not a word of anything to anybody. We found this Monsieur stretched on the ground wounded. As for the refuse here," and he looked scornfully at the dead men, "poof! we do not see them. They are beneath the notice of sabreurs. Lift him gently; use your cloaks as bands beneath his body. So away to the Trinity. Forward! *Marchez, mes dragons!*"

The days drew into weeks, and the weeks into months. The winter, with its snows and frosts was gone; the spring was coming. Yet, still, Walter Clarges lay, white as a marble statue, in the hospital bed, hovering 'twixt life and death. But, because he was young and healthy, and had ever been sober and temperate, his constitution triumphed over the thrust that had pierced his lung and gone dangerously near to piercing his heart; his wound healed well and cleanly both inside and out, his mouth ceased at last to fill with blood each time he coughed or essayed to speak. Recovery was close at hand.

That he was a gentleman the surgeons recognised as plainly as the good-natured swashbucklers of Monseigneur's guard had done. His clear-cut, aristocratic features and his delicate shapely hands showed this as surely as his rich apparel (he had put on the best he had for his wedding), his jewelled watch by Tompion (which his father had left him), and his well-filled purse seemed to testify the same. But they did not know that what the purse contained was all he would have in the world after he had made provision for the woman he had married in the morning, and had paid every debt. At last, one day, the surgeon spoke to him, telling him that he was well and cured. If he had a home he might go forth to it, nothing now being required but that he should exercise some little care with his lung, while endeavouring to catch no chill--and so forth.

"Yes," he said, "I have a home, such as it is. An apartment in a back street, yet good enough, perhaps, for an English exile--an English Jacobite."

He had told them who he was and his name, while contenting himself with simply describing the attack upon him as one made by armed ruffians on that night of confusion, and thinking it best that he should say no more. To narrate the reason why he had been thus attacked, to state that he had taken a woman away from her lawful guardian, and married her on the morning when she was about to have become the wife of a prominent member of the noblesse--prominent in more ways than one!--would, he knew, be unwise. It might be that, even now, Desparre or Vandecque could set the law upon him, in spite of their base attempt at murder. If such were the case, and he should become a prisoner in the Bastille or Vincennes, his chance of being of further help to his wife would be utterly gone. And, for the same reason, he had not, during the last two weeks that he had been enabled to speak or write, sent any message to the custodian of the house where he lived, nor to his wife. He imagined that, since he had not returned on that night as he had promised to do, she would continue to remain on in the apartments in the Rue de la Dauphine until she heard from him. He had shown her his strong box and had told her that it contained four thousand livres, enough to provide her with her subsistence for some time to come. Surely she would not fail to utilise the money--would not forget that she was his lawful wife, and, though caring nothing for him, was therefore fully entitled to do with it what she chose. He would find her there on his return. And then--then they would make their arrangements for parting. He would force himself to bury, in what must henceforth be a dead heart, the love and adoration he had for her. Nay, he would do more. He had told her that, in days to come, he would find some means of setting her free from the yoke of their marriage, that yoke which must gall her so in the future. He could scarcely imagine as yet how this freedom was to be obtained, but, because of that adoration, that love and worship of his, it should be done. He had saved her from Desparre; soon she would need him no more. Then she could fling him away, if any means could be devised to break the bonds that bound her to him.

What he did find when he reached the house in the Rue de la Dauphine has been told, and how, when there, he learned that his thoughts of setting her free had long since been anticipated. She had waited for no effort on his part. She had escaped and left him the first moment that a chance arose, after having availed herself of the sacrifice he had made, all too willingly, for her.

"So be it," he said at last, as he sat before the burning logs, thinking over all these things, while that letter, written in some unknown woman's handwriting, lay at his feet "So be it; she is gone. I have no wife. Yet, yet"--and he gazed down as he spoke at the paper--"had she known this story which it tells--if it is the truth, she should have thanked me five thousand times over for the service I did her. To have saved her from Desparre as her husband was, perhaps, something worth doing--to save her from the awful, hellish union into which she would have entered unknowingly, would surely have entitled me to her everlasting gratitude--even without her love."

And, again, he shuddered as he glanced at the letter lying there.

"Now," he exclaimed, springing to his feet, "that is over; done with; put away for ever. One thing alone is not--my vengeance."

"Vandecque's abode I know," he muttered, "though not the address of that double-dyed scoundrel, his master. That I must learn later. Now for the jackal."

He seized his roquelaure and was about to throw it over his shoulder when he paused, remembering that he was unarmed--since the last sword he had worn, that one which had been broken in the affray of the Rue des Saints Apostoliques, was left where it had fallen. Then he went into his sleeping room and came forth bearing a strong serviceable rapier, which he passed

through his sash.

"It has done good work for me before now," he mused; "'twill serve yet to spit the foul creature I go to seek."

Whereupon, putting the letter from his unknown female correspondent in his pocket, he went forth and made his way to the spot at which he had met his wife on the morning of their ill-starred marriage; the "Jardin des Roses," out of which the Passage du Commerce opened.

The roses were not yet in bloom, the spring flowers were only now struggling into bud; yet all looked gay and bright, and vastly different from what it had done on that cold wintry morning when Laure had stolen forth trembling to the arbour in which he waited for her, and had gone with him to that ceremony which she then regarded as but a lesser evil than the one she fled from.

"What hopes we cherish, nourish in our hearts," he thought, as he went swiftly over the crushed-shell paths to the opening of the Passage. "Hopes never to be realised. Even as I married her, even as I vowed that never would I ask her for her love, nor demand any consideration for me as her husband, I still dreamed, still prayed that at last--some day--in the distant future--she might come to love me. If only a little. Only a little. And now! And now! And now! Ah, well! It must be borne!"

He reached the house in the Passage as thus he meditated; reached it, and summoned the concierge to come forth from his den. Then, when the man stood before him ready to answer his inquiries, he said:

"I seek him who occupies the second floor of this house. Your tenant, Vandecque."

"Vandecque!" the man exclaimed. "Monsieur Vandecque! You seek him?" and the tones of the man's voice rose shriller and shriller with each word he muttered. "You seek Monsieur Vandecque?"

"'Tis for that I am here. What else? Where is he?" Then, seeing a blank look upon the man's face, he suddenly exclaimed: "Surely he is not dead?"

"Dead; no. Not that I know of. Though, sometimes, I fear. But--but--missing. He may be dead."

"Missing! Since when--how long ago?"

"Since the night of the--the--catastrophe. The night of the day when mademoiselle threw over the illustrious duke to marry an English outcast. They say--many think--that it broke his heart; turned him demented. That he drowned himself, poor gentleman, plunged into the Seine to hide--"

"Bah!" exclaimed Walter, "such fellows as that do not drown themselves. More like he is in hiding for some foul crime, attempted or done. If this is true that you tell me" (he thought it very likely that the man was lying by Vandecque's orders) "what of his companions, his clients--the men who gambled here. The 'illustrious duke' of whom you make mention; where is that vagabond?"

The man rolled up his eyes to heaven as though fearing that the skies must surely be about to fall at such profanation as this, and would have replied uncivilly to his interrogator only--the accent of that interrogator showed him to be an Englishman of the same class as the man who had stolen the Duke's bride. And he remembered that Englishmen were hot and choleric; above all that they permitted no insolence from inferiors. He did not know but that, if he were impertinent, he might find himself saluted with a kick or a blow. But, because he had as much wit of a sub-acid kind as most of his countrymen, he muttered to himself, "Apparently, Monsieur knows Monsieur le Duc." But, aloud, he said, "Monsieur le Duc is extremely unwell. He is no longer strong; in truth, he has lived too well since he removed himself from the army. They say," and the fellow sunk his voice as though what he was now about to impart was of too sacred a nature to be even whispered to the vulgar air, "they say that Monsieur fears a little fluxion, a stroke of apoplexy. His health, too, has suffered from the events of that terrible morning, and that----"

"No matter for his health. Where is he? Tell me that. If I cannot find Vandecque I must see him." Then, taking a louis from his pocket, he held it out, while making no pretence of disguising the bribe. "Here," he said, "here is something for your information. Now, answer, where is the man?"

"He is," the concierge said, slipping the louis with incredible rapidity into his breeches' pocket, "at or near Montpellier. The doctors there are the finest in the world, while the baths are of great repute for such disorders as those of Monsieur le Duc."

"This is the truth? As well as that Vandecque has disappeared?"

"Monsieur, I swear it. And, if Monsieur doubts me, he can see Monsieur Vandecque's apartments. They will prove to him that they have not been occupied for months. Also, if

Monsieur demands at the Hôtel Desparre he will learn that, in this case as well, I speak the truth."

"I take you at your word. Let me see the apartments. Later, I will verify what you say as to the absence of Desparre."

"Ascend, Monsieur," said the man, pointing to the stairs. "Ascend, if you please." Walter Clarges did as was suggested, yet, even as he preceded the concierge, he took occasion to put his hand beneath his cloak and loosen his sword in its sheath. He did not know--he felt by no means sure of what he might encounter when he reached those rooms upon the second floor.

CHAPTER XV

THE PEST

Almost did those unhappy women of the cordon, or chain-gang--those skeletons clad in rags--thank God that something was occurring down below in the great city, the nature of which they could not divine beyond the fact that it was horrible, and must be something portentous, since it delayed their descent from the hill towards the ships that were, doubtless, now waiting in the harbour to transport them to New France. For, whatever the cause might be--whether the city were in flames, or attacked by an enemy from the sea, or set on fire in different places by the recent lightning--at least they were enabled to rest; to cast themselves upon the dank earth that reeked with the recent rain; to lie there with their eyes closed wearily.

Yet, amongst those women was one who knew--or guessed, surely--what was the cause of those flames; what they signified. The dark woman of Hérault--the woman who, as a child, had listened to stories told of not so many years ago, when, forth from this smoking city which lay now at their feet, had rushed countless people seeking the pure air of the plains and mountains; people seeking to escape from the stifling and pestiferous poison of the pest that was lurking in the narrow, confined streets of Marseilles.

"It has come to the city again," she whispered in Laure's ear, as the latter lay prostrate by her side--chained to her side--"As it has come, they say, more than thirty times since first Christ walked the earth--since Cæsar first made the place his. It must be that it has come again."

"What?" murmured Laure, not understanding. "What has come? Freedom or death? Which is it?"

"Probably both," Marion Lascelles answered. "Freedom and death. Both."

Then, because her eyes were clearer than the eyes of many by whom she was surrounded, and because her great, strong frame had resisted even the fatigues and the miseries of that terrible journey from Paris to which so many of her original companions had succumbed--to which all had succumbed, more or less!--she was able to observe that the mounted gendarmes and the warders and gaolers were holding close consultation; and that, also, they looked terror-stricken and agitated. She was able to observe, too, that a moment later they had been joined by a creature which had crept up the hill to where they were, and had slowly drawn near to them. Yet it had done so as though half afraid to approach too close, or as one who feared that he might be beaten away as an unknown dog is driven off on approaching too near to the heels of a stranger.

Thrusting her brown, sunburnt hands through her matted, coal-black hair, now filled and clotted with mud that had once been the dust of the long weary roads she had traversed until the rain turned it into what it was, she parted that hair from off her eyes and glared transfixed at the figure. It was that of a man almost old, his sparse white locks glistening in the rays of the moon which now overtopped the brow of the hill behind them--yet it was neither the man's age nor his grey hairs that appalled her. Instead, it was his face, which was of a loathsome yellow hue--it being plainly perceptible in the moonbeams--as is the face of a man stricken to death with jaundice; a face covered, too, with huge carbuncles and pustules, and with eyes of a chalky, dense white, sunken in the hollow sockets.

"It is," Marion muttered hoarsely to herself, "the pest. That man is sickening, has sickened of it. God help us all! Slave-drivers and slaves alike. I saw one like him at Toulon once." And again she muttered, "God help us all!"

Above her murmur, which hardly escaped beyond her white, clenched teeth, there rose a shout from those whom she termed to herself the slave-drivers--a shout of fury and of horror.

"Away, leper!" cried the man who had been the most stern of all the guards, on seeing this figure near to him and his companions; "away, or I shoot you like a dog," and he wrenched a great horse pistol from out his belt as he spoke. "Away, I say, to a distance. At once."

The unfortunate, yellow-faced creature did as he was bidden, dragging himself wearily off for several paces, while falling once, also, upon one knee, yet recovering himself by the aid of a huge knotted stick he held in his hands; then he turned and said in a voice which, though feeble, was still strong enough to be heard:

"In the name of God give me some water. I burn within. Oh! that one should live and yet endure such agony!"

"You shall have water--later," a warder answered. "Only, approach not on peril of your life. Presently, a jar of water for you shall be carried to a spot near here." Then the speaker asked huskily, and in a voice which trembled with fear, "Is it the pest? Down there--in the city?"

"It is the pest," the man replied, his awful white eyes gleaming sickeningly. "They die in hundreds daily. Whole families--whole streets of families--are dead. All mine are gone--my wife and seven children. I, too, am stricken after nursing, burying them. I cannot live. In pity's sake, put that jar of water where I can reach it ere--ere they come forth!"

"They come forth?" the guards of the cordon exclaimed all together. "Ere who come forth?"

"Many who are still left alive. All are fleeing who can leave the city. It is a vast tomb. Hundreds lie dead in the streets--poisoning, infecting the air. Also, the dogs--they, too, are stricken, through tearing them. The rooks, likewise, who have swooped down upon the bodies. God help me! The water! The water! The water! Ere they come."

Perhaps it was compassion, perhaps fear, perhaps the knowledge that ere long they, too, might be burning inwardly from the same cause as that which now affected this unhappy man, which caused those brutal custodians to take pity on his sufferings. But, from whatever cause it might be, at least that pity was shown. A flat, squat bottle holding about a pint was taken by one of them to a little rising knoll some seventy yards away and put on the ground; then the pest-stricken man was told he might go to it.

By now, even as he hobbled and dragged himself on his stick towards that knoll, his white eyes gleaming horribly, the women of the chain-gang had somewhat recovered from the stupor in which they had been lying; some besides Marion Lascelles had even sat up upon the rain-steeped ground and had heard all that had passed. And, now, they raised their voices in a shrill clatter, shrieking to their custodians:

"Release us! Release us! Set us free! We are not doomed to this; instead, we are on our road to freedom. Strike off these accursed irons; let us find safety somewhere. None meant that we should perish thus," while Marion's voice was the loudest, most strident of all, since she was the strongest and the fiercest.

A common fear--a common horror--was upon everyone by now: women prisoners and captors, or custodians, alike; all dreaded what was impending over them. Wherefore their cries and shrieks, which, before this day, would have been answered with the lash or the heavy riding wand, were replied to almost kindly.

"Have patience, good women," the gendarmes and guards replied, "have patience. All may yet be well. If the vessels are in the port they will soon carry you to sea; to a pure air away from this."

Yet still more hubbub arose from all the women. Those very women who, upon the weary journey, had prayed that each day might be their last, screamed at this time for life and safety and preservation from this awful death--the death by the pest.

"Turn us back," they wailed. "Turn us back. It has not penetrated inland, or we should have heard of it on the route. Turn us back, or set us free to escape by ourselves. 'Tis all we ask. It is our due. The law desires not our death. Above all, no such death as this!"

But again their guardians bade them have patience, telling them that soon they would be on board the transports and well out upon the pure bosom of the ocean.

"Well out!" cried Marion Lascelles, her voice still harsh and strident, her accent defiant and contemptuous. "Well out to sea! Yes, after traversing that fever-stricken city from one end to the other to reach the docks. How shall we accomplish that; how will you, who must accompany us? You! You, too! Can we pass through Marseilles unharmed? Can you?" and again she emphasised the "you," while striking terror into the men's hearts and making them quake as they sat on their horses or reclined in the carts. "All are doomed. We, the prisoners. You, the gaolers."

Those men knew it was as she said; they knew that their lives were subject to as much risk, were as certain to be forfeited, as the lives of the wretched women in their charge. Whereon they trembled and grew pale, especially since they remembered that this was a woman of the South, and, therefore, one who doubtless understood what she spoke of. The people of the Midi had

been reared from time immemorial on legends telling of the horrors of the earlier pests.

Whatever terrors were felt by either prisoners or custodians, women or men, were now, however, to be doubly, trebly intensified. They were to see, here, upon this rising upland of sunburnt and, now, rain-soaked grass, sights even more calculated to make their hearts beat with apprehension, their nerves tingle, and their lips turn more white.

Forth from the smitten, pestiferous city lying at their feet--that city which now flared with a hundred fires lit to purify it, if possible--there came those who could escape while still life remained, and while the poisonous venom of the scourge had not reduced them to helplessness. They came dragging themselves feebly if already struck by the disease; swiftly if, as yet, the fever had not penetrated their systems nor death set its mark upon them. Walking rapidly in some cases, crawling in others; running, almost leaping, if able to do so. Doing anything, thereby to flee away in the open; out into the woods and plains and mountains--anything to leave behind the accursed city in which the houses were empty or only filled with corpses; the accursed streets in which the dead bodies of men and women, of dogs and crows, lay in huddled masses.

A band of nuns passed first--their heads bound in cloths that had been steeped in vinegar into which gunpowder had been soaked; their holy garments trailing on the ground, their rosaries clattering as they went along, their faces white with terror though not with disease. These were good, pious women, many of them young, who, until now, when the panic of dread had seized upon them, had nursed the sick and dying under the orders of their saintly bishop, Henri de Belsunce de Castlemoron, but who, at last, had yielded to the fear that was upon all within Marseilles, and had fled. They had fled from their cloisters out into the open, rushing away from the city of death, shrieking to those who were stricken to keep off from them in the name of God and all his Saints; even arming themselves with what were called the "Sticks of St. Roch," namely, canes from eight to ten feet long, wherewith to ward off and push aside the passers-by and, especially, the dogs which were supposed to be thoroughly infected from the dead bodies at which they sniffed and sometimes tore. Nay, not supposed only, since the creatures had already perished by hundreds from having done so.

Running by their side, endeavouring to keep up with those over whom, but a little while ago, she had ruled with a stern, unbending power, went the mother superior, a fat, waddling woman, whose face may have been comely once, but was now drawn with fright and terror. Yet--with perhaps some recollections left in her mind, even now, of the sanctity and charity that should be the accompaniment of her holy calling--she paused on seeing the group of worn, sunburnt, and emaciated women sitting there under the charge of their frightened warders, and asked who and what they were?

"Galley slaves," one of these warders answered; "at least, emigrants. They go to New France. Can we pass through the city, think you, holy mother, or reach the ships without danger? Can we go on to safety and pure breezes?"

"Alas!" the woman answered, gathering up her skirts even as she spoke, so as to flee as swiftly as might be after her flock, which had gone on without pausing when she herself did so. "Alas, there are no ships. The galleys are moored outside 'tis true, but all else have put to sea to escape. Turn back if you are wise. Ah!" she cried with a scream, a shriek, as some other fugitives from the city passed near her, their eyes chalky white, their faces yellow and blotched with great livid carbuncles. "Oh, keep off! keep off!" And she waved her long stick around her and then rushed precipitously after her band of nuns.

But still the refugees came forth, singly, in pairs, in families. Some staggered under burdens which they bore, such as bags containing food or jars holding water. Numbers of women carried not only babes in their arms and folded to their breasts, but others strapped on to their backs. Some men wheeled hand barrows before them with their choicest household goods flung pell-mell into them; some, even, had got rough vehicles drawn by horses or cows--in one or two instances by dogs, and in another by a pig--by the side of which they walked while their stricken relatives lay gasping within. Yet, even as these latter passed along, that which was most distinctive in their manner was the horror which those who still remained unstruck testified for those who were stricken, yet whom the ties of blood still prompted them to save. A son passed along with his aged mother dying on the truck he pushed before him, yet he had bound his mouth up with vinegar-steeped cloths so that her infected breath should not be inhaled by him; a husband, whose wife was at the point of death, bore, fastened on his chest, a small iron tray on which smoked burning sulphur, so that he should inhale those fumes. Others, too, carried flasks and bottles of spirituous liquors, from which they drank momentarily; some smoked incessantly enormous pipes full of rank, coarse tobacco, and drew into their lungs as much of the fumes as they could bear.

There, too, passed flying domestics and servitors, upon whose coarse hands sparkled rich and sumptuous rings never made to be worn by such as they, and carrying in those hands strong boxes and jewel boxes. None need have asked how they became possessed of such treasures as these! Imagination would have told at once of dead or dying employers, of dark houses rifled, and of robbery successful.

Yet these fugitives were such as, up to now, had escaped the deadly breath of the pest, and were not so horrible as those stricken by that breath. These latter were too awful to behold as

they staggered along moaning, "I burn! I burn!" and then flung themselves down to lick the rain-water off the grass beneath them, or to thrust their parched tongues into rivulets formed by the recent downpour. They flung themselves down, never, in many cases, to stagger to their feet again. Exhausted they lay where they fell, and so they died.

The stream of refugees ceased not. Under the rays of the now risen moon they poured forth continuously from the flaming city beneath them, their faces lit also by the crimson-illuminated sky above. They came on in numbers, running or walking, breathlessly if strong, staggering, falling, moaning, shrieking sometimes, if already attacked by the pest.

And Marion Lascelles sitting up upon the sodden hill slope, her hands holding back her matted hair so that the soft wind now blowing from above should not cause it to obscure her eyes, saw all these passers-by, and felt a horror in her soul that she had never before known in her tempestuous life. While, also, she saw something else, and whispered in the ears of the half inanimate Laure what it was that she perceived. "Observe, dear one," she muttered, "observe. The guards, all of them, the gaolers and gendarmes move. They mix with that rushing crowd; see, they disappear; almost, it seems, they dissolve into the night. One understands what they have determined to do. They flee, too; they dare not face this thing. They depart, leaving us here. The cowards!" And if eyes as well as lips could hurl contemptuous curses at others, the woman of the South hurled them now at the departing captors.

"For," she said a moment later, "the safety the creatures seek they do not give us the opportunity of finding as well. They have left us chained and manacled so that we, on our part, cannot escape."

CHAPTER XVI

"I HAD NOT LIVED TILL NOW, COULD SORROW KILL"

The night wind rose as the hours went by, so that at last the cool breezes brought ease, and, in a manner, restoration to those unhappy women lying or sitting upon the slope of the hill which lay to the north of Marseilles. Gradually, under its influence, many of them began to feel more strength coming to their wasted and aching limbs, while others, who up to now had been dazed and stupefied at the end of their journey, began to understand that the long and terrible march from Paris was at last concluded; that, henceforth, there was to be no more dragging of weary, bleeding feet along league after league of rough and stony roads.

Unhappily, however, as this fact dawned upon them, so did another and more hideous one--the awful, ghastly fact that they had but escaped from one terror to be surrounded by a second to which the first was almost a trifle.

As their senses came back to many of them, such senses being aroused by the continual excitement of the talk amongst those who were already awake or had never slept since their arrival, they grasped this fact, and became aware of what was now threatening them. They grasped the fact that death in a more horrid garb than that which it had previously worn had to be faced, and was around them; close to them; and about to seize them in an awful embrace.

Some started to their feet shrieking as this knowledge dawned upon them, while clanking their chains as they did so, and endeavouring to tear from off their necks the loathsome *carcan*, or collar, in their frenzy, or to rush away from where they were back to the great plain through which they had passed but a day or so ago, or up to the vine-clad heights of which they had caught a sight as they drew near to the end of their journey. Anywhere! Anywhere, away from this new terror which threatened them. Then, even as they wailed aloud, while some cast themselves upon their knees and prayed to be spared from the horrible contagion into which they had advanced, the voice of Marion Lascelles was heard speaking to them, counselling them as to what they should do, what measures take to preserve themselves from this fresh calamity. And, because, all along that dreary road which stretched from Paris in the north to Marseilles in the south, this woman's strong, indomitable courage and contempt for suffering and misfortune had cheered and comforted them, they hearkened to her now. They welcomed, indeed, any words that fell from her lips.

"Listen," she said, "my sisters in misery. Listen to me. Of what use is it for each to try and wrest from off her neck the accursed *carcan* that encloses it, to tear from off her wrists the accursed cordon that binds her to her neighbour? It is impossible; not that they might be thus easily parted with, did the warder rivet them to us in Paris. Yet, how else have we progressed here but with them on; how progressed along dusty roads, beneath the burning sun, the beating

rains, over mountains and across valleys. We have done this, I say to you, yet now the night is fresh and cool."

"Thank God for that. For that," they murmured.

"Ay, thank Him for that. 'Tis well we do so, sinners as most of us are. We need His help and blessing. But, hear me. Can we not also retreat together, as we have advanced over all these leagues to this plague-stricken spot? Can we not?"

But no more words were required from her; already they understood and grasped her meaning. It was simple enough, yet, heretofore, their despair and frenzy had prevented them from conceiving that, together, they might escape from this place, as, together, they had reached it.

With cries of rejoicing and exultation they prepared to do what she suggested; to flee at once from this awful spot. To join those who were still pouring out of the city unceasingly, even though the depth of the night was now upon them; to follow in the wake of those who had already gone. They knew--those previous fugitives--they must know--where to flee for safety; to follow them was to reach that safety themselves.

Weak, enfeebled as they were, they prepared to act upon Marion's advice; staggeringly they formed themselves once more into the lines in which they had marched day after day and week after week; they turned themselves about to unwind the tangled chains which ran from the first woman of the chain-gang to the last, and placed themselves in order to at once depart. And it seemed easier to their poor bruised bodies, easier, too, to their aching hearts, to thus set about these preparations for seeking safety since there were now no longer brutal gendarmes nor custodians, nor guards of any kind to lash them with whips or curse them with foul oaths.

Wherefore they turned back, commencing at once to retrace the road they had come and walking in the same order as they walked from the first--since the position of none could be altered. And by Marion's side was Laure, as ever.

"You are refreshed," the former said to her companion; "you can accomplish this? Strive--oh! strive--poor soul, to be brave! Remember, every step we take, every moment, removes us farther and farther from the risk of this awful thing. Be brave, dear one," and, herself still strong and brave, unconquered and unconquerable, she placed her arm around that of her more delicate fellow-prisoner and helped her upon the way.

"I will be brave," Laure answered. "I will struggle to the end. My heart is broken, death would be welcome--yet not such a death as this. Oh! Marion, I do not desire to die thus--like those," and she pointed to some of the awful yellow-faced victims who were being wheeled or dragged along, or were staggering by themselves to the mountains and open country. "Yet, surely," she added, "the risk is as great here as in the city below, so long as we keep in their vicinity. Is it not?"

"Ay, it is," the other answered. "Yet we will break off from them ere long. Alas! these chains. If we were only free of them we could all separate; you and I could climb that little hill together which rises over there; we could go on and on until the feverous breath of the pest was left behind. But we can do nothing. All must stay together."

Still they went on, however--not swiftly, because amongst them there was not one, not even Marion herself, who could progress otherwise than slowly, owing to the fatigue that was upon them after their long march, and owing, also, to the weight of their irons, as well as to the fact that they were almost famished. Their last meal had been eaten at midday, and they had been promised a full one by their late guardians on entering the gates of Marseilles. Yet, now, they were retreating from Marseilles, and there were no guardians left to provide for them. When, Marion wondered, would they ever eat again; how would food be found for the mouths of all in their company? There were still some twenty women left chained together; how could they be fed?

Even, however, as she reflected on all this, another thought arose in her mind; one that had had no existence in it for many hours, or, indeed, days.

"Where is the men's chain-gang, I wonder?" she mused aloud. "The men who, poor wretches, are in many cases our newly-made husbands. Where can they be? They were ahead of us all the way; therefore, since we have not passed them, and since, also, we halted within musket-shot of the city, it follows that they, at least, have entered the doomed place--are doomed themselves. Great God! we who survive this are as like as not to be widows again soon," and she laughed a harsh, strident laugh that had no mirth in it, but was born of the bitterness within her.

Those words "our newly-made husbands" gave rise to thoughts in Laure's own sad heart that she would willingly have stifled if she had possessed the power to do so. They recalled memories that (when she had not been too dazed--almost too delirious--to dwell upon them during the horrors of the past six weeks) she had endeavoured to dispel. Memories of the noble Englishman who had sacrificed his existence for her--nay! if that villain Desparre had spoken truth, his very life--and whose sacrifice had obtained for her no more than the state of misery in which she was now plunged.

"Yet," she whispered, half to herself, half aloud, so that Marion heard her words; "yet, almost I pray that he may be dead----"

"Your husband?" the other interrupted. "You pray that he may be dead! He who gave up all for you--the man whom you love. Whom, Laure, you know you love?" For still Marion insisted, as she had insisted often enough before during the journey, that Laure had come to love Walter Clarges.

"Yes--I even pray for that--sometimes," the girl answered. "For--for if he lives, how doubly vile must he deem me. What must he think of me, supposing--supposing that Desparre lied--that he was not dead--that he was not even met by that villain and his myrmidons--that the whole story was false!"

"What should he think!" exclaimed Marion, not, in truth, grasping Laure's meaning. "What should he think?"

"What? Why think that but I used him for my own selfish purposes to escape from marriage with Desparre, as, God forgive me, was the case; and that, once he had left me alone in his home, I next escaped from him. How can he know--how dream of what befell me? Who was there to tell him of what happened in that room? Even I, myself, know nothing of what occurred from the time I fell prostrate at Desparre's feet, until I awoke a prisoner in that--that prison, which I only left for this," and she cast her eyes despairingly around upon her miserable companions and upon the flying inhabitants of the stricken city who still went on and on, their one hope being to leave the place behind.

But the brave heart, the strong mind of Marion Lascelles--neither of which could be subdued by even that which now encompassed them--would not for an instant agree to such hopelessness as her companion expressed. Instead, she cried:

"Nay, nay. He would not do so. Believe that Desparre lied when he said that your husband was dead, since how could such a creeping snake as that slay such as he was, one so noble. Believe he lived, and, thus living, returned to find you gone. But, in doing so----"

"He would hate, despise, loathe me. He would deem me what I was, base and contemptible, and so, God help me! endeavour to forget. He would remember nothing except that he had parted with his freedom for ever to save so vile a thing as I."

"Again I say nay, Laure," and now Marion's voice sank even lower, her tone became more deep. "Laure, I know the hearts of men--God help *me*, too!--I have had cause to know them--bitter cause, brought about sometimes by my own errors, sometimes by their own wickedness. And I--I tell you, you have judged wrongly. This man, this Englishman, loved you with his whole heart and soul; he loves you still."

"Alas! alas! it cannot be," Laure murmured. "It is impossible."

"At first," Marion went on, "he may, it is true, deem that you used him only as a tool. He may do so because no man who ever lived has yet understood woman's nature--ever sounded the depths of that nature. Therefore, not knowing, as they none of them know, our hearts, he may at first believe, as you say, that you sacrificed his existence to your salvation. Not understanding, not guessing in his man's blindness that, as he made the sacrifice, so the love for him sprang newborn into your heart. Is it not so, Laure? Here in the midst of all these horrors with which we are surrounded, here with death close at hand, with infection in the air, ready to seize on one or all at any moment, answer me. Speak truth as you would speak it on your death-bed. You love him--loved him from that moment? Answer! Is it not so?"

"Yes," Laure said, faintly, her whisper being almost drowned in the soft, cool breeze that came sweeping over them from the distant mountain-tops of the Basses Alpes. "Yes, I loved him from the first--from the moment when he took me to his house. Oh, God!" she murmured, "when he told me that we must part, deeming that I could never love him, almost I threw myself at his feet, almost I rushed to his arms beseeching him to fold me in them, to stay by my side for ever. And now--now--we shall never meet again."

"Never meet again, perhaps," said Marion, scorning to hold out hopes to the other that she could not believe were ever likely to be realised; "yet of one thing be sure, namely, that he will seek for you. As time goes on he will learn the truth--how, I cannot tell, yet surely he must learn it--and then--and then no power on earth, nothing short of the will of God will prevent him from seeking for you."

"And finding me dead. Here, or in the new land to which we go."

"The new land to which we go!" Marion echoed, scornfully. "The new land to which we go! I doubt if that will ever be. If it were not for these cursed irons we should be free now--free for ever. We could disperse singly, or in couples, wander forth over France, even seek other lands. And--and you could write to him."

"Ah!" Laure exclaimed. "Write to him! To do that! Oh, Marion, Marion, you are so strong, so brave! Set us free! Set us free! Set us free!" Alas! that Marion should have spoken those words, or have let them fall on Laure's ears, thus raising desires and expectations never to be gratified.

There was no freedom to come to them--none from so awful a captivity as that which was now to enslave them.

For, even as Laure uttered her wail for freedom, which was born of her companion's hopeful words, the atom of liberty they possessed--the liberty of being able to remove from this fever-tainted spot to some other that remained still unpoisoned by the breath of the pestilence, although shackled and chained altogether--was taken away.

There came up swiftly behind them a band of men; they were a number of convicts, drawn from the galleys lying at the Quai de Riveneuve, as well as several of the beggars of Marseilles, known as "the crows:" beggars who were employed and told off to act under the orders of the sheriffs in removing the dead from the streets, in lighting nightly the fires to purge the city, and in fulfilling the duties of the police--mostly dead themselves by this time.

And in command of them were two sheriffs.

"These are the women, the emigrants," one of the latter said to the other. "'Twas certain they could not be very far behind the men." Then the speaker, who was mounted, rode his horse up to where this group of desolate, forlorn wanderers stood hesitating while appalled by the sudden stoppage of their escape, and said--

"Good women, whither are you going? Your destiny is Marseilles, en route for New France."

For a moment those unhappy women stood helpless and silent, gazing into each other's worn faces, not knowing what answer to make or what to say. In truth they were paralysed with the fear that was upon them, namely, that they were about to be driven into the infected city, paralysed also with grief at their escape being cut off.

"Answer," the Sheriff said, not speaking harshly. And then, with all the eyes of her companions in misery fixed on her and bidding her plainly enough to act as their mouthpiece, Marion said--

"Those who drove us from Paris here have fled in fear of the contagion that is amongst you. We, too, have sought to flee away from it. The law which condemned us to transportation to New France, to be followed by our freedom, did not condemn us to this."

"You speak truth," the Sheriff said, his voice a grave and solemn, yet not unkindly, one. "Yet you must go on with what you are sent here for. And--and--we need women's help here, such help as nursing and so forth. You must come with us and stay until the ships, which have put to sea in fear, return to transport you to New France."

"It is tyranny!" Marion Lascelles exclaimed. "Tyranny to force us thus!"

"Not so," the Sheriff replied. "Not so. You will be treated well; your freedom will begin at once. Your irons shall be struck off now. Also, while you remain with us and work for us--heaven knows how we require assistance--you shall have a daily wage and good food. But--you must come."

"We shall die," Marion exclaimed, acting still as the spokeswoman of all. "And our deaths will lie at your door."

But still the Sheriff spoke very gently, saying that, even so, they must do as he bid them. Then, next, he ordered some of the convicts to stand forward and remove their chains and collars, so that even the short distance to be accomplished ere reaching the city should be no more irksome than possible.

After which he said to the group of women, many of whom were sobbing around him, some with fear of what they were about to encounter, and some with joy at losing at last, their horrible, hateful iron burdens.

"Do not weep. Do not weep. Already is our once bright, joyous city a vale of tears. Nay, there can be, I think, no more tears left for us to shed. I myself can weep no more. I who, in the last week, have buried my wife, my two daughters, and my little infant babe."

"Oh! oh!" gasped Marion and Laure and all the women standing round who heard the bereaved man's words. "Oh! Unhappy man. Unhappy man!"

CHAPTER XVII

AN ARISTOCRATIC RESORT

The little watering-place of Eaux St. Fer, which stood on the slope of a hill some few leagues outside Montpellier, and nearer than that city to the southern sea-board, was very full this summer; so full, indeed, that hardly could the visitors to it be accommodated with the apartments they required. So full that, already it had incurred the displeasure of many of those patrons--who were mostly of the ancient nobility of France--at their being forced to rub shoulders with, and also live cheek by jowl with, such common persons as--to go no lower--those of the upper bourgeoisie. Yet it had to be done--the doing of it could not be avoided; for this very year the waters of Eaux St. Fer had bubbled forth a degree warmer than they had ever been known to do before; they tasted more of saltpetre than any visitor could recollect their having done previously, and tasted also more unutterably nauseous; while marvellous cures of gout and rheumatism, and complaints brought on by overeating and overdrinking and late hours, as well as other indulgences, were reported daily. Even at this very moment the gossips staying at The Garland (the fashionable hostelry) were relating how Madame la Marquise de Montesprit, who was noted for eating a pâté of snipe every night of her life for supper, was already free from pain and able to sit up in her bed and play piquet with the Abbé Leri, whose carbuncles were fast disappearing from his face; while, too, the Chevalier Rancé d'Irval had lost eight pounds of his terrible weight, and the Vicomtesse de Fraysnes had announced that in another week she would actually appear without her veil, so much improved was her complexion. Likewise, it was whispered that, only a day or so before, three casks of the atrociously tasting water had been sent up to Paris to no less a person than the Regent himself.

Wherefore Eaux St. Fer was full to suffocation; dukes, duchesses, and all the other members of what was even then called the old régime, were huddled together pell-mell with bankers, merchants, even eminent shopkeepers and tradesmen; and, except that in the principal alley, or walk, it was understood that the nobility kept to one side of it, and those whom they termed the "refuse" to the other, one could hardly have told which were the people who boasted the blood of centuries in their veins, and which were those who, if they knew who their grandfathers were, knew no more. And, after all, when one's blood is corrupted by every indulgence that human weakness can give way to until the body is like a barrel, and the legs are like bolsters, and the face is a mass of swollen impurity, or as white as that of a corpse within its shroud, it matters very little whether that blood is drawn from ancestors who fought at Ascalon and Jerusalem or peddled vulgar wares in the lowest purlieus of cities.

"Mon ami!" exclaimed one of the high-born dames, who kept to the right side of the alley, to an aristocrat who sat on a bench beneath a tree close by where one of the fountains of Eaux St. Fer bubbled forth its waters, "Mon ami, you do not look well this morning. Yet see how the sun shines around; observe how it shows the wrinkles beneath the eyes of Mademoiselle de Ste. Ange over there, and also the paint on the face of the old Marquis de Pontvert. You should be gay, mon ami, this morning."

"I am not well," replied the personage whom she addressed. "Neither in health nor mind. Sometimes I wish I were a soldier again, living a life of----"

"Neither in health nor mind!" the lady who had accosted him repeated. "Come, now. That is not as it should be. Let us see. Tell me your symptoms. First, for the health. What ails that?" and, as she asked the question, she peered into the man's dull eyes with her own large clear ones. Then she continued, "Remember, Monsieur le Duc, that, although an arrangement once subsisting between us will never come to a settlement now, we are still to be very good--friends. Is it not so?" Yet, even as she asked the question, especially as she mentioned the word "friends," she turned her face away from him on the pretence of flicking off some dust from her farthest sleeve, and smiled, while biting her full, red nether lip with her brilliantly white teeth.

Then she turned back to him, saying: "Now for the health. What is the worst?"

"Diane, I suffer. I burn----"

"*Already!*" she exclaimed. And the Marquise laughed aloud at her own cruel joke; a merry little, rippling laugh, and one more befitting a girl of twenty than a woman nearly double that age. And her blue eyes flashed saucily--though some might, however, have said, sinisterly. Then she begged the other's pardon, and desired him to continue.

But, annoyed, petulant at her scoff, he would not do so; instead, he turned his white face away from where she had taken a seat beside him, and watched the other members of his own order strolling about under the trees, their hats, when men, under their arms, their dresses, when women, held up in many cases by little page boys.

She, on her part, did not press him to continue. She had strolled forth that morning from The Garland, where she had been fortunate enough to secure rooms for herself and her maid, with the full determination of meeting Monsieur le Duc Desparre and of conversing with him on a certain topic, her own share in which conversation she had rehearsed a thousand times in the last seven months, and she meant to do so still; but as for his health, or his mental troubles, she cared not one jot. Indeed, had Diane Grignan de Poissy been asked what gift of Fate she most desired should be accorded to her old lover at the present time, she would doubtless have suggested that a long, lingering illness, which should prevent him from ever again being able to

enjoy, in the slightest degree, the fortune and position he had lately inherited, would be most agreeable to her. For this man sitting by her side had, in his poverty, been her lover, he had accepted substantial offerings from her under the guise of her future husband, and, in his affluence, had refused to fulfil his pledge to her--a Grignan de Poissy by marriage, a Saint Fresnoi de Buzanval by birth--a woman notorious, famous, for her beauty even now!

No wonder she hated the "cadaverous infidel"--as often enough she termed him in her own thoughts--the man now seated by her side.

Her presence in this resort of the sick and ailing was, like that of many others, simply for her own purpose. Some of those others came to keep assignations; some to win money off well-to-do invalids who, although rushing with swift strides to their tombs, could not, nevertheless, exist without gaming; some to carry on here the same life which they led in Paris, but which life there was now at a standstill and would be so until the leaves began to fall in the woods round and about the capital. As for her, Diane Grignan de Poissy, she needed neither to drink unpleasant waters that tasted of iron and saltpetre, nor to bathe in them, nor to follow any regimen; though, to suit her own ends, she gave out that she did thus need to do so. Instead, and actually, in all her thirty-eight years she had never know either ache or pain or ailment, but had revelled always in superb health, notwithstanding the fact that she had been a maid of honour once at Versailles to a daughter of the old King--that now-forgotten "Roi Soleil!"--and had taken part since in many of the supper parties given by Philippe le Débonnaire.

Yet in spite of all, she was here, at Eaux St. Fer.

Presently she spoke again, saying in a soft, subdued voice, into which she contrived to throw a contrite tone--

"Armand, dear friend, you are not going to quarrel with me for a foolish word; a silly joke! Armand, the memories of the past brought me here--to see you. I heard that you were suffering, and also--that--that--you--could not recover from the trick put upon you by that girl--Laure Vauxc--"

"Silence!" he said, turning swiftly round on her. "Silence! Never mention that name, that episode again in my hearing. It has damned me in the eyes of Paris--of France--for ever. It has heaped ridicule on me from which I can never recover. It is that--that--that--which has broken me down. Neither Tokay, nor late nights--as I cause it to be given out--nor----" He paused in his furious words, then said a moment later, "Yet, so far as he, as she, are concerned, I have paid the score. He is dead, she worse than dead."

"I know, I know," she murmured, her blue eyes almost averted, so that he should not observe the glance that she felt, that she knew, must be in them. "I know. Let us talk of it no more. Armand, forget it."

"Forget it! I shall never forget it. What can I do to drive it from my own thoughts or to drive the memory of my humiliation by that beggar's brat from out the memory of men--of all Paris!"

"Ignore it. Again I say, forget. Thus you cause others to do so." Then, as though she, at least, had no intention of saying aught that might re-open, or help to re-open, the wounds caused to his vanity by the events of the winter, she picked up idly a book he had been glancing at when she drew near him, and which had fallen on to the crushed-shell path of the alley as they conversed. She picked it up and began turning its fresh white pages over.

"It amuses you?" she asked. "This thing?" And she read out the title of one of Piron's latest productions, the comic opera, "Arlequin Deucalion."

"One must do something--to pass the time. If we cannot see a play, the next best thing is to read one."

"Alas," his companion exclaimed, "the plays of to-day are so stupid--so puerile! No plot, no characters bearing truth to life. Now I! Now I--ah!----" she broke off. "Look at that! And just as we speak, too, of plays and playwrights. Behold, Papa de Crébillon. Mon Dieu! What is the matter with him. He jabbars like a monkey. Yet still he bows with grace--the grace of a gentleman."

"He suffers from gout atrociously," Desparre muttered.

In truth, the figure which now approached the pair seated in the alley might have been either of the things which Diane Grignan de Poissy had mentioned, a monkey or a gentleman. His face was a drawn and twitching one, filled with innumerable lines and with, set into it, deep sunken eyes, while his manners were--for the period--perfect, his bow that of a courtier, and worthy of the most refined member of the late Louis' court. For the rest, he was a man of over forty years of age, and was renowned already as the author of the popular dramas "Electra," "Atreus," and "Idomeneus." By his side walked a lad, his son, Claude Prosper, destined to be better known even than his father, though not so creditably.

"Good morning, Monsieur de Crébillon," cried the bright and joyous Diane--bright and joyous as she assumed to be!--while the dramatist drew near to where she and her companion were seated beneath the acacias. "You are most welcome. 'Tis but now we were talking of plays and

dramas--lamenting, too----"

"Ah! Madame la Marquise!" exclaimed the dramatist at the word "lamenting," while his face twitched worse than before, since assumed horror was added to it now. "Lamenting; no! no! madame! lament nothing. At least there is, I trust, nothing to lament in our modern drama."

"Ay, but there is though!" the Marquise said. Then assuming an air of playful reproof, she went on: "How is it that you all miss plot in your productions now? Why have you no secrets reserved for the end--for the dénouement, for the last moment ere they make ready to extinguish the lights. Eh! Answer me that. Hardy was the last. Since then it is all pompous declamation, heavy versification, dull pomp, and thunder. Hardy belonged to a past day, but at least he excited his listeners, kept them awake for what was to come--what they knew would come--what they knew must come."

"Madame has said it----" the dramatist bowed at this moment to three ladies of the aristocracy who passed by, while Desparre rose from his seat to greet them with stiff courtesy, and Diane Grignan de Poissy smiled affectionately. "Hardy did belong to a past day. We have changed all that, Corneille changed it." At the name of Corneille he bowed again solemnly. "Yet," he said, "plot is no bad thing. A little vulgar and straining, perhaps, yet sufficiently interesting."

"Monsieur de Crébillon," Desparre exclaimed here, he not having spoken a word before or acknowledged the dramatist's presence, except by a glance, "you may be seated. There is a sufficiency of room upon this bench."

With a gleam from his sunken eyes--which might have meant to testify thanks to Monsieur le Duc, or might have meant to convey contempt--was he not already a popular favourite among the highest ranks of the aristocracy in Paris, and, even here, in Eaux St. Fer, one of those to whom the fashionable side of the alley was thrown open as a right!--he took his seat upon the vacant space on the other side of the Marquise. Then, from out the hollow caverns of his eye-sockets he regarded her steadily, while he said--

"Has Madame la Marquise by chance any protégé among her many friends who has written a play with a plot? An embryo Hardy, for example. Almost, if a poor poet might be permitted to have a thought," and again his glance rested with contempt on Desparre; "I would wager such to be the case. Some gentleman of her house who deems that he has the sacred fire within him----"

"Supposing," interrupted Diane, "that one who is no poor gentleman--but--but--as a matter of fact--myself--had conceived a good drama, a--a--story so strange that she imagined it might amuse--nay--interest an audience. Suppose that! Would it be possible to----?"

"Madame," exclaimed le Duc Desparre, "have you turned dramatist. Are you about to become a bluestocking?"

"Why not?" she asked, with a swift glance that met his; a glance that reminded him--he knew not why--of the blue steely glitter of a rapier. "Why not? Have not other women of France, of my class, done such things?"

"Frequently," de Crébillon replied, answering the question addressed to the other. "Frequently. Yet--yet--never that I can recall in public, before the lower orders, the people. But to pass a soirée away, to amuse one's friends in the country. That would be another thing. A little comedy now,--with a brilliant, startling conclusion--"

"Mine is not a comedy!"

"Perhaps," questioned the dramatist, "a great classical tragedy? With a dénouement such as was used in early days?"

"Nay, a drama. One of our own times."

Still, as she spoke, she kept her eyes fixed full blaze upon de Crébillon--yet--out of the side of them--she watched Monsieur le Duc. And it might be that the sun was flickering the shadows of the acacia leaves upon his face and, thereby, causing that face to look now as though it were more yellow than white. She thought, at least, that this was the tinge it was assuming. Yet--she might be mistaken.

"Will you not tell us, Madame la Marquise, something of this plot, at least?" the duke asked, "give us some premonition of what this subject is. Or prepare us for what we are to expect when this drama sees the day?"

And she knew that his voice trembled as he spoke. "Nay, nay, Monsieur le Duc," the dramatist exclaimed, "to do that would destroy the pleasure of the representation. It would remove expectancy--the salt of such things." Then, turning to the Marquise, he asked: "Is Madame's little play written, or, at present, only conceived? If so, I should be ravished to read it; to myself alone, or to a number of Madame's friends. There are many here, in Eaux St. Fer. And the after dinner hours are a little dull; such an afternoon would compensate for much."

"The plot is alone conceived. It is in the air only. Yet it is all here," and she tapped with her

finger on her white forehead over which the golden hair curled crisply.

"Will Madame la Marquise permit that I construct a little play for the benefit of her friends? The saloon of The Garland will hold all she chooses to invite. Doubtless, Monsieur le Duc will agree with me that no more ravishing entertainment could be provided in Eaux St. Fer, which is a little--one may say--a little *triste*--sometimes."

Heavily, stolidly, Monsieur le Duc bowed his head acquiescingly; though, had it been in his power to do so, he would have thrown obstacles in the way of the Marquise's little plot ever falling into de Crébillon's hands. He had seen something in that steely glitter of her blue eyes which disturbed him, though he scarcely knew why such should be the case--yet, also, he could not forget that this was a woman whom he had wronged in the worst way possible to wrong such as she--by scorning her in his prosperity. Therefore he was disturbed.

Half an hour later the alley was deserted, the visitors were going to their dinners, it was one o'clock. The Duc had departed to his, the Marquise Grignan de Poissy was strolling slowly towards The Garland, there to partake of hers; de Crébillon and his son walked by her side. And, as they did so, the dramatist said a word.

"Always," he remarked quietly, "I have thought that Madame la Marquise was possessed of the deepest friendship for Monsieur le Duc."

"*Vraiment!*" she exclaimed, transfixing him with her wondrous eyes. "*Vraiment!* And has Monsieur de Crébillon seen fit to alter that opinion?" To which the other made no answer, unless a shrug of his lean shoulders was one.

CHAPTER XVIII

"THE ABANDONED ORPHAN" PROLOGUE

The company had assembled in the saloon of the Garland and formed as fashionable a collection of the upper aristocracy as any which could perhaps be brought together outside Paris. Not even Vichy, the great rival of Eaux St. Fer, could have drawn a larger number of persons bearing the most high-sounding and aristocratic names of France. For Eaux St. Fer was this year *la mode*, principally because of that one extra degree of heat which the waters were reported to have assumed, and, next, because of the rumour, now accepted as absolute truth, that the Regent had casks and barrels of those waters sent with unfailing regularity to Paris daily. And, still, for one other reason, namely, that here the life of Paris might be resumed; the intrigues, the flirtations, and the scandals of the *Maitresse Vile*--or of that portion of it which the highest aristocracy of the land condescended to consider as Paris, namely, St. Germain, the Palais Royal and Versailles--might be renewed; everything might be indulged in, here as there, except the late hours of going to bed and the equally late ones of rising, the overeating and overdrinking, and the general wear and tear of already enfeebled constitutions. Everything might be the same except these delights against which the fashionable physicians so sternly set their faces.

"Do what you will," said those aristocratic tyrants, who (after having preached up the place as one from which almost the elixir of a new life might be drawn) had now followed their patients to the spot thereby to guard over and protect them, and, also, to continue to increase their bills. "Do all that you desire, save--a few things. No late hours, no rich dishes, no potent wines, no heated rooms. Instead, fresh air all day long in the valleys, or, above, on the hills; the plain living of the country and long nights of rest; for drink, the pure draughts of the springs and of milk. Thereby shall you all return to Paris renovated and restored."

Yet they were careful not to add, "And ready to commence a fresh career of dissipation which shall place you in our hands again and, eventually, in the tombs of your aristocratic families."

Since, however, the visitors followed with more or less regularity the prescribed regimen, the wholesomeness of the life was soon apparent in renewed appetites, in cheeks which bloomed--almost, though not quite--without the adventitious aid of paint and cosmetiques; in nerves which ceased to quiver at every noise; in nights which were passed in easy slumbers instead of being racked by the pangs of indigestion. Wholesome enough indeed, revivifying and strengthening; a life that recuperated wasted vitality and prepared its possessors for a new season of dissipation and debauchery at the Regent's court. Yet, withal, a deadly dull one! Wherefore, when it was whispered that they were invited to "a representation of a play" by "a lady of rank," which play was, as they termed it themselves, "*Un secret de la Comédie*," since everyone in Eaux St. Fer

knew who the lady of rank was, they flocked to the saloon of The Garland, and did so a little more eagerly than they might otherwise have done, since there was also in the air a whisper that, in the "representation," was something more than the mere attempts of a would-be bluestocking to exhibit her talents for dramatic construction.

De Crébillon possessed another talent besides an inventive genius and a power of writing tragedies; he had a tongue which could whisper smoothly but effectively, a glance which could suggest, and an altogether admirable manner of exciting curiosity by a look alone.

So they were all gathered together now, two hours after their early and salutary, but scarcely appetising, dinners had been eaten; and they formed a mass of gorgeously-dressed, highbred men and women, everyone of whom were known to the others, and everyone of whose secrets were, in almost every case, also known to each other. Yet, since each and all had a history, none being free from one skeleton of the past (or present) at least, this was not a matter of very much importance.

In costumes suited for the watering-places--yet made by the astute hands of the workwomen of Mesdames Germeuil or Carvel, Versac or Grandchamp, and produced under the equally astute eyes of those authorities in dress--the ladies entered the room where the representation was to take place, their pointed corsages and bouffante sleeves, with their deep ruffles at the elbows, setting off well their diamond-adorned head-dresses and their flowered robes. As for the men, their dress was the dress of the most costly period in France, not even excepting the days of the Great Monarch; their court-swords gold-hilted; their lace at sleeve and breast and knee worth a small fortune; their wigs works of art and of great cost.

"Mon ami," said the Marquise Grignan de Poissy to a youth who approached her as she made her way through the press of her friends, the young man being none other than her nephew, the present bearer of the title of the de Poissys, "you are charming; your costume is ravishing."

"Yet," she continued, "that is but a poor weapon to hang upon a man's thigh," and she touched lightly with her finger the ivory and gold hilt of the court-sword he carried by his side. "There is no fighting quality in that."

"My dear aunt," exclaimed the young marquis, glancing at her admiringly, for, even to him, the beauty of his late uncle's widow was more or less alluring, "my dear aunt, it professes to have no fighting qualities. It is only an ornament such as that," and he, too, put out a finger and touched the baton, or cane, which she carried in her hand in common with other ladies.

"Yet this," she said, "would strike a blow on any who molested me, even though it broke in the attempt, being so poor a thing," and her deep blue eyes gazed into his while sparkling like sapphires as they did so.

"And," he replied, not understanding why those eyes so transfixed him, or why, at the same time, he vibrated under their glance, "this would run a man through who molested you, even though it broke in the attempt, being so poor a thing," and he gave a little self-satisfied laugh.

"Would it? You mean that?"

"Without doubt, I mean it," he replied, his voice gradually becoming grave, while he stared fixedly at her, as though not comprehending. "Without doubt, I mean it." Then he said, a moment later--speaking as though he had penetrated the meaning she would convey: "My dear aunt Diane, is there by chance anyone whom you wish run through? If so name him. It shall be done, to-night, to-morrow, at dawn, for--for--the honour of our house and--your bright eyes."

"No! No! No! No! I do but jest. Yet, come, sit by me, I--I am nervous for the success of this play. I know the writer thereof---"

"So do I!" he interjected.

"And, see, all are in their places. De Crébillon comes on the platform to speak the argument. Sit. Sit here, Agénor. Close by my side." Then she muttered to herself so low that he could not hear her words. "Almost I fear for that which I have done. Yet--Vengeance confound him!--he merits it. And worse!"

An instant later the easy tones of de Crébillon were heard announcing--as briefly and succinctly as though he were addressing the players at the Français ere reading to them the plot of some new drama by himself--what was to be offered to the audience.

Having opened his address with many compliments to those assembled there and to their exalted rank, equalled only by their capacity of judgment and their power to make or mar for ever that which would now be submitted to them as the work of an illustrious unknown, he went on--

"The scene is in two acts. The title is 'The Abandoned Orphan.' The leading characters are Cidalise, who is the orphan, and Célie, who has protected her. The first act exhibits the child's abandonment, the second--but, no! Mesdames et Messieurs--that must be left for representation, must be unrolled before you in the passage of the play. Suffice it, therefore, if I say now that the

work has been hurriedly written so as to be presented before you for your delectation; that the actors and actresses are the best obtainable from a troupe now happily roaming in Provence; that, in effect, your indulgence is begged by all. Mesdames et Messieurs, the play will now begin."

Amidst such applause as so fashionable an audience as this felt called upon to give, de Crébillon withdrew from the hastily-constructed platform which had been erected in the great saloon--which was not, in truth, very great--the blue curtain that was stretched across from one side of the room to the other was withdrawn, and the play began. Yet not before more than one person in the audience had whispered to himself, or herself, "At whom does she aim?" Not before, too, more than one had turned their eyes inwardly with much introspection. And one who heard de Crébillon's words gave a sigh, almost a gasp of relief. That one was Monsieur le Duc Desparre. To his knowledge he had never abandoned any infant.

There was, naturally, no scenery; yet, all the same, some attempts had been made to aid dramatic illusion. The landlord had lent some bits of tapestry to decorate the walls, and some chairs and tables. In this case only the commoner sort were required, since the scene depicted a room not much better than a garret. And in this garret, as the curtain was pulled aside, was depicted Célie having in her arms a bundle supposed to be the child, Cidalise, while on the bed lay stretched the unhappy mother, dead.

With that interminable monologue, so much used by the French dramatists of the period, and so tolerated by the audience of the period, Célie delivered in blank verse a long recitation of what had led to this painful scene. Fortunately, the actress who played this part was (as happened often enough in those days, when the wandering troupes were quite as good as those which trod the boards of the Parisian stages, though, through want of patronage or opportunity, they very often never even so much as entered the capital) quite equal to its rendition, she having a clear distinct diction which she knew thoroughly well how to accompany with suitable gesture. Also, which caused some remark even amongst this unemotional audience, she bore a striking likeness to the highbred dame who was the authoress of the drama. The woman was tall and exquisitely shaped; her primrose-coloured hair--coloured thus, either by art and design, or nature--curled in crisp curls about her head; her eyes were blue as corn-flowers. Wherefore, as they gazed on her, there ran a suppressed titter through that audience, a whispered word or so passed, more than one head turned, and more than one pair of eyes rested inquiringly on Diane Grignan de Poissy sitting some row or so of chairs back from the platform. And there were some whose eyes sought the countenance of le Duc Desparre and observed that his face, although blank as a mask, showed signs of aroused interest; that his eyes were fixed eagerly on the wandering mummer who enacted Célie.

"'Tis thee," whispered Agénor to his aunt. "'Tis thee!"

"Yes. It is I," she whispered back. In solemn diction, the woman unfolded her story. The story of an innocent girl betrayed into a mock marriage, a fictitious priest, desertion followed by death, and her own determination to secure the child and to rear it, and, some day, to use that child as a means whereby to wreak vengeance on the betrayer because he was such in a double capacity. He had sworn his love to Célie, to herself, as well as to the unfortunate woman now lying dead; he had deceived them both. Only the dead woman was poor; she was rich. Rich enough, at least, to provide in some way for that child, to keep it alive until the time came for producing it. "As I swear to do," Célie cried in rhyme, this being the last speech, or tag, of the prologue, "even though I wait for years. For years." Then she called on Phœbus and many other heathen divinities so dear to the hearts of the French dramatists, to hear her register her vow. And, thus, the prologue ended amidst a buzz from the audience, loud calls for Célie, for de Crébillon, for the author. Expectancy had been aroused, the most useful thing of all others, perhaps, to which a prologue could be put. De Crébillon led on the blue-eyed, golden-haired actress, and she, standing before the most exalted audience which had ever witnessed her efforts, considered that her fortune was as good as made. Henceforth, farewell, she hoped, to acting in barns and hastily-erected booths in provincial towns and villages, to the homage of country boors and simple country gentlemen. She saw before her . . . what matters what she saw! In all that audience none, except a few of the younger and most impressionable of the men, thought of the handsome stroller; all desired to know what the drama itself would bring forth.

For none doubted now (since they knew full well from de Crébillon's whispered hints and suggestive glances who the author was) that Desparre was the man pointed at as the betrayer of the woman who had been seen stretched in the garret. All remembered that, for years, even during the life of the old king, his name had been coupled with that of the Marquise. And they remembered that she, who was once looked upon as the certain Duchesse Desparre of the future, had never become his wife; that instead, he had meant to wed with a woman who had emerged none knew whence except that it was from the gutters of the streets--from beneath a gambler's roof; and that even such a one as this had jilted him! Jilted him who sat there now, still as a statue, white as one, too. Looking like death itself!

What were they about to see? A denunciation of this man by his abandoned child to that intended bride born of the gutter, a denunciation so fierce and terrible that even she, that creature of nothingness, shrank from him as something so base--so *scabreux*, as they termed it in their whispers--that she dared not share his illustrious name! Was that what was now to be depicted before them? Was that the true reason for the scandal with which all Paris had rung

since the cruel months of winter; of which people still spoke apart and in subdued murmurs? Was the abandoned orphan, or rather her representative, to speak her denunciation on that platform? Was that woman of the people to fly from him before their eyes? Was the Duc Desparre to be held up before them here, on this summer day, in the true colours which all knew him to possess, but which all, because he was of their own patrician order, endeavoured to forget that he thus possessed?

If so, then Diane Grignan de Poissy's vengeance was, indeed, an awful one! If so, then God shield them from having their own secrets fall into her possession, from having her vengeance aroused against them, too!

As had been ever since the days of Hardy, of Corneille, of Moliere, their attention was now drawn to the fact that the actual play was about to commence by three thumps upon the stage from a club, and, once more, they settled down to the enjoyment of the spectacle; the buzz amongst them ceasing as again the curtain was drawn back. They prepared for the denunciation! Yet, still, in their last whispers to each other ere silence set in, they asked how that denunciation was to take effect? There were but two female characters, Célie, the protectress, Cidalise, the orphan. Where then was the character of the woman to whom the man was to be denounced; the woman who should represent before them that creature of the lower orders who, in actual fact and life, had last winter fled from Desparre--the blanched figure sitting before them--sooner than become his wife and a duchess?

Perhaps, after all, they thought and said, they had been mistaken--perhaps, after all, it was not a true representation of Desparre's degradation which was about to be offered to them! Perhaps they had misjudged, overrated, the vengeance of Diane!

Well! they would soon see now. The curtain was withdrawn, the scene was exposed, and it represented a pretty *salon* adorned for a festivity--a betrothal.

The play began.

CHAPTER XIX

"THE ABANDONED ORPHAN" DRAMA

The usual guests who figure at stage weddings had assembled in the salon. Evidently, the audience whispered, one to another, it was a marriage contract, at least, which was about to be signed--or, perhaps, an assemblage of relatives at the bride's house ere setting forth to the church. No doubt of that, they thought, else why the love-knots at ladies' wrists and breasts--quite clean and fresh because, somehow, the poor strolling players who represented high-born dames had been provided with them by the giver of the entertainment--and why, also, had the gentlemen got on the best suits which the baggage waggon of their troupe contained?

Wherefore, after seeing all this, the actual high-born dames and men of ancient family in the audience gave many a sidelong glance at each other, while the former's eyes frequently flashed leering looks over their enamelled cheeks and from beneath their painted eyelashes and eyebrows. For all recalled that, in the real drama which had happened in Paris in the winter months--the real drama over which Baron and Destouches and Poinset (who should never have been an author, since he was born almost a gentleman), and other grinning devils of the pen, had made such bitter mockery in verse and prose--in that real drama, a marriage, renounced and broken, had formed the main incident. Recalling all this, they settled down well into their seats, eager and excited as to what was to come.

Enter amongst the guests, Célie. The handsome woman was made up to look a little older now. Yet, "the deuce confound me!" said the venerable Marquise de Champfleury, a lady who, fifty years before, had been renowned for her *bonnes fortunes* in the Royal circle, "the deuce confound me! she resembles Diane more than ever." Which was true, and was, perhaps, made more so by the fact that the woman was now wearing a costly dress which Diane Grignan de Poissy had herself worn more than once at Eaux St. Fer before all her friends, but which she had now bestowed upon the wandering actress. The latter was, indeed, so like Diane, that again and again the revered marquise uttered her oaths as she regarded her.

To Célie there entered next Cidalise, young, slender, pretty, yet--because sometimes the troupe were starving and had naught to eat but that which was flung to them in charity, or a supper of broken victuals given them by an innkeeper in return for a song or performance before

a handful of provincial shopkeepers--thin, and out of condition. Nevertheless, she could deliver her lines well, and speak as clearly as Charlotte Lenoir had done, or as La Gautier did now--and would have become a leading actress, indeed might become one yet, if she could only get a foothold in Paris.

In short, sharp sentences, such as the French dramatists loved to intersperse with the terribly long monologues which, in other places, they put into the mouths of their characters, Célie asked her if she was resolved to carry out her contract and marry this man, this Prince, who desired her for his wife? Yes, Cidalise replied, yes. Not because she loved him, but because her origin was obscure, her present surroundings revolting. Was not her uncle a gambler! At this there was a movement amongst the audience; many exquisitely painted fans were fluttered, a rustle of silk and satin and brocade was perceptible. And, also, eyes gleamed into other eyes again, but none spoke. Even the old Marquise de Champfleury swore no more. The aged trifler had become interested, a novelty which had not occurred to her--unless in connection with herself and her food and her health--for a long time.

Yet, because when all is said, these were ladies and gentlemen, not one stole a glance in the direction of Monsieur le Duc.

Had they done so they would have seen that he sat motionless in his seat, with his eyes half closed, yet glittering, as they gazed at the two women on the stage.

Two more figures were now upon the scene. His Highness, the Prince, the bridegroom predestinate, and also the uncle of Cidalise; the first called Cléon, Prince de Fourbignac, the second, Dorante. They loved such names as these, did those old French dramatists. Yet what was there about the man who played the Prince which awoke recollections in the minds of all the audience of another man they had once seen or known who was not the Duc Desparre, but someone very like him? How--how was that likeness produced? The vagabond, the stroller who enacted the illustrious personage, was a big, hectoring fellow, with a short-clipped, jet black moustache; an individual who looked more accustomed to the guardroom than a salon, to a spadron clanking against his thigh--perhaps sticking out half a foot through its worn-out scabbard--than to a clouded cane which he now wielded, even though in a salon. His clothes, too--they were the best that could be found in the frowsy, hair-covered trunk which carried the costumes of the "first gentleman" of the troupe--seemed more fitted to some bully or sharper than to an exquisite. So, too, did his expressions, his "Health, belle comtesse!" to one high-born (stage) lady, his "*Rasade*" to another whose glass touched his as she wished him felicity; so, too, did his vulgar heartiness to all.

"A Prince!" the real aristocrats in front muttered to themselves and each other, yet remembered that the words he uttered must for sure have been put into his mouth either by the authoress, or her collaborateur, De Crébillon. Only, why and wherefore? And still they were puzzled, since many of them could recall in far back days some fellow very much like the creature who was now strutting about the stage and kicking a footman here and there, slapping the bare shoulders of female guests, and giving low winks to his male friends.

There was some art in this, they muttered; some recollection which it was intended to evoke. Whom had they ever known like this? What fellow who, for some particular reason, had been admitted to their august society--a society in which, to do them justice, they behaved admirably and with exquisite grace so long as their actions were public, no matter how much they atoned for that behaviour by extremely questionable conduct in private?

Then they remembered all, memory being aroused by none other than the respected Marquise de Champfleury.

"*Me damne!*" she whispered, changing her form of exclamation somewhat--probably for fear of being monotonous. "*Me damne!* does no one recall our friend when a beggarly captain on the frontier? *Hein!* he was the second, heir then, wherefore we permitted his presence sometimes. Yet, only sometimes, God be praised! Had he not been an heir, our lackeys should have kicked him down the street. You remember; you, Fifine, and you, Finette? Heaven knows you are both old enough to do so!"

After which the amiable aristocrat ceased her pleasing prattle, and attended to the development of the drama before them.

They were all doing that now, eagerly, absorbingly, and even more especially so since the fine memory of the old Marquise had recalled to them, or most of them, the time when Desparre stamped about their salons roughly, and, because he was the second heir to the dukedom and almost sure to succeed to it some day, treated them all to a great deal of what they termed privately in disgust, "his guardroom manners." And, in remembering, they thought what good fortune it was for Diane (if it was not the outcome of astute selection) to have secured this rough fellow to personate the man she was undoubtedly bent on exposing--the man who now sat staring at the stage with his face as set as a mask, and as expressionless.

Meanwhile, the play went on. The signing of the contract which, all recognised now, was the ceremony to be performed, was at hand. First came the bridegroom, who--having ceased his tavern buffooneries--so becoming to a Prince! and in the distribution of which he had included

Cidalise, who, with well-acted horror, shrank from him every time he approached her--drew near the table at which the notary and his clerk sat, and, having slapped the former on the back, affixed his signature with a great deal of gesticulation, and then handed the quill with ostentatious politeness to his future Princess.

"Sign, dear idol," he whispered in a stage whisper, "sign. I await with eagerness the right to call thee mine." Only he marred somewhat these affecting words by winking at another girl who stood by Cidalise.

On either side of that Iphigenia were grouped now Célie and Dorante--an old grisly actor this, round shouldered and ill-favoured, who had forgotten to shave himself that morning, or who, perhaps, imagined that, as he represented a Parisian gambler, it was a touch of nature to go thus unclean--Cléon being of course next to Cidalise. And to her, Célie spoke clearly, so clearly that her voice was heard by everyone of the audience present in the salon of The Garland as she said "Sign, Cidalise." Then she stood with her large blue eyes fixed full on Cléon, while the expression in them told the spectators as plainly as words could have done that the great moment was at hand, that the dénouement was coming.

"Sign," she said again.

Taking the pen, the girl signed, repeating in stage fashion the letters of the name "Cidalise," so that the audience, who could not see the characters, should understand that they were being written down.

"So," exclaimed Célie, her eyes still on Cléon, "So, Cidalise. Continue."

"D. O. R.," murmured the bride as she pretended to write again, when, suddenly, breaking in upon hers was heard the voice of the leading actress. "No! Not that. If you sign further you must use another name." Then, turning to Cléon she hissed rapidly:

"*Lâche!* You abandoned one woman and deserted another. My time has come."

Aroused thoroughly, the audience bent forward in their chairs. The Marquise de Champfleury drew a quick breath, but cursed no more. Agénor Grignan de Poissy felt his aunt's hand tighten convulsively on his. Now, not one of the painted patricians glanced at the other; all eyes were on the stage, except one pair--those of Diane--and they were fixed on Desparre!

"What must I sign?" whispered Cidalise, trembling, and playing her part as the audience said afterwards, *à ravir*: "What? What?"

"Demand of thy uncle--uncle, mon Dieu! Demand of Dorante. Speak, Dorante."

"Thy real name," replied Dorante slowly, effectively, "is De Fourbignac."

"Thou canst not marry him," and now the woman who represented Célie was superb, as, with finger extended and eyes ablaze, she pointed at Cléon, (she got to Paris at last and became the leading lady at the Odéon!). "He is thy father. Even as he deserted me, so, too, he deserted thy mother, leaving her to die of starvation. Villain! *maraud!*" she exclaimed, turning on Cléon. "What did I promise thee? Thus I fulfil my vow."

"And thus I avenge myself," cried Cléon, tugging at his rapier. "Thus, traitress----"

But the actor did not finish his speech. From outside the wall of the salon was heard ringing the great bell of The Garland; the bell which was a signal to all who resided at the inn that now was the time when the noblesse, in contradistinction to those of the commercial world, repaired to the wells of Eaux St. Fer, there to take their glass of those unutterably filthy, but health-giving waters. Perhaps it was an arranged thing; arranged by the vengeful Diane, or the spiteful De Crébillon. Perhaps, too, it was arranged that, as the bell ceased to ring, the old Comte de la Ruffardière, a man who was of the very highest position even among so fashionable an audience as that assembled there, should rise from his chair and say, in a voice exquisitely sweet and silvery:

"Mesdames et Messieurs,--you hear that bell. Alas, that it should--although we are desolated in obeying it--that it should be able to call us away from this most ravishing drama. Yet, my dear friends, we have our healths, our most precious healths, to consult. If we miss our revivifying glass what shall become of us? Madame," addressing the representative of Célie, "Monsieur," to Cléon, "Mademoiselle," to Cidalise--his manners were of a truth perfect--not for nothing had he handed the Grand Monarch his shirt for forty-two nights in every year (by royal appointment), and watched his august master's deportment both in public and private--"we are penetrated, we are in despair, at having to depart ere this most exciting play is at an end. A play, my faith! it is a tragedy of the first order. Yet, yet, it must be so. We are all invalids--sufferers. Alas! the waters the waters! We must partake of the waters!"

Then he bowed again, solemnly to each actress, in a friendly way to the representatives of Cléon and Dorante, comprehensively to all. And, strange to say, not one of those gifted Thespians seemed at all surprised, nor in the least offended, at the departure of the audience, which was now taking place rapidly. On the contrary, the shrinking, persecuted Cidalise, that distinguished

heroiner and once-about-to-be sacrificed one, tapped him lightly on his aged cheek with her bridal fan as he stepped on to the foot-high stage, and whispered, "be still, *vieux farceur*," while Célie regarded him with a mocking smile in her blue eyes. Nor did Cléon refuse a fat purse which, surreptitiously, the old courtier dropped into his hand, but, instead, murmured his thanks again and again.

The audience had indeed departed now amidst rustlings of silks and satins, the click-clack of light dress swords upon the parquet floor, and the sharp tap of high heels. Diane, with her nephew, had slipped out even as De la Ruffardière commenced his oration; scarcely any were left when he had concluded it and his withered old cheek had received the accolade of Cidalise. And, it was strange! but not one had looked at--in solemn truth, all had avoided looking at--the only person who seemed to make no attempt to move. Desparre!

Desparre, who sat on and on in his seat, motionless as ever, and always stone, marble white; his eyes glaring through their drooping lids at the little stage on which the battered old courtier was whispering his compliments.

Presently however, the latter turned and descended the foot-high platform, casting his eyes,--for him, timidly and, undoubtedly, furtively--at the silent, motionless figure sitting there. Then he turned round to the actors and actresses who, themselves, had observed Desparre, while, in a totally different tone from that in which he had previously addressed them, he said:

"Begone. Quit the stage. Your parts are played. And," he muttered to himself, "played with sufficient effect."

As they obeyed his orders--he watching them depart from the scene of what was undoubtedly their triumph (never before had those wandering comedians achieved such a success--in more ways than one), he went over slowly to where the Duke sat and touched him gently on the shoulder. The withered, battered old roué, who had known the secrets and intrigues of the most intriguing court that ever existed in Europe, had still something left that did duty for a heart.

"Come, Desparre. Come," he said. "The company has broken up. It is time to--to--to take the waters."

But Monsieur le Duc, sitting there, his eyes still fixed on the stage, made him no answer, though his lips moved once, and once he turned those eyes and gazed at the old Chevalier by his side.

"Come, Desparre," the other repeated. "If not the waters, at least to your apartments. Come."

Then, old and feeble though he was, he placed his hands under Desparre's shoulders and endeavoured to assist him to rise.

CHAPTER XX

"THE WAY TO DUSTY DEATH"

"If," said Lolive, the Duke's valet, to himself later that day, "he would speak, would say something--not sit there like one dead, I could endure it very well. But, mon Dieu! he makes me shudder!"

It was not strange that the shivering servant should feel afraid, though he scarce knew of what. One feels not afraid of the actual dead--they can harm us no more, even if they have been able to do so in life!--unless one is a coward as this valet was; yet, still, the brave are sometimes appalled at the resemblance of death which, on occasions, those who are yet alive are forced to assume, owing to some strange stroke that has attacked either heart or nerve or brain. And such a stroke as this, subtle and intangible, was the one which had fallen upon Desparre.

He was alive, Lolive knew; he could move, he felt sure; almost, too, was he confident that his master could speak if he chose. Yet neither did he move nor speak. Instead, he did nothing but sit there immobile, before the great cheval glass, staring into it, his hands lying listless in his lap, his face colourless and his lips almost as much so.

Once, the valet had made as though he was about to commence undressing Desparre after having previously turned down the bed and prepared it for his reception, but, although the latter had not spoken, he had done what was to the menial's mind more terrifying. He had snarled at him as an ill-conditioned cur snarls at those who go near him, while showing, too, like a dog, his

discoloured teeth with, over them, the lips drawn back and, thereby, exhibiting his almost white gums. And with, too, his eyes glistening horribly.

Then the man had withdrawn from close vicinity to that master and had busied himself about the room, while doing anything rather than again approach the chair in which the stricken form was seated. Also, he lit the wax candles in all the branches about the room; on the dressing table, over the bed, and in girandoles placed at even distances on the walls, while receiving, as it seemed to him some comfort from the light and brightness he had now produced. For some reason, which, as with his other fears, he could not have explained, he feared to be alone in the gathering darkness with that living statue.

Summoning up again, however, his courage, he approached once more his master and pointed to the latter's feet and to the diamond-buckled shoes upon them, then whispered timorously that it would be well if Monsieur would at least allow those shoes to be removed. "Doubtless Monsieur was tired," he said; "doubtless also it would relieve Monsieur."

But again he drew back trembling. Once more that hateful snarl came on Desparre's face, and once more there was the drawn-back lip. "What," the fellow asked himself, "what was he to do?" Then, suddenly he bethought him of the fashionable doctors from Paris of whom Eaux St. Fer was full; he would go and fetch one, if not two of them. Thereby, at least, he would be acquitted of failing in his duty if the Duke died to-night, which, judging by his present state, seemed more than likely.

Thinking thus, he let his eyes wander round the room, while meditating as he did so. Near to the bedside was a locked cupboard in which he had placed, on their arrival, a large sum of money, a sum doubly sufficient to pay any expenses Desparre might incur during his course of waters; in a valise, bestowed in the same cupboard, was a small coffer full of jewellery of considerable value. And, upon the walls of the lodging, was the costly tapestry which, in accordance with most noblemen and all wealthy persons in those days, Desparre had brought with him, so that the often enough bare and scanty lodgings to be found at such resorts as Eaux St. Fer might be rendered pleasant and agreeable to the eyes. This he too regarded, remembering as well the costly suits his master had with him; the wigs, each costing over a thousand livres, the lace for sleeves and breast and for the steinkirks and other cravats, and the ivory-hilted Court sword in which was a great diamond. He recalled all the costly things the room contained.

"If he should die to-night," he muttered inwardly--"to-night. None would know what he brought with him and what he left behind. None, but I. No other living soul knows what he possessed. He hated all his kinsmen and kinswomen. None know. I will go seek the doctors; yet, ere I do so--I will--will place these things out of sight. They must not see too much."

Then the knave began moving about the room, "arranging" things, while, even as he did so, he recalled a cabaret in Paris where heavy gambling went on as well as eating and drinking, which was for sale for two thousand crowns. If he had but that sum! And--and--Desparre might die to-night! Wherefore, his eyes stole sideways towards the spectral figure seated there--powerless, or almost so.

He might die to-night! Might die to-night! Well! Why not? Why might he not die to-night? The doctor--the leading one from Paris--should visit him. Yes, he should do that. He knew that doctor; he had seen him called in before to gouty, or paralysed, or dropsical men and women whose servant he himself had once been. And he knew the fashionable physician's formula--the cheering words, accompanied, however, by a slightly doubting phrase; the safe-guarding of his own reputation by a hint to others that--"all the same"--"nevertheless"--"it might be--he could not say. If there were any relatives they should be warned--not alarmed, oh, no! only warned," and so forth. Well! the doctor should come to see the Duke. Doubtless he would say some such thing before himself and the landlord, who, he would take care, should also be in the room. That would be sufficient. If the Duke did die to-night suddenly, as he might very well do--as he would do--why then he, Lolive, was safe. The doctor's words would have saved him.

He was sure now that Monsieur would die to-night. Quite sure. So sure that he knew nothing could save the Duke. He would die to-night; he even knew the time it would happen; between one and two of the clock, when every soul in Eaux St. Fer would be wrapped in sleep, even to the servants. Then, about that hour--perhaps nearer two than one--the Duke would die. And the cabaret, the disguised gambling hell, would be his in a month's---

"Lolive," uttered a voice from behind him. "Lolive!"

The man started; stopped in what he was doing; then dropped a dressing case with almost a crash on to the shelf of a wardrobe, in which he was placing the box and its contents, and withdrew his own head from the inside of the great bureau. He scarcely dared, however, to turn that head round to the spot whence the voice issued, since he knew that he was white to the lips; since he felt that he was trembling a little. Yet--he must do it--it had to be done--it was his master's voice.

Therefore he turned, gazing with startled eyes at Desparre who was now sitting up more firmly in his chair, and saw that some change had come to him, that he had regained speech as

well as sense, that he would not die, could not by any chance be made to die, that night. The possession of the cabaret was as far off as ever now!

"Ah, Monsieur, the Virgin be praised," he exclaimed fawningly and with a smile of satisfaction, as he ran forward to where Desparre sat, still rigid, though not so rigid as before. "Monsieur is better. What happiness! Monsieur will go to bed now."

While, even as he spoke, he regained courage; confidence. Sick men had died before now in their beds, in their sleep. Such things had been often heard of: they might-would, doubtless-be heard of again.

His master spoke once more, the voice, harsh, bitter, raucous, yet distinct.

"*Malotru!*" Desparre said, while, as he did so, his eyes gleamed dully at the other, "you thought I was dead, or dying. Eh, dog? Well! it is not so. Go--descend at once. Order my travelling carriage. We depart to-night, in an hour--for--Marseilles."

"For Marseilles?"

"Ask no questions. Go. Hangdog I Go, I say. And come not back until you bring me news that the carriage is prepared. Go, beast!"

"The horses, Monsieur; the coachman! He sleeps----"

But there the valet stopped. Desparre's eyes were on him. He was afraid. Therefore he went, murmuring that Monsieur should be obeyed.

Left alone, Desparre still sat on for some moments in his chair, listless and motionless. Then, slowly, he raised himself by using his hands upon the arms of the chair as levers; he stood erect upon his feet. He tried his legs, too, and found he could walk, though heavily and with a feeling as if he had two senseless columns of lead beneath him instead of limbs. Still, he could walk.

"The second time," he muttered to himself, as he did so. "The second time. What--what did the physician tell me? What? That, if the first stroke did not kill neither would the second, but that--that the third was certain, unailing. If that could not be avoided, all was lost. All! No longer any hope. This is the second, when will the third come? When? Perhaps--when I stand face to face with her again. With Cidalise! My God! When she blasts me to death with one look. Cidalise! Laure!"

He resumed his seat, resumed, too, his dejected musings.

"It was well done. Fool that I am never to have remembered that Diane was implacable. Cidalise! Ha! I recollect. It was my pet name for the woman I left behind in Paris when hastily summoned away. I loved that woman. She--she--Diane must have known--have taken the child, have reared it. And I should have married her--my own child! Oh, God! that such awful, impious vengeance could be conceived. That, having found out how, all unknowing, I loved the girl, she--she--she--that merciless devil--would have stood by and let me marry her--my child. My own child. The child of Cidalise."

Again he sat back in his chair. To an onlooker it would have seemed as though it was still a statue sitting there before him. Yet he was musing always and revolving horrible matter in his mind.

"Balked thus," he reflected; "she evolved this scheme of revenge to expose me to all. To tell me, too, that I have consigned my own child to a living death, to exile in a savage land, to the chain gang. And, I have gloated over it, not knowing. Not knowing! I have pictured the woman whom I deemed to have outraged me as trudging those weary leagues with the carcan round her neck, the chains about her limbs. And she was my own child! My own child! My own child!"

Again he paused, thinking now of what lay before him. Of what he had to do. What was it? Yes, he remembered his orders for the carriage to be prepared. He had to hasten to Marseilles at once, as fast as that coach (known as a "berceuse"), as that luxurious sleeping carriage could be got there, and then to intercept the cordon of women who were to be deported; to find her, to save her. And--and--and, if they had already reached that city and left for New France--if they had sailed--what to do next? What? Why, to follow in the first vessel that went. To save her! To save her! To save her if she had not fallen dead by the roadside, as he knew, as all France knew, the women and the men did often enough fall dead on those awful journeys.

But if he found her; if God had spared her; if she still lived! What then? What had he then to do? To stand before her whom he had most unrighteously sent to so cruel a doom, to acknowledge himself so vile, so deep a villain that life was too good for such as he; yet, also, to purge himself in her eyes of one, of two, crimes. To prove to her that he knew not that her mother, ere dying, had ever borne him a child; to prove to her that he had never dreamt, when he proposed to marry her, that he was so near committing the most hideous crime that could be perpetrated. And afterwards--afterwards--then--well, then, she might curse him as he stood before her, or the third stroke that he knew would--must come--might come then. What mattered; nothing could matter then. He would have saved her. That was enough.

Why did not the menial come to tell him the berceuse was ready--the great cumbersome form of carriage which Guise had invented fifty years before, so that one might sleep in their beds even while they travelled on and on through day and night, and also take their meals therein--the commodious carriage which had been built for himself in exact imitation of that possessed by the present young Duc de Richelieu et Fronsac.

Young Richelieu! What a scoundrelly ruffian he was, he found himself meditating; what a villain, what a seducer; how he would have revelled in the idea of a man marrying his own daughter after leaving the mother to starve, how----. He broke off in these musings to curse Lolive and all his pack of pampered servants, coachmen and footmen, who were snoring still in their beds, and to curse himself; to wonder when the third stroke would come and how: to wonder also if it would be when he stood before his wronged daughter. To muse if he would fall dead, writhing at her feet--to----

Lolive re-entered the room. The berceuse was ready, the horses got out of the stables. Would Monsieur have all his goods packed and taken with him, also his jewellery, or--or should he wake the landlord and confide everything to him until--until Monsieur's return? Only, Lolive thought to himself, Monsieur might, in truth, never return. He was ill, very ill; he might die on the road to Marseilles. He hoped that, at least (though he did not say so), the Duke would not take the money and the jewellery with him. Thus, he could find it later!

"Take," said Desparre, his eyes glinting hideously, as Lolive thought, "take all that is of small compass and of value. Give it to me, I will bestow the money and jewellery where it will be safe in the carriage. Give it to me."

With a smothered oath, the valet did as he was bidden, Desparre placing the jewellery in the pockets of his vast travelling cloak, and the money about him, and bidding Lolive pack the clothes, the wigs and the swords at once, and swiftly. And the pistols; they, too, should go.

"There are highwaymen, brigands, upon the road, Lolive," he muttered, fixing the valet with his eye. "Thieves everywhere. It may befall that I shall have to shoot a thief on the way. I had best be armed--ready."

Wherefore he took the box containing his silver-hilted pistols upon his knee, and, with the lid up, sat regarding the man as he hastily packed all that was to accompany them on the journey to Marseilles.

"My God!" the fellow muttered, "he makes me tremble. Can this man, half alive, half dead, divine my thoughts?"

The boxes were packed at last with their changes of linen and clothes; once more Desparre was left alone. Lolive was despatched to arouse the landlord and to inform him that Monsieur had to depart at once for Marseilles on important matters, but that his room was to be retained for him and his furniture and other things taken proper care of. And the valet was also bidden to say that the Duke did not require the presence of the landlord to see him depart. The reason whereof being that Desparre felt sure that the man knew as well as all in Eaux St. Fer knew what had befallen him that day; and how a play had been produced by a vengeful woman for the sole purpose of holding him up to the derision, the execration, of all who were in the little watering-place, nobility and others, as well as the "refuse" who had not been admitted to the representation but were aware of what had happened.

Everyone knew! He could never return here, nor to Paris. If he found his child, if he saved her, then--then he must go away somewhere, or--or, perhaps, then the third stroke would fall. Well, so best. He would be better dead. He could not live long; he understood by the doctor's manner that his doom was pronounced, assured. Better dead!

Upon the night air, up from the street below, he could hear the rumble of the berceuse on the stones as it approached the door of the house where he lodged; he could also hear the horses shaking their harness, and the mutterings of the coachman and the footman at being thus dragged forth from their beds at night.

It was time to go--time for Lolive and the footman to come up with the carrying chair, which he used now when stairs had to be either ascended or descended, not so much because he could not walk as because he did not care to do so. He could have got down those stairs to-night, he knew, even after this second shock, this further and last warning of his impending end--only he would not. These menials, these dogs of his, would have heard from Lolive of that stroke--they would be peering curiously at him out of their low, cunning eyes to see whether he were worse or not.

Therefore, he let them carry him down and place him on his bed in the sleeping carriage, while all the time but one thought occupied his mind.

That thought--what he would find at the end of his journey, and whether he would find his child alive or dead?

CHAPTER XXI

A NIGHT RIDE

The berceuse had passed through Aix and was nearing Gardanne-le-Pin, leaving to its right the dead lake known as l'Etang de Berre, while, rising up on its left, were the last and most southern spurs of the Lower Alps.

It was drawing very near to Marseilles. Inside that travelling carriage, which comprised, as has been said, a sleeping apartment and sitting-room combined, as well as a cooking place and a bed for the servant, all was very quiet now except for the snores of the knavish valet, Lolive, which occasionally reached the ears of the white-faced, stricken man in the inner compartment; the man who, in spite of the softness of the couch on which he lay, never closed his eyes, but instead, whispered, muttered, continually to himself: "If I should be too late. God! if the transports should have sailed!"

Behind, and just above where his head lay upon the pillow of that couch, there was let into the panel of the carriage a small glass window covered by a little curtain, or pad of leather, a convenience as common in those days as in far later ones, and, through this, Desparre, lifting himself at frequent intervals upon one elbow, would glance now and again as a man might do who was desirous of noting--by the objects which he passed on the road--how far he had got upon his journey. Yet, hardly could this be the case with him now, since the route the berceuse was following was one over which he had never travelled before. In the many journeys he had made, either with the regiment in which he had served so long or when riding swiftly to rejoin it after leave of absence, this road had, by chance, never been previously used by him. What, therefore, could this terror-haunted man be in dread of seeing, when, lifting the leather pad, he placed his white face against the glass and peered out; what did he see but the foliage of the warm southern land lying steeped in the rays of the moon, while no breeze rustled the leaves that hung lifelessly on the branches in the unstirred, murky heat of an almost tropical summer's night; or the white, gleaming, dusty road that stretched behind him like a thread as far as his eyes could follow it?

In truth, he expected to see nothing; he knew that there was nothing to come behind him which he need fear, unless it were some mounted robber whom he could shoot, and would shoot, from the interior of his carriage--from out that window--with his silver-mounted pistols--as he would shoot a mad dog or a wolf that might attack him; he knew that there was no human creature on earth who could molest him or bar his way. He had made that safe, at least, he told himself, though, even in the telling, in the recalling how he had done it, he shuddered. Still, it was done! The Englishman who had thwarted him, as he then considered, but for whose interference he now thanked the Being whom, even in his evil heart, he acknowledged as God, was dead; had been left lying dead upon the stones of Paris months ago. Dead, after saving him from another infamy which he would have added to all the horrors of his past life, though, in this case, unknowingly. And Vandecque--ay, Vandecque--the man who could have told so much, who could have told how that Englishman had been hacked and done to death so that his patron's vengeance might be glutted both on him and the woman he had once meant to marry. Well! Vandecque was safe. Neither could that gambler rise up to denounce him, nor could he ever stand before the world and point to Desparre as the murderer of the man who had married his adopted niece. He, too, was disposed of. Yet, still, the traveller glanced ever and anon through that window as the berceuse rolled on, not knowing why he did so nor what he feared, nor what he expected to see.

"Laure, his own child! His daughter!" he mused again, as he had now mused for so long. The child of the one woman he had ever really loved--of a woman who had fondly loved him, who had believed and trusted in him. And he, called away suddenly to join his regiment to take active service, had never even known what had befallen her, had never even dreamt that she was about to become a mother. He had not known that she had been cast forth into the streets by her parents to die, but had, instead, deemed that she was false to him from the moment he left Paris, and had, therefore, hidden herself away from him ever afterwards.

Well! he was innocent of all this--innocent of all that had befallen her and their child, innocent of what a hideous, hateful crime his marriage would have been: yet guilty, blood-guilty in his vengeance on that child after she had escaped from marrying him. Guilty of sending her to the prison under a false charge of attempted murder--of banishing her to a savage, almost unknown land. Guilty of murder in yet another form than that which he had meted out to her husband--of the cruel, wicked murder of an innocent woman. And now he had learnt that this woman was his own child, his own flesh and blood!

And he might be too late to save her. The transports had probably sailed, or--and again he shuddered--she might have fallen dead on the road in that long, dreary march from Paris to the

South. He knew well enough what the horrors were that the chain-gangs experienced in their journeys towards the sea-coast towns--nay, all France knew. They had heard and talked for years of how the convict men and women dropped dead day by day; of how, each morning, the cordon resumed its march with some numbers short of what it had been on the previous morning--of how bodies were left lying by the wayside to bake in the sun and to have the eyes picked out by the crows until the communes found and buried them.

Awful enough would have been his vengeance had she been an ordinary woman who had despised and scorned him. But, as it was, she was his own daughter!

Would he be in time to save her? Or, if not, would he still find her alive if he should follow her to New France? And if so, if he could save her either at Marseilles or in that town now rising at the mouth of the Mississippi, then--then--well then, instead of hating Diane Grignan de Poissy for the revenge she had taken on him, he would bless her, worship her for at last revealing the secret she had so cherished as an instrument of future vengeance.

In that night, as he thought all these things, a revolution took place in the soul of Armand Desparre; he was no longer all bad. Vile as he had been and execrable, a man who had trifled with women's hearts, who had received benefits from at least one woman under the pretence of becoming her husband eventually; a man who had been a very tiger in his rage and hate against those who had thwarted him, and a shedder of blood, yet now--now that his evil life stood revealed clearly before him, he shuddered at it. On this night he registered a vow that, if he lived, he would make amends. His child should be rescued if it were possible, even though he, with paralysis staring him threateningly in the face, should have to voyage to the other side of the world to save her. That, at least, should be done. As for the Englishman murdered at his instigation who was that child's husband, nothing could call him back to life from the Paris graveyard in which he had doubtless been lying for months; while for Vandecque--but of Vandecque he could not dare to allow himself to think. His fate, as an accomplice removed, was too terrible, even more terrible than his vengeance on Laure Vauxcelles, as she had come to be called.

Unknowingly, Diane Grignan de Poissy had gone far by what she had done--by the vengeance she had been nursing warm for years to use against him if he proved faithless to her--towards enabling him to whiten and purify his soul at last.

Again, as it had become customary for him to do since he had lain in the travelling carriage, and from the time of quitting Eaux St. Fer, he lifted the cover of the little window and glanced out. And it seemed to him that the night was passing away, that soon the day-spring would have come. The stars were paling and already the moon sank towards the northwest; he saw birds moving in the trees and pluming themselves and heard them twittering; also it had grown very cold. Sounding his repeating clock it struck four. The August dawn was near at hand. A little later and a grey light had come--daybreak.

The route stretched far behind him; for half a league he could see the white thread tapering to a point, then disappearing sharply and suddenly round a bend of the road which he remembered having passed. And as he gazed, recalling this and recollecting that at that bend he had noticed a lightning-blasted fir tree growing out of a sandy hillock, he saw a black speck emerge from behind the point, with, beneath it, a continual smoke of white dust. Then the speck grew and grew, while the smoke of dust became larger and larger and also whiter, until at last he knew that it was a horseman coming on at a swift rate, a horseman who loomed larger and larger as each moment passed and brought him rapidly nearer to the lumbering berceuse in which the watcher sat.

"He rides apace," Desparre muttered; "hot and swiftly. He presses his hat down upon his head as the morning breeze catches it and hurries forward. It is some courier du Roi who posts rapidly. One who rides with orders."

Observing how well the man sat his horse, his body appearing as though part of the animal's own, and how, thereby, the creature skimmed easily along the road and overtook the berceuse more and more every moment, he decided that this was some cavalry soldier, young and well trained, whose skill had been acquired first in the schools and then, mayhap, on many a battlefield. Whereon he sighed, recalling how he himself, in other days, had ridden fast through summer nights and dewy dawns, with no thought in his mind but his duty and--his future! And now--now!--he was a broken-down invalid; a man whose soul was black and withered with an evil past. Would he ever---?

He paused in his reflections, scarcely knowing why he did so or what had caused their sudden termination. Yet he realised that something quite different from those reflections had come to his mind to drive them forth--some idea totally removed from them. What was it? What was he thinking of? That--he comprehended at last, after still further meditation--that this form following behind, enshrouded in its long riding-cloak, was not strange to him; that he had seen those square shoulders, which that cloak covered but did not conceal, somewhere before. Yet, what a fantasy must this be! There were thousands of men in France with as good a figure as this man's, as well-knit a frame, as broad and shapely shoulders.

Perhaps he was going mad to imagine such things; perhaps madness sometimes preceded that

paralysis with which he was threatened and which he feared so much! Yet, at this moment, when now the sun rose up bright and warm from beyond where the Rhone lay, and threw a long horizontal ray across the road that both he and the horseman were travelling at a rapidly decreasing distance apart, the rider put up his hand, unfastened the hook of his cloak, and, taking the latter off, rolled it up and placed it before him on the saddle. Whereby he revealed a well-shaped, manly form, clad in a dark riding suit passemented with silver galloon. Yet, still, his face was not quite visible since the laced three-cornered hat was now tilted well over it to keep the rays of the bright morning sun from out his eyes, into which they now streamed as the road made another turn.

"I am not mad," Desparre whispered to himself. "I have seen that form before. Yet where? Where?"

This he could not answer. He could not even resolve in his own mind whether the knowledge that he was acquainted with that on-coming figure disturbed him or not, yet he turned his glance away from the eyehole of the carriage and cast it on a shelf above the couch. A shelf on which lay the box wherein reposed his silver-hilted pistols.

Then he returned to the little window, holding the leathern flap so lowered with a finger raised above his head, that he could gaze forth while exposing to view little more of his features than his eyes.

The horseman was overtaking him rapidly, he would be close to him directly, so close that his face must then be plainly discernible; he would be able to discover whether he had been deceived into that quaint supposition that the figure was actually known to him, or whether, instead, he was cherishing some strange delusion. Doubtless the latter was the case! Yet, all the same, the finger let down the flap a little more, so that there was now only a slit wide enough to enable his eyes to peer through the glass.

At this moment the road took still another turn and, in an instant, the rider was lost to his view. Then, next, that road rose considerably, whereby the berceuse was forced to creep up the incline at a pace which was less than a walk. The man behind him must, therefore, come up in a few minutes; even his horse would, at a walking pace alone, overtake his own animals as they struggled and dragged at the heavy lumbering carriage behind them.

But still he kept the flap open with his upraised hand, and still he peered forth from the window, it being darkened and blurred by the moisture from his nostrils. Then, suddenly, the carriage stopped, the horses were doubtless obliged to rest for an instant from their labours, and, a moment or so later, the horseman had come round the corner and up the inclined road at a trot, he reaching almost the back of the berceuse ere pulling up. At which Desparre dropped the flap as though it had been molten steel which seared his hand; dropped it and staggered back on to the couch close by, whiter than before, shaking, too, as if palsied! For he had not been deceived in his surmise as to recognising the horseman's figure; he knew now that he had not. He had seen the man's face at last! And it was the face of the man whom Desparre thought to be long since lying buried in some Paris graveyard, the face of the man who had married Laure; the husband of the woman he had caused to be sent out an exile to the New World. That man, alive--strong--well!

"What should he do? What? What? What?" he asked himself, as he recognised this rider's presence and its nearness to him and observed that he could hear the horse's blowings, as well as the great gusts emitted from its nostrils and the way it shook itself on slackening its pace on the other side of the back panel of his carriage. What? He could not get out and fight him in his diseased, enfeebled state, brought on by a year of hot and fiery debauch in Paris following on years of coarser debauches when he had been a poor man; he would have no chance--one thrust and he would be disarmed, a second and he would be dead, run through and through. Yet he knew that, if the man outside but caught a glimpse of his face, death must be his portion. They had met often at Vandecque's and at the demoiselle's Montjoie; almost he thought that the Englishman had recognised him as he concealed himself in the porch of the house in the Rue des Saints Apostoliques--if he saw his features now, he would drag him forth from the carriage, throttle him, stab him to the heart. Doubtless he would do that at once--these English were implacable when wronged!--doubtless, too, he was in pursuit of him, had sought him in Paris, followed him to Eaux St. Fer, was following him to Marseilles. For, that he should be here endeavouring to find his wife he deemed impossible. She had been almost spirited away to the prison of St. Martin-des-Champs and there were but one or two knew what had become of her; while those who did so know had been--had been--well--made secure.

He had followed him, and--now--he had found him! Now! and there was but an inch, a half inch of carriage panel between them; at any moment he might hear the man's summons to him to come forth and meet his doom. And he would be powerless to resist--he was ill, he repeated to himself again, and his servants were poltroons; they could not assist him.

Thinking thus--glancing round the confined spot in which he was cooped up--wondering what he should do, his eyes lighted on the pistol box upon the shelf.

The pistol box! The pistol box! Whereon, seeing it, he began to muse as to whether a shot well directed through that small window--not now, in full daylight, but later, in some gloomy cove

they might pass through--would not be the shortest way to end all and free himself from the enemy whom he had already so bitterly wronged.

CHAPTER XXII

THE STRICKEN CITY

Whatever effect such musings might have brought forth, even to bloodshed, had Walter Clarges continued to ride close behind the carriage containing his enemy--of which fact he was, in actual truth, profoundly unconscious--cannot be told, since, scarcely had Desparre given way to those musings, than events shaped themselves into so different a form that the idea with regard to the pistols was at once abandoned.

For, ere the summit of the ascent, which was in itself a trifling one, had been reached by both the berceuse and the rider following it, Desparre was surprised--nay, startled--to discover that the man he dreaded so much was not by any possibility tracking him; that the pursuit of him was not his object.

Clarges had ridden past the carriage almost immediately after coming up with it; he had gone on ahead of it--and that rapidly, too--directly after reaching level ground once more.

"Startled" is, indeed, the word most fitting to express the feelings of the man who had but a moment before been quivering with excitement--with nervous fear--within his carriage, not knowing whether his end was close at hand or not. He had felt so sure that the presence of that other, in this region so remote from where they had ever met before, could only be due to the fact that Clarges was in search of and in pursuit of him, that, when he discovered such was not the case, his amazement was extreme. Since, if Clarges sought not him, for whom did he look? Was it the woman who had become his wife? Yet, if so, how did he know that she was, had been, near this spot, even if, by now, already gone far away across the sea whose nearest waters sparkled by this time in the morning sun. For Marseilles was close at hand; another league or so, and Desparre would have reached that city--would know the worst. He would know whether his child had departed to that distant, remote colony, or had died on the roadside ere reaching the city. But his freedom from the presence of that man, of that avenger--even though it might be only momentary--even though the Englishman might only have taken a place in front of the horses instead of riding behind the carriage--enabled him to reflect more calmly now on what the future would probably bring forth when he came into contact with his enemy--as come he must. In those reflections he began to understand that vengeance could scarcely be taken upon him, sinner though he was. Clarges had married the daughter--he could not slay the father. No! not although that father had plotted to slay him--had in truth, nearly slain him by the hands of others. Not although he had himself taken such hideous vengeance on that daughter, not knowing who she was.

But, did the Englishman know all, or, if he were told of what was absolutely the case, would he believe, would----?

A cry, a commotion ahead, broke in upon his meditations, his hopes of personal salvation from a violent death. The carriage stopped with a jerk and he heard sudden and excited talking. What was the reason? Had Clarges suddenly faced round and ordered the coachman to halt ere he proceeded to exercise his vengeance on the master--had he? What could have happened? A moment later, the valet, aroused from his heavy, perhaps guilty, slumbers, had thrust aside the curtain which separated the bed-chamber (for so it was termed) from the fore part of the berceuse, and was standing half in, half out, of the little room, undressed as yet and with a look of agony; almost, indeed, a look of horror, on his features.

"Oh! Monsieur, Monsieur le Duc," he gasped, "there is terrible news. Terrible. We cannot go forward."

"Cannot go forward!" Desparre ejaculated. "Why not? Has that man--that man who passed us endeavoured to stop the carriage?"

"No, Monsieur. No. But--but they flee from the city; in hundreds they flee. There are some outside already, Marseilles is----"

"What?"

"Stricken with the pest. They die like flies; they lie in thousands unburied in the streets. It is death to enter it. Nay, more," and the man shook all over, "it is death to be here."

"My God! Marseilles stricken again. Yet we must go on. We must, I say. Where is that--that cavalier who overtook--rode past us?"

"He has gone on, Monsieur le Duc. He would not be stayed, though warned also. The people, the fugitives--there are a score at the inn a few yards ahead of where we are--warned him to turn back ere too late, and told him it was death to approach the city; that, here even, so near to it, the air is infected, tainted, poisonous! He heeded them not but said his mission was itself one of life or death, and that this news made that mission--his reaching the city at once--even more imperative. Oh! Monsieur le Duc, for God's sake give the orders to turn back."

"Fool, poltroon, be silent So, also, by this news, if it be true, is my reaching the city become more imperative. Where is this crowd, this inn you speak of?"

It was natural he should ask the question, since the bed-chamber of the berceuse had no other window but the little one at the back out of which its occupant could gaze.

"Where," he repeated, "is the crowd--the inn?"

"Close outside, Monsieur; but, oh! in the name of all the Saints, go not forth. It is death! It is death!"

"It is death if I do aught but go on," the Duke muttered to himself; "death to her if she is there and cannot be saved." And, at that moment, Desparre was at his best. Even this man of vile record was dominated by some good angel now.

As he spoke, he pushed the valet aside and, shambling through the still smaller compartment outside the curtain in which the fellow slept and cooked, he appeared on the little platform beneath where the coachman and a footman sat, and from which it was easy by a step to reach the ground.

"What is this I hear of the pestilence at Marseilles?" he asked, as, seeing in front of him an inn before which his carriage was drawn up, as well as a number of strange, sickly-looking beings huddled about in front of it--some lying on wooden benches running alongside tables and some upon the ground--he addressed them. "What? Answer me."

Yet he knew that no answer was required. One glance at those beings told all, especially to him who had once known the pest raging in Catalonia and had seen the ravages it made, and once also at Bordeaux. Those chalk-white faces, those yellow eyes and the great blotches beneath them, were enough. These people might not be absolutely stricken with the pestilence, yet they had almost been so ere they fled.

"We have escaped," one answered, "though it may be only for a time. It is in us. We burn with thirst, shiver with cold. On such a morn as this! Marseilles is lost! Already forty thousand lie dead in her; they pile quicklime on them in the streets to burn them up. At Aix ten thousand are dead--at Toulon ten thousand; thousands more at a hundred other places. Turn back. Turn back, whosoever you are; be warned in time."

"Man," Desparre answered, "we have passed by Aix, yet we are not stricken. I must go on," and his white face blanched even whiter while his eyes rested on those unhappy people. Yet all the same, he did not, would not, falter. He had vowed that his attempt to save his child should act as his redemption if such might be the case; he would never turn back! No, not though the pest awaited him with its fiery poisonous breath at the gates; not even though the Englishman stood before him with his drawn sword ready to be thrust through his heart. He would go on.

He felt positive, something within warned him, that his hour was not far off. And also some strange presentiment seemed to tell him that by, or through, the pest his death was to come--not by the man whom he had himself striven to slay.

Partly he was wrong, partly he was right. An awful penalty awaited him for his misdeeds as well as through his misdeeds, though how the blow was to be struck he had not truly divined.

"Who," he asked, still standing on the platform of his carriage with his richly-embroidered sleeping gown around him, "are there besides the Marseillais? Are--there--any--strangers?"

"Strangers. Nay, nay! Strangers. Bon Dieu! Does Monsieur think strangers seek Marseilles now, when even we, the Marseillais, flee from it? When we leave our houses, our goods, sometimes our own flesh and blood, behind? Who should be there?"

"The commerce is great," he replied. "To all parts of the world go forth ships laden with merchandise. All traffic, all commerce cannot be stopped, even by such a scourge as this!"

"Not stopped!" the man replied. "Monsieur, you do not know. It is impossible that monsieur should understand. There are no ships; they lie out at sea. They will not approach. None, except the galleys. Their cargo counts not."

For a moment the Duke made no reply, while his eyes wandered from that group of fugitives to the people gazing forth from the inn window; to, also, his own servants looking paralysed with

fear as they stood about, all having left the berceuse temporarily and crossed to the other side of the road so as not to be too near to the infected ones; then he said:

"There left Paris some weeks ago--many weeks now--two gangs of--of emigrant convicts for--for the New World. One cordon was of men, the other of--of women. Have they, are--are they there in that great pest house?" And he drew in his breath as he awaited the reply.

"The men are there."

"My God!" he whispered.

"They arrived yesterday."

"Have they sailed--put to sea? For New France?"

"I know not. There are, I tell monsieur, no ships. Those which were to transport those gallows' birds would not perhaps come in. They may have gone elsewhere."

"And the women?"

"I know not. If they are there, they will work in the streets--the men at burning and burying. The women at nursing."

"Have many persons there succumbed?"

"Many! Of those in the town almost half; at least a half."

Desparre asked no more questions but turned away, shaking at that last reply. Yet a moment later he returned to where the fugitives were (he was so white now that one whispered to another that already he was "struck"), took from his pocket a purse, and, shaking from it several gold pieces into his hand, held them out towards the poor creatures. Yet, even as he did so, he paused a moment, saying:

"Nay, do not come for them--there!" And he threw the coins towards where the people were huddled together.

For a moment they seemed astonished, even though he muttered, "Doubtless they will be of assistance," and he noticed that only one man in the small crowd picked them up--he with whom he had first conversed. But he saw a man whose head was out of the window smile, if the look upon his wretched face could be called by that name, whereby he was led to believe that the man who had last spoken was some rich merchant flying from the stricken city, even as the poorest and most humble fled. He understood that wealth made no difference in such a case as this.

He gave now the orders to proceed towards Marseilles, bidding his coachman and footman resume their places on the box, and his valet re-enter the berceuse. Instead, however, of doing so, they remained standing stolidly upon the farther side of the road muttering to themselves, shaking their heads, and looking into each other's eyes, as though seeking for support in their disobedience.

At last the coachman spoke, saying:

"Monsieur le Duc, we cannot go on. We--we dare not. This is no duty of ours--to risk our lives in this manner. No wages could repay us for doing that."

"You must go on," Desparre said; "you must conduct me to the gates of Marseilles. Beyond that, I demand no more. It is but two leagues. If I were not sick and ailing I would dismiss you here and walk into the city by myself. As it is, you must finish the journey. If not----"

"If not--what?" demanded the footman, speaking in an almost insolent tone. "What, Monsieur le Duc? These are not feudal days; there is no law here. All law is at an end, it seems; and--and, if it were not, no law ever made can compel us to meet death in this manner."

For a moment Desparre looked at the man, his eyes glistening from his pallid, sickly face; then he turned and slowly entered the berceuse. A moment later he reappeared upon the platform, and now he held within his hands his pistols. He was, however, too late. Whether the men had divined what he had intended to do and how he meant to coerce them, or whether they recognised that here was their chance--which might be their last one--of escaping from the horrible prospect of death that lay before them, at least they were gone, They had fled away the moment his back was turned, and had disappeared into a copse lying some distance from the road.

There remained, however, as Desparre supposed, Lolive; yet he recollected that he had been in neither of the compartments as he entered them. In an instant he understood that the man was gone too. The fellow had slid into the inn while his master had been inside the berceuse, and, passing swiftly through it to the back, had thereby made his own escape also.

Desparre would, in days not so long since past, have given way to some tempestuous gust of rage at this abandonment of him by his domestics, creatures who had been well paid and fed,

even pampered, since they had been in his service and since he had come to affluence--he would have endeavoured to find them, and, had he done so, have shot them there and then. Yet now, either because he was a changed man in his disposition, or because his physical infirmities were so great, he did nothing beyond letting his glance rest upon the people standing about who had been witnesses of the desertion. Then, at last, he addressed them, haltingly--as he ever spoke now--his words coming with labour from between his lips.

"I am," he said, "a rich man. And--and--there is one in Marseilles dear to me, one whom I must save if I can. She is," the pause was very long here, "my daughter, and--heretofore--I have treated her evilly. I--must--see her if she be still alive; I must see her. If any here will drive my carriage to Marseilles he may demand of me what he will. Otherwise, I, feeble, sick, as I am, must do it myself. Even though I fall dead from the box to the ground in the attempt."

For a moment none spoke. None! not even those who, a short time back, would have performed so slight a task for a crown and have been glad to do it. Not one, though now, doubtless, a hundred pistoles would be forthcoming if asked from a man who travelled in so luxurious a manner. They knew what was in that city; they had had awful experience of the poisonous, infected breath that was mowing down thousands weekly, and, though some in the little crowd were of the poorest of the population, they did not stir to earn a golden reward. Gold, precious as it was, fell to insignificance before the preservation of their lives, squalid though such lives were even at the best of times.

A silence fell upon all; there was not one volunteer, not one who, meeting Desparre's imploring glance as it roved over them, responded to that glance. Then, suddenly, the man who had conversed with Desparre when last he appeared on the platform, the one who had taken no notice of the coins the latter tossed out in his sudden fit of charity, came forward and took in his hands the reins lying on the backs of the horses, and began to mount to the deserted box.

"I will drive you to the gates," he said quietly, "since your misery is so extreme. Yet, in God's grace, it must be less than mine. You may find this daughter of whom you speak alive even now--but for me--God two of mine are gone. I shall never see them again. As for your money, I need it not. I would have given a whole fleet of ships, a hundred thousand louis--I could have done it very well and not felt the loss--to have saved my children's lives. Oh! my children! My children! My children!" and, as he shook the reins, he wept piteously.

CHAPTER XXIII

WITHIN THE WALLS

Midnight sounded from the tower of the ancient cathedral of Marseilles--the deep tones of the bell, in unison with all the bells of the other churches in the stricken city, being borne across the upland by the soft breeze from off the Mediterranean to where the women of the cordon stood--and those women were free at last from one awful form of suffering. The hateful collar was gone from off their necks; the chains that looped and bound them together had fallen from their wrists under the blows of the convicts, and lay in a mass upon the ground. They could hold up their heads and straighten the backs which had been bowed so long by the weight of the collar; they could stretch their limbs and rejoice--if such women could ever rejoice again at aught!--that they might raise their arms unencumbered by either steel or iron shackles. Yet, around their necks, around their arms, were impressed livid marks that, if they should live, it would take months to efface. More months than it had taken to produce the impression which the things had stamped into their flesh.

Then the order was given by the Sheriff, that broken-hearted man, that they should descend into the city; the very tones in which it was uttered--so different from the harsh, cruel commands of the men who had escorted the forlorn women from Paris!--being almost enough to make compliance with that order easy.

"Come," said Marion Lascelles to Laure, "come, dear one. Even though we march into the jaws of death, at least we go no longer as slaves, but as freed women. Let be. Things might be worse. Had those cowardly dogs, our warders, stayed by our side we should have been whipped or cursed into this nest of pestilence."

So they went on, following their sorrowful guide; the men of the galleys marching near them and relating the awful ravages of the plague which had stricken the city. Yet not without some exclamations of satisfaction issuing from the lips of those outcasts and mingling with their story, since they dilated on the freedom which was now theirs--except at nights when they were re-

conducted to the galleys moored by the Quai de Riveneuve; and on, also, the better class of food which--at present! but at present only--they were able to obtain. Upon, too, the almost certain fact of their being entirely pardoned and released when the pestilence should at last be over.

"Will that come to us--if we live?" murmured Laure to the man who walked by the side of her and of Marion. "Will anything we do here, and any dangers to life we encounter, give us our pardon; save us from voyaging to that unknown land?"

"Will it, *ma belle!*" answered the convict--a brawny, muscular, fellow, who would have been a splendid specimen of humanity but for the fact that he was gaunt and yellow and hideously disfigured by the white cloth steeped in vinegar which he wore swathed round his lower jaw, so that he might continuously inhale the aromatic flavour with each breath he drew. "Will it! Who can doubt it! And, if not, why--name, of a dog!--are we not free already?"

"Free! How?"

"In a manner we are so. What control is there over us--over you, especially? You will live in the streets--or, if you prefer it, in any house you choose to enter; have a care, though, that it is one from which the healthy have fled in fear, not one in which the dead lie poisoning the air. At any moment you can hide yourselves away. While for us--well, there will come a night when we shall not return to the galleys. That is all."

"Has," asked Marion, "a chain of male emigrants entered Marseilles but a few hours before us? They should have done so, seeing that they were not more than a day in advance."

"Yes, yes. They have come. Yet their fortune was different; better or worse than yours, according to how one regards it. One of the merchant ships was still in the port--off the port--a league out to sea, and, well, they risked it. They took the human cargo; they are gone for New France. Had you a man amongst them whom you loved, my black beauty?" he asked, gazing into the dark eyes of Marion, those eyes whose splendour not all she had gone through could dull.

"My husband was amongst them," she replied quietly; while, to herself, she added: "Poor wretch! He did little enough good in marrying me. Yet this leaves me free to devote myself to her."

"Your husband," the convict exclaimed with a laugh. "Your husband? Good! he will never claim you. You can take another if you desire--the first one who falls in love with those superb glances."

"Vagabond! be still," she answered, with such a look from the very eyes he had been praising that the man was silent.

They were by now close to the northern gate of Marseilles; and here for a little while they halted, the Sheriff, whose name was Le Vieux--and who is still remembered there for his acts of mercy and goodness to all--addressing some archers who formed a group outside the gate, and bidding them produce food and wine, as well as some vinegar-steeped cloths for the neck of each woman.

"Who are they?" asked another Sheriff, who came up at this moment, while he scanned the worn and emaciated women and ran his eyes over their dusty and weather-stained clothes. "Surely you are not bringing to our charnel house the refugees from other stricken towns? Not from Toulon and Arles?"

"Nay," replied Le Vieux, "not so. But women who may, by God's grace, be yet of some service to those left alive. If there are any!" he added ominously. Then he asked: "What is the count to-day?"

The other shrugged his shoulders ere he replied:

"There is no count. It is abandoned. Who shall count? The tellers die themselves ere the record is made. Poublanc made a list yesterday--now----"

"He is not dead? My God I he is not dead?" The other nodded his head solemnly. After which he said:

"He lies on his doorstep--dead. He was struck this morning--now----!"

* * * * *

It was a charnel-house to which the Cordon entered! The second Sheriff had spoken truly!

Yet, at this time, but half of the ninety thousand^[4] who were to die in Marseilles of this pestilence had achieved their doom. Still, all was bad enough--awful, heart-rending! Not since ten thousand people died daily in Rome, in the first century of the Christian era, had so horrible a blight fallen upon any city. Nor had any city presented so terrible a sight as did Marseilles now

when the women entered it, while glancing shudderingly to right and left as they passed along.

The dead lay unburied in the streets where they had fallen--men, women, and children being huddled together in heaps; it seemed even as if, after one heap had lain there for some hours, another had fallen on top of it, so that one might suppose that these second layers of dead represented those who, coming forth to search for their kindred and friends, had in their turn been stricken and fallen over them. There were also the bodies of many dogs lying stretched by the sides of the human victims, it being thought afterwards that they had taken the infection through sniffing at and caressing those who were dear to them. Yet--heart-rending as such a sight as this was to see, and doubly so as the women regarded it, partly under the rays of the moon and partly by aid of the flames of the fires which had been lit to destroy the contagion if possible--there was still worse to be witnessed.

This was the sight of those still left alive.

The women who had once formed the chain of female emigrants, and who, unfettered at last, marched along in company towards a spot where the Sheriff had said they would be able to sleep in peace for the remainder of the night, were now passing down a public promenade which ran for some three hundred yards through the principal part of the city. This promenade was known as Le Cours, and was bordered on each side by trees, mostly acacias and limes, which in summer threw a pleasant shade over the sitters and strollers during the day time, and, in the evening of the same season, had often served as a place for summer evening fetes to be held in, for open-air balsmasqués, and as a rendezvous for lovers. Now the picture it presented was frightful!

In its midst there was a fountain with water gushing from the lips of fauns, nymphs, and satyrs into a basin beneath, and at that fountain the moon showed poor stricken men drinking copiously to cool their burning thirst, or leaning over the smooth sides of the basin and holding their extended tongues in the water. Or they lay gasping with their heads against the stone-work, in their endeavours to cool the heat of their throbbing brains, and to still, if might be, the splitting headaches which racked them. For clothes, many had nothing about them but a counterpane snatched hastily from off a bed ere they had rushed forth in agony unspeakable; often, too, when they had left their houses fully dressed, they had torn off their apparel in their inability to bear the warmth imparted by the garments. Yet numbers of them were not poor--if outward signs were sure testimony of wealth. One woman--young, perhaps beautiful, ere stricken by the disfiguring signs of the pest--was resplendent on breast and neck and hands with jewels that glittered in the moonbeams. Doubtless she had seized all she owned ere rushing from her house in misery!

If death levels all, so, too, had the pest in this desolated city plunged into strange companionship persons who, in other days, would never have been brought together. Hard by this bedizened woman was another, a woman of the people--perhaps a beggar, or a work girl, or a washer-woman at the best--who screamed and wailed over a dead babe lying in her lap. At her side was an old man, well clad and handsomely belaced, who shrieked forth offers of pistoles and louis' to any who would ease him of his pain, and then suddenly paused to call to him a dog hard by, to utter endearing words to it, and to endeavour to persuade it to draw near to him and quit the spot on which it lay writhing. A beggar, too! an awful thing of rags and patches! sat gibbering near them, and held out a can into which a monk passing by poured some soup, as he did into many others--yet, no sooner had the man put the stuff to his mouth than he hurled away the can, shrieking that the broth burned him to the vitals.

"This is the end," muttered Marion to herself, her dark eyes roving over all and seeing all as the women passed along--themselves now hideous in their vinegar-steeped wrappings--"the end of our journey!" Then she glanced down, frightened, at Laure, to see if she had heard her words. And she observed that this woman of gentler nature was walking by her side with her eyes closed, while supported and guided only by her own tender arm. The sight was too awful for Laure to gaze upon.

The alley led into a street called La Rue de la Bourse, a broad and stately one, full of large commodious houses such as the merchants of Marseilles had been accustomed to inhabit for some centuries. Now, it was deserted by all living things, while, at the same time, the dead lay in the streets as thick as autumn leaves. Huddled together they lay; some with their faces horribly distorted, some almost placid as though they had died in their sleep, some with their heads broken in! These were the people who had leapt from their windows in a frenzy of delirium or in an agony of pain; or, being dead, had been flung forth from those windows by the convicts and galley-slaves who had been sent into the houses to free them from the poisonous bodies of those who had expired.

Marion noticed, too, that the still living were driven off the thresholds of some houses to which they clung--one man, who looked like the master of the abode, was pouring cold water from a bucket down the steps, so that none would be likely to lie there. And, next, she heard a piteous dialogue between two others.

"It is my own house--my own house!" a man, writhing in a porch close to where she was, gasped to another who parleyed with him from a door open about half a foot. "Oh, my son! my son! let me die here on my own doorstep, if I may not enter."

Then the son answered, his tones being muffled by the aromatic bandages around his face:

"My father, it cannot be. Not because I am cruel to you, but because I must be kind to others still unstruck. Your wife and mine, also myself and my babes, are still free from the fever. Would you slay all, yet with no avail to yourself? My father, think of us," and he shut the door gently on the man while beseeching him once again to begone and to carry the contagion he bore about him far away from the house which contained all that should be dear to him.

"Brute!" cried Marion, hearing all this. "Brute! Animal!"

Then, because of her warm, impetuous Southern nature, she hurled more than one curse up at the window from which she saw the son's white face looking forth by now.

"Nay, nay," murmured the dying old man, while understanding. "Nay, curse him not, good woman. He speaks well. Why should I poison them? And--I am old, very old. I must have died soon in any hap. It matters not."

"There are houses here," whispered the convict, who still walked by Marion's and Laure's side, "at the end of the street, which are, by some marvel, unaffected. Yet, also, they are deserted, because they are so near to the poisoned ones. Seek shelter in one for the night, I counsel you."

"Show me one of such," said Marion. "If there is room enough for all of us," and she indicated with her eyes that she referred to the other women who had marched in company from Paris.

"Follow me, then. There is a house at the end, the mansion of one of our richest merchants. Yet he and all are gone; they have escaped safely in one of his ships to sea. He will not return for months; not until the city is free and purged. 'Twould hold a regiment," he added. Then he led the way down towards the house he spoke of.

"To-morrow," he continued, "the Sheriffs will ask me where you are disposed of, and I must say, since you will be required to lend aid. Meanwhile, sleep well, all you women. Above all, when you are in, shut fast every window so that no air enters the house to infect it. Forget not."

"Be sure I will remember," Marion replied. "As well as to shut the doors," she added, not liking too much the looks of this stalwart, though gaunt ruffian, and mistrusting his familiarity, in spite of the services he had more or less rendered them.

But the man only laughed, yet with some slight confusion apparent in his manner, and said:

"Oh! you are too much of my own kind to have any fear. You women have nothing to be robbed of--nothing to lose. And--Marseilles is full of everything which any can desire, except food and health. Here is the house. If you like it not, there are many others."

Casting her eyes up at what was in truth a mansion, Marion answered that it would do very well. Then she advanced up the steps towards it, still leading and supporting Laure, and bidding all the other women follow her.

"My sisters," she cried, "here is rest and shelter from the poisoned air of the city. And there should be good beds and couches within. Ah! we have none of us known a bed for so long. We should sleep well here."

Whereupon one and all filed in after her, uttering prayers that the pestilence might not be lurking within the place and making it even more dangerous than the open air.

"Fear not," the man replied. "Fear not. The owner fled at the first outbreak. Not one has died here unless--unless some have crawled in to do so. It is untainted."

"Now," said Marion to him, "begone and leave us. To-morrow we will do aught that we are bidden. You will find us here," and as he stood upon the steps of the house, she closed the door.

The place echoed gloomily with the reverberation. It appeared to be a vast, mournful building as they cast their eyes around the great hall into which the moonlight streamed through a window above the stairs. Mournful now all deserted as it was, yet a building in which many a festival and much gaiety had, for sure, taken place in vanished years. The stairs were richly carpeted; so, too, the hall. Upon the walls hung pictures and quaint curiosities, brought, doubtless, by the owner's ships from far-off ports; bronzes and silken banners, great jars of Eastern workmanship, savage weapons and shields and tokens; also statues and statuettes in niches and corners.

"The mansion of a rich, wealthy merchant," Marion thought to herself, seeing all these things plainly in the pure moonlight streaming from the untainted heavens above. "The home of gentle women and bright, happy men. Now, the refuge of such as we are--lepers, outcasts, gaol-birds."

And even as she so thought, Marion pushed open a door on the right of the hall, when, seeing that it led to a rich, handsome salon, she bade her companions follow her.

CHAPTER XXIV

A DISCOVERY

Aided by the light of the moon which now soared high in the heavens, she being in her second quarter, the women--of whom there still remained many out of the original number that quitted Paris--distributed themselves about this vast and sumptuous abode of gloom. Some, and these were the women who felt the most worn out and prostrate of all, flung themselves at once upon the rich Segoda ottomans and lounges which were in the saloon they had entered; one or two even cast themselves down upon the soft, thick Smyrna carpets, protesting they could go no further, no, not so much as up a flight of stairs even to find a bed; while others did what these would not, and so proceeded to the first floor. Amongst them went Marion and Laure.

Yet this, they soon found, was also full of reception rooms and with none of the sleeping apartments upon it; there being a vast saloon stretching the whole length of the front of the house with smaller rooms at the back, and in the former the two women cast themselves down, lying close together upon a lounge so big that two more besides themselves might easily have reposed thereon.

"Sleep," said Marion, "sleep for some hours at least. To-morrow they will come for us; yet, heart up! the work cannot be hard. 'Tis but to nurse the sick; and, remember, if we survive--if we escape contagion--we shall doubtless be free. That Sheriff, that unhappy, bereaved man promised as much; he will not go back upon his word."

"Can he undo the law?" muttered her companion, as now she prepared to find rest by Marion's side. "Are we not condemned to be deported to the other side of the world? How then can he set us free? And, even though free, what use the freedom? We have not the wherewithal to live."

"Bah!" exclaimed Marion, ruthlessly thrusting aside every doubt that might rise in Laure's, or her own, mind as to the possibility of a brighter future ahead: "Bah! we are outside the law's grip now. We can set ourselves free at any moment. Can we not escape from out this city as inhabitants who are fugitives? Or get away----"

"In these prison rags!" Laure exclaimed, recalling to the other's memory how the garb they wore--the coarse black dress and the equally coarse prison linen--was known and would be recognised from one side of France to the other. "Marked, branded as we are Even with the impress of the carcan still on our necks! It is impossible!"

"Is it? Child, you do not understand. Do you not think that in this great, rich house there are countless handsome dresses and vast quantities of women's clothing? We can go forth decked as we choose--even as rich women fleeing from the scourge. Have no fear," the brave, sturdy creature added; "that we cannot depart when we desire. And--leave all--trust all--to me."

"How to live though we should escape? I am fit for nothing. I can do no work: even though I were strong. I know nothing. My uncle reared me too delicately."

"I can do all, I am strong. I will work for both of us. Now sleep."

And they did sleep, lying side by side. Side by side as they had done before when chained together, and as they had trudged along the awful road which led to still more awful horrors than even the route could produce. In the morning Marion arose as the first rays of dawn stole in through the windows of the great room, while thinking at first, ere she was thoroughly awake, that the guardians would come in a moment to curse into consciousness all who still slept, and half dreaming that she was again on the road. Then, she remembered that these men would never trouble her more; that, in a manner of speaking, she and Laure were free. Yet she remembered that their freedom was a ghastly one, and that death was all around them; that the pestilence was slaying a thousand people a day (as she had heard one galley slave say to another); and that, ere they had been in Marseilles many hours, it might lay its hot, poisonous hands on her and her companions.

Laure still slept, and, gazing down upon her, Marion saw how white and worn she was--yet how beautiful still! Upon that beauty nothing which she had yet undergone had had full power of destruction. Neither sun nor rain nor wind, nor the long dreary tramp and the rough, coarse food--not even the sleeping in outhouses and barns, and, sometimes, of necessity, beneath the open heavens and in the cold night wind--could spoil the soft graceful curves of chin or cheek, or alter the features. Burnt black almost, worn to skin and bone, and with, on those features, that look which toil almost ever, and sorrow always, brings, she lay there as beautiful still in all the absolute originality of her beauty as on the day she was supposed to be about to marry one man and had married another.

Looking down upon her, that other woman, that woman whose own life had been so turbulent--and who, like Laure, had been reared among the people but who had, doubtless, never known the refining influences which even such a man as Vandecque could offer to one whom he loved for herself, as well as valued for her loveliness--wept. She wept hot, scalding tears, such as only those amongst us whose lives have been fierce and tempestuous (almost always, alas! because of those fiery passions which Nature has implanted in our hearts, and which, could we but have the arbitrament of them, we would hurl away for ever from us), can weep. Then, slowly, she did that which she could not remember having once done for long past years--not since she was a tiny, innocent child. She sunk first on one knee and then on the other, and so knelt at the side of the sleeping girl, murmuring:

"If I may dare to pray--I--I--who have so outraged Him and all His laws. Yet, what to say--how to frame a prayer? 'Tis years since she who taught me my first one at her knee--since she--ah! pity me, God," Marion broke off, "I know not how to pray."

Yet, all the same, she prayed (if, in truth, "prayer is the soul's sincere desire, uttered or unexpressed") that this stricken, forlorn woman might live through all the dangers that now encompassed her; that once more she might see the noble, chivalrous man who had married her, and be at last folded to his heart. While, even as she bent over Laure, the latter's lips parted, and it seemed as though she muttered the name "Walter."

"Ay", Marion muttered, "that is it. But where is he? Where? Oh! if he were but near to save her." Then she sighed deeply, as she would not have sighed could she have known that, already, the man whose name was in the sleeping and waking thoughts of each woman had reached the city, intent upon finding and rescuing his wife. His wife, whom he had loved since first his eyes fell on her fresh, pure beauty in the foetid, sickly air of a Paris gambling hell.

For Walter Clarges knew all now. He knew of the deadly, damnable vengeance that Desparre had taken on the woman whom he would have married if she had not cast him off for another. Himself!

The knowledge had come to Clarges in that strange way, by one of those improbable incidents which are the jest of the ignorant scoffers who, in their self-importance and self-sufficient conceit, are unaware that actual life is more full of strange coincidences than the most subtle of plot-weavers has ever been able to devise. It had come to him when least to be expected--in such a manner and at such an opportune moment as to make the knowledge vouchsafed to him appear to be the work of Providence alone.

He had been passing one night at dusk down the street which led to that in which he dwelt, while musing, as ever, on whether she had been false to him--so bitterly, cruelly false as to make her memory and all regrets worthless--when his attention was attracted by an altercation going on between two men. One, a middle-aged, powerful-looking individual; the other, a beggar and almost old.

"Fie! Fie! Shame on you!" he said to the former, as he saw him strike the second with his cane. "For shame! The man is older than you, and apparently feeble. Put up your stick, bully, or seek a more suitable adversary."

"Monsieur's self to wit, perhaps," the aggressor sneered, yet ceasing his blows all the same. "Pray, does Monsieur regulate the laws by which gentlemen are to be molested by whining mendicants in the public places of Paris? This fellow has followed me with his petition for alms through a whole street."

"I will see that he does so no more," Walter Clarges said, quietly yet effectively. "At least, you shall beat him no further. You had best begone now," and there was something in his tone, as well as in his stalwart appearance, which induced the other to draw off and proceed on his way. Not, of course, without the usual protestations of "another time," and "when the opportunity should serve," and so forth. But, still, he went.

"What ails you?" asked Walter, gazing down now on the man whom he had saved from further drubbing. "Answer," he continued, seeing that the beggar turned his face away from him, and seemed, indeed, inclined to shuffle off after mumbling some thanks in his throat which were almost inaudible and entirely indistinct. "Answer me. And here is something to heal your aches from that fellow's cane." Whereon he held out a small silver coin to him.

But still the man made off, walking as swiftly as two lame feet would allow, and keeping at the same time his face turned from the other, as well as not seeing, or pretending not to see, the proffered coin.

"A strange beggar!" exclaimed Walter, now. "You pester a man until he beats you, yet refuse alms when cheerfully offered. By heavens perhaps he was not so wrong. At least, you are an ungrateful churl."

"I am not ungrateful," the fellow answered, turning suddenly upon Walter, and showing a blotched, liquor-stained face. "No; yet I will not take your money. It would blister me."

"In heaven's name, who are you?" Walter exclaimed, utterly amazed.

"Look at me and see!" And now the man thrust his blotchy visage close up to the other's, as though inviting the most open inspection.

"I protest I never set eyes on you before. My friend, you have injured someone else--evidently you must have injured him!--and mistake me for that person."

"I do not mistake. You are the man who was set upon and done to death, left for dead--as all supposed--on the night when Law's bubble was nearly pricked; the man whose newly-married wife was flung into the prison----"

"Ah! My God! What?"

"Of St. Martin des Champs, and thence deported to America. Nay, nay," the fellow shrieked suddenly, seeing the effect of his words; "do not swoon, nor faint. Heavens!" he added to himself, "he is about to drop dead at my feet."

He might well have thought so! The man before him had become as rigid as a corpse that had been placed upright on its dead feet and left to topple over to the earth as soon as all support was withdrawn.

Clarges' eyes were open, it was true--better, the appalled man thought, they should have been shut than look at him as they did!--yet they were glassy, staring, dreadful. His face was not white now with the whiteness of human flesh--it was marble--alabaster--ghastly as the dead! So, too, with his lips--they being but a thin, grey, livid line upon that face. And he spoke not, no muscle twitched, no limb moved. Only--one thing happened; one sign was given by the statue standing before the shaking outcast. That sign consisted of a clink upon the stones at his feet--the coin which that outcast had refused to take had dropped from the other's nerveless, relaxed hand.

At last the man knew that he who was before him had not been turned to stone, had not died standing there erect. From that livid line formed of two compressed lips, a voice issued and said:-

"The prison of St. Martin des Champs! And--deported--to--America! Is this true? You swear it?"

"Before Heaven and all the angels."

There was another pause, another moment of statuelike calm. Then, again, that voice asked:-

"Whose doing was it? Who sent her--there?"

"The noble--the man they termed a Duke. The man she had jilted for you."

"Come with me. I--I--can walk, move, now."

* * * * *

They were seated opposite to each other in Walter Clarges' room half an hour later, and the fellow, who had by such a strange chance been brought into contact with him, had told his tale, or partly told it. He had described how he had been one of those employed by another who worked under "the man they termed a Duke," to assist in falling on him who was now before him; how they, the attackers, had left him for dead, and how they had been bidden to follow to this very house to assist in another matter.

"She lay there--there," he said, "when we came in," and he pointed to a spot at the side of the table; "dead, too, as we all thought. He and his creature, the man who gave you your *coup de grâce*, as we imagined.--I--I cannot remember his name----"

"I can," Walter said. "It was Vandecque. Go on."

"That is the name. Vandecque bade us lift her up and convey her to the prison. To St. Martin des Champs, because it was the nearest. And we did so, Heaven pardon us! Yet, ere we set forth, that man, that noble--that rat--he did one thing that even such ruffians as we were shuddered at.

"What did he do?" Walter asked, dreading to know what awful outrage might have been offered to his insensible wife as she lay before her ruffian captor. "What? Tell me all."

"He tore from his lace cravat, where it hung down over his breast, a piece of it; tore it roughly, raggedly and--and--he placed it in her right hand, clenching the fingers on it. Then he whispered in his lieutenant's ears, 'the evidence against her, mon ami. Yes. Yes. The damning evidence, Vandecque.' Yes--Vandecque. That was the name."

Again the man was startled--at the look upon the face of the other. As well as at the words he heard him mutter; the words:--"It shall be thy evidence, too, blackest of devils. The passport to thy master."

Aloud he said:--

"Do you know more? Is--is--oh! my wife--my wife!--is--has she set out?"

"La Chaine went to Marseilles a month ago."

"How fast do they--does la Chaine, as you term it--travel?"

"But slowly. Especially the chain-gang of women. They must needs go slowly."

Again Walter Clarges said nothing for some moments; he was calculating how long, if mounted on relay after relay of swift horses, it would take him to catch up with that chain--to reach Marseilles as soon as it--to rescue her. For he knew he could do it--he who was now an English peer could save her who was an English peer's--who was his--wife. He had but to yield on one point, to proclaim himself an adherent of the King who sat on England's throne, and the ambassador would obtain an order from the French Government to the prison authorities to at once hand over his wife to him. And politics were nothing now! They vanished for ever from his thoughts! Then he again addressed the creature before him. "You should have been well paid for your foul work," he said. "So paid that never again ought you to have known want. How is it I find you a beggar?"

"Ah!" the man cried. "It was our ruin. We were blown upon somehow to the ministry of police a day or two later for some little errors--Heaven only knows how there were any who could do so, but thus it was. We were imprisoned, ruined. I but escaped the galleys by a chance. Yet, I, too, was ill-treated. I was cast into prison for two months. God help me! I am ruined. There was some private enemy."

"Doubtless, your previous employer."

"I have thought so."

"And that other vagabond. That villain, Vandecque! What of him? He is missing." The man cast his bloodshot eyes round the room as though fearing that, even here, he might be overheard, or that the one whom they called a duke might be somewhere near and able to wreak further condign vengeance on him; then he whispered huskily:

"Ay--he is missing. Some of us--I have met them in the wineshops--think he is dead. He knew too much. He--all of us--have paid for our knowledge of that night's work. Yes, dead! we think."

"'Tis very possible. Desparre would leave no witness--none to call him to account. Yet," muttered Walter to himself, "that account has soon to be made. I am alive, at least. But first--first--for her. For Laure!"

CHAPTER XXV

FACE TO FACE

It was during the day preceding the night on which those unhappy, forlorn women were conducted down to the north gates of the pest-ridden city that Walter Clarges himself entered Marseilles.

He had passed those women on the previous night, unseen in the darkness and himself unseeing, while they, worn out and inert, lay in some barns and outhouses belonging to a farm some miles off the city. He had ridden by within two hundred yards of where the woman he loved so much was enfolded in the arms of Marion Lascelles, half dead with fatigue and misery. He had ridden by, not dreaming how near they were to each other!

On the morning following he had also passed, not knowing whom it contained, the travelling carriage of the man who had wrought so much evil in his own and his wife's life; he had gone on fast and swiftly towards Marseilles, impelled by even greater speed by the first news of the horror which had fallen on the city, as well as by the hope that he might be in time to rescue her from that horror and the danger of an awful death. And, if not that--if happily, for so he must deem it now, she, with the other female prisoners, should have been sent on board the transports for New France and already departed--then he was still full of the determination to follow her across the ocean, and so, ultimately, effect her freedom.

Only an hour or two later, and after he and the villain Desparre had passed the spot where the

first news of the pest was heard by them, La Chaine went by too. Yet, by that time all around and within the inn was desolate, while the place itself was abandoned and shut up, the landlord and his family having closed the house and joined the other refugees in their flight. The spot was too near to Marseilles to make it safe to remain there; it was too much visited by the stricken inhabitants as they fled to the open country to continue long unattacked by the poisonous germs brought with them by those inhabitants.

Walter entered the city, therefore, on the midday preceding the arrival of those unhappy, forlorn women; he entered it at last after having made what was, perhaps, one of the fastest journeys ever yet effected from Paris to the great city in the South, so often spoken of in happier days, by those who dwelt therein, as the Queen of the Mediterranean.

How he had done it, how compassed all those leagues, he hardly knew. Indeed, he could scarcely have given a description of how that long journey had been made, and seemed, in truth, to remember nothing beyond the fact that it had been accomplished more by the lavish use of money than aught else. He had (he could recall, as he looked back to what appeared almost an indistinct dream) bought more than one horse and ridden it to a standstill; and had, next, hired as swift a travelling carriage as it was possible to obtain, so that, thereby, he might snatch some hour or so of rest. Then he remembered that he had also left that in its turn, had bought another horse--and--and had--nay, he could scarcely recollect what it was he had done next, how progressed, where slept, and how taken food and nourishment. Yet, what mattered? He had done it. He was here at last. That was enough. But now that he was in the great seething plague spot, now that he was here and riding his horse down Le Cours amidst heaps of decaying dead, both human and canine (with, also, some crows poisoned and lying dead from pecking at those who were stricken), all of whom tainted the air and spread fresh poison and disease around, how was he to find her? And if he found her, in *what* condition would it be? Would she be there, and his eyes glanced stealthily, nervously towards those heaps--or--or--would he never find her at all! Some--he had been told at the gate, where they handed him the repulsive cloth steeped in vinegar which he was bidden to wrap round his neck--were destroyed by quicklime as they died; while there was an awful whisper going about that the thousands of dead now lying in the streets were to be burnt in one vast holocaust, and that, likewise, the houses in which more than a certain number had died were to be closed up for a long space of time with what was termed "walled up doors and windows." Suppose--suppose, therefore, she had died, or should die, in any of these circumstances, and he should never find her--never hear of her again! Never, although he had reached the very place in which she was! Suppose he should never know what had been her actual fate!

"I must find her," he muttered; "I must find her!" And he prayed God that he might do so ere long; that he might discover her alive and well, so that he could rescue her from this loathsome place and take her away with him to safety and health. He could make her so happy now that he was rich. He must find her!

At the gate where he had been given the disinfectants, the man in charge stared at him as one stares at a madman or some foolhardy creature who insists on doing the very thing which all people possessed of sanity are intent upon not doing at any cost. He stared at the well-dressed stranger, who, flinging himself off his horse, had battered at the gate to be let in--much the same as, on the other side of it, people battered against it in their desire to be let out.

"Admit you!" exclaimed the galley slave who now filled the post of the dead and gone gate-keepers (with, for reward, a prospect of freedom before him when the pest should be finally over, if he should be alive by that time). "Admit you! Name of Heaven one does not often hear that request! Are you sick of life? It must be so!"

"Nay; instead, I seek to preserve life, even though I lose my own in doing so. To preserve the life of one I love." Then, observing the man's strange appearance, his red cap and convict's garb, he asked: "Are you the warder of the gate?"

"For want of better! When one has not a snipe they take a blackbird. I am the substitute of the warders. They lie in the outhouse now. I may lie there, too, ere long."

"Has--has any cordon of women--female convicts--emigrants--passed in lately? From Paris? Speak, I beseech you," and he had again recourse to that which had not failed him yet, a gift of money.

The man pocketed the double piece in an instant. Then he said: "I cannot say. I was sent here but yesterday--the warders would have known."

"Go and ask them."

"Ask them. *Ciel!* they would return a strange answer. Man, they are dead! Do you not understand?"

"Is everybody dead in this unhappy place?" Walter asked, despairingly.

"Not yet. But as like as not they will soon be. You see, *mon ami*, we die gaily. Of us, of us others--gentlemen condemned for crimes we never committed--forty were sent into the city from our galleys two days ago. Four remain alive. I am one." Then, changing the subject, he said: "Is

the life you love that of a woman who comes--or has come--in the cordon of which you speak?"

"God pity me! yes. She is my wife. Yet an innocent."

"Ha! An innocent. So! so! We are all innocent--all the convicts and convict emigrants. Also, our woman-kind. Well! enter, go find her if she is here. Then, away at once. Escape is easy, for the sufficient reason there will be none to stop you."

"Why not, therefore, flee yourself?"

"Oh I as for that, we have our reasons. We may grow rich by remaining, and we are paid eight livres a day to encourage us. There is much hidden treasure. And our costume is a little pronounced. We should not get far. Moreover," with a look of incredible cunning, "we shall get our yellow paper, our 'passport,' if we do well and survive! We shall be gentlemen at large once more. If we survive!"

Sickened by the sordid calculations of this criminal, Walter Clarges turned away, then, addressing the man once more, he said:

"I will go seek through the city for my wife. If I find her not I will return to you. You will tell me if the cordon I have spoken of arrives. Will you not?" and again he had recourse to the usual mode of obtaining favours.

"Ay! never fear. If they come in you shall know of it."

Whereon Walter Clarges took his way down Le Cours and traversed the rows of dead and dying who lay all around him at his horse's feet, seeing as he went along the same horrors that, in the coming midnight, his wife and her companions in misery were also to gaze upon. The daylight showed him more than the dark of twelve hours later was to show to them, yet robbed, perhaps, the surroundings of some of those tragic shadows and black suggestions which night ever brings, or, at least, hints at.

It was almost incredible that the ravages of an all devouring plague, accompanied in human minds by the most terrible fear that can haunt them--the fear of a swift-approaching, loathsome death--could have so transformed an always gay, and generally brilliant, city into such a place as it had now become. Incredible, also, that those who still lived while dreading a death that might creep stealthily on them at any moment, could act towards those already dead with the callous indifference which they actually exhibited.

He saw some convicts flinging bodies from windows, high up in the houses, down into the streets, where they would lie till some steps could be taken for gathering and removing them--and he shuddered while seeing that now and again the wretches laughed, even though the very work that they were about might be at the moment impregnating them with the disease itself. He saw a pretty woman--a once pretty woman--flung forth in a sheet; an old man hurled naked from a window; while a little babe would sometimes excite their derision, if, in the flight to earth, anything happened that might be considered sufficient to arouse it. He saw, too, lost children shrieking for their parents--long afterwards it came to his knowledge that, in this time of trouble and disorder, some strange mistakes had been made with these little creatures. He learnt that beggars' offspring had undoubtedly become confused with the children of rich merchants who had died from the pest, and that the reverse had also happened. In one case, many years afterwards (the account of which reached England and was much discussed) a merchant's child had been mistaken for that of an outcast woman, and had eventually earned its living as a domestic servant working for the very pauper child who had, by another mistake, been put in possession of the wealth the other should have inherited.

Still, he went on; nerved, steeled to endure such sights; determined that neither regiments of dead, nor battalions of dying, nor scores of frightened, trembling inhabitants fleeing to what they hoped might be safety in some distant, untouched village, should prevent him from seeking for the woman he had loved madly since first his eyes rested on her. The woman he had won for his wife only to lose a few hours later!

Through terrible spectacles he went, scanning every female form and face, looking for women who might be clad in the coarse sacking of the convict *emigrée*; peering at dying women and at dead. And he knew, he could not fail to recognise, how awful a grip this pest had got on the city, not only by the forms he saw lying about, but by the action of the living. Monks and priests were passing to and fro, one holding a can of broth, another administering the liquid to the stricken; yet all, he observed, pressing hard to their own nostrils the aromatically-steeped cloths with which they endeavoured to preserve their own lives. He saw, too, an old and reverend bishop passing across a market place, attended by some of his priests, who gave benedictions to all around him and wept even as he did so. A bishop, who, calm with that holy calm which he was surely fitted to be the possessor of, disdained to do more than wear around his neck the bandage which might preserve him from contagion. He pressed nothing to his lips, but, instead, used those lips to utter prayers and to bestow blessings all around him. This was, although Walter knew it not, the saintly Belsunce de Castelmoron, the Reverend Bishop of Marseilles, of whom Pope afterwards wrote:

"Why drew Marseilles' good bishop purer breath,
When nature sickened, and each gate was Death?"

Of convicts, galley slaves, there were many everywhere, since, as soon as one batch sent from the vessels lying at the Quai de Riveneuve was decimated, or more than decimated, another was turned into the city to assist in removing the dead, and, where possible, burying them within the city ramparts and port-walls, which had been discovered to be not entirely solid but to possess large vacant spaces within them that might serve as catacombs. And, also, they were removing many to the churches, the vaults of which were opened, and, when stuffed full of the dead, were filled with quicklime and closed up again, it remaining doubtful, however, if the churches themselves could be used for worship for many years to come.

In that dreadful ride he saw and heard such things that he wondered he did not, himself, fall dead off his horse from horror. He saw men and their wives afraid to approach each other for fear of contracting contagion; he observed many people running about the streets who had gone mad from fright; once, in the midst of all these shocking surroundings, he perceived a wedding party--the bride and bridegroom laughing and shrieking, while the man, who was either overcome with drink or frenzy, called out boisterously, "Thy uncle can thwart us no more, Julie. The pest has done us this service at least."

Next, he passed through a street at which a little trading was taking place, some provisions being sold there. Yet he noticed what precautions prevailed over even such transactions as these. He saw a great cauldron of boiling water with a fire burning fiercely beneath it, and into this cauldron was plunged every coin that changed hands, pincers being used for the purpose. It was feared that even the pieces of metal might convey the disease! And he observed that those who brought fish to sell were driven away with shouts and execrations, and made to retire with their bundles. It was rumoured, he heard one man say, that all the fish near land were poisoned and infected by the bodies that had been cast into the sea.

The night drew near as still he paced the city streets and open places, and he knew that both he and his horse must rest somewhere--either out in the open or in some deserted house or stable. Food, too, must be obtained for both. Only--where?

Then he determined he would make his way back to the gate and discover if, by any chance, the chain-gang of women had yet arrived. If it had not, it must, he felt sure, be very near, or--perhaps--already lying outside the city. To-morrow at daybreak he would begin his search again.

Remembering the way he had come, guided by terrible signs, by shocking sights which he recollected having passed on his way to the spot he was now returning from; guided, also, by the glow left by the sun as it began to sink, he went on his road back towards the gate, observing the names of the streets at the corners as he did so. One, which now he was passing through, and which he noticed was called *La Rue des Carmes Déchaussés*, seemed to have, for some reason, been more deserted by its inhabitants than several others he had traversed. Perhaps, he thought, because the fever had developed itself more pronouncedly here than elsewhere; perhaps because the inhabitants were wealthy enough to take themselves off at the first sign of the approach of the pestilence. That might be so. Now, the doors and, in many cases, the windows stood open; he could see through these windows--even in the fast falling dusk--that the rooms were sumptuously furnished, yet how desolate and neglected all seemed! How fearful must have been the terror of their owners when they could flee while leaving behind them all their treasures and belongings, leaving even their doors open behind them to the midnight prowlers or thieves who must surely be about after dark. Or, had those prowlers and thieves themselves burst open those doors, while neglecting to shut them again after they had glutted themselves with the treasures within?

Musing thus he halted, regarding one particularly open house--it was number 77--then started to see he was not alone in the street.

Coming slowly up it was a man who walked as though with difficulty; a man who, seeing a solitary woman's body lying on the footpath, crossed over to her, turned over the body, and regarded the face. Then he seemed to shake his head and walk on again towards where Walter Clarges sat his horse observing him. And, far down the street, he saw also another figure, indistinct as to features, distinct as to dress. A man arrayed in the garb of a convict; a man who, as he crept along, gave to the watcher the idea that he was tracking him who was ahead.

Ahead and near Clarges now, so near that he could see his features. And, as he saw and recognised them, he gave a gasp, while exclaiming hastily, "My God!"

For the first man of the two, the one who now drew close to him, was Desparre!

CHAPTER XXVI

"REVENGE-BITTER! ERE LONG BACK ON ITSELF RECOILS!"

The night was close at hand as those two men came together, they being brought so by the slow, heavy approach of Desparre towards where the other sat his horse watching him. The dark had almost come. But, still, there was a sufficiency of dusky light left beneath the stars which began to twinkle above in the deep, sapphire sky for the features of each to be recognised by the other.

"Yet," Clarges asked himself, as he dismounted and left his tired horse standing unheld in the deserted street, "did Desparre recognise his features?" He could hardly decide.

The man had stopped in that halting, dragging walk up the long, deserted street which rose slightly on a hill; he had stopped and was looking--yes, looking--staring--at him, yet saying nothing either with his lips or by the expression of those glassy eyes. He was standing still before him, mute and rigid.

And Clarges noted, all unimportant as it was, that far down the street, a hundred yards away, the galley slave who was the only other living creature about besides themselves, had halted too--had halted and was looking up towards them as though wondering curiously what these men might have to do with one another.

"Desparre!" exclaimed Walter Clarges now, abandoning all title, all form of ceremony. "Desparre, how it is that you have been delivered into my hands here to-night in this loathsome, plague-stricken spot, I know not. Yet I know one thing. We have met. Met for me to kill you, or for you to kill me!"

To his astonishment, to his utter amazement, the other was silent--silent as if stricken dumb, as if turned to stone. But still the glassy eyes regarded him and seemed to glisten in the light that was almost darkness now.

Clarges paused a moment while observing that figure before him and wondering if this might be some devilish ruse, some scheme concocted in Desparre's mind for either saving himself or perpetrating some act of treachery. The villain might, he thought, have a pistol in his breast or pocket which he would suddenly draw forth and discharge full at him. Then, seeing that the other still remained mute and motionless, he said:

"No silence on your part can save you. Be dumb if you will, but act. Draw your sword at once or stand there to be slain, to be righteously executed. I have to avenge to-night the wrongs of myself and of my wife--your daughter. Ha! you know that!"

As he mentioned "my wife--your daughter," he saw that he had moved the man. His face became contorted with a horrible spasm; one part of it seemed to be drawn down suddenly, the mouth, by the process, assuming a hideous, one-sided grin.

Desparre was now awful to gaze upon.

Unsheathing his own sword, Clarges advanced towards him, uttering only one word, the word "Draw." Then he stood before the other, waiting, watching what he would do, while determined that, if he did not draw as he bade him, he would thrust his weapon through his craven breast and so put an end to his vile life.

At first Desparre did nothing, but stood stock and motionless before him with always that drawn-down look upon one side of his face, though now his lower jaw seemed, as seen through the dusk, to be working horribly, and his teeth, one or two of which were discoloured, showing like fangs.

Then he put his hand to his sword--it appeared as though that hand would never reach the hilt, as though it were numbed or dead--and with what looked like extreme effort, drew forth the blade. Yet only to let it drop listlessly by his side directly afterwards, the point clicking metallically against the cobble stones of the street as he did so.

Was the coward struck lifeless with fear? Almost, it seemed so. Yet but a moment later, Clarges knew that it was something worse than fear that possessed him. For now the sword he had held so languidly fell altogether from his hand and clattered upon the stones as it did so, while Desparre stood shaking before the man who was about to slay him, his arms quivering helplessly, his face appalling in its distortions, his body swaying. Then he, too, fell heavily, and lay, as it seemed, lifeless before the other, his arms stretched out wide.

And Clarges, bending over him, regarding him as though he still doubted whether this were a ruse or not, yet knowing, feeling certain, that it was not so--did not perceive that the skulking form of the galley-slave had drawn nearer to them--that the man was now crouching in a stooping posture on the other side of the street regarding him and Desparre, while his starting, eager eyes observed all that was happening.

"Has he died of fright?" Clarges whispered to himself, while he bent over the prostrate man. "Died of fright or by God's visitation? Or is he dead? Anyway, he has escaped me for the present. So be it. We shall meet again, unless this scourge which is over all the place takes him or me, or both of us, before we can do so."

Whereupon, he left Desparre lying there. He could not stab him now, helpless as he was and dead or dying? Yet, as he remounted his tired steed which had stood tranquilly in the road where he had left it, he remembered that, during the many weeks he had lain in the Paris Hospital, and while the wounds administered at that craven's instigation were healing, he had seen men brought into it who had fallen almost lifeless in the street from paralysis and apoplexy. From paralysis! Yes, that must be what had now stricken this man; he felt sure it must. He remembered that there was one so brought in who had dropped in the street suddenly--the doctors said from a great shock he had received--whose face had been drawn down as Desparre's was, whose jaws had twitched, even in his insensibility, in much the same way.

Yes, he reflected, it was that, it must be that which had stricken this man thus at the moment when he had meant to slay him. One death had saved him from another, since now he must surely be near his end. If he did not perish of the stroke, the fever would doubtless lay hold upon him. His account was made. And musing thus, thanking God, too, that he had been spared from taking the life of even so great a villain as Desparre, and from having for ever the burden of the man's execution upon his head, he slowly rode off from the street of the Barefooted Carmelites, to learn, if possible, whether the cordon of women from Paris had yet arrived. But scarcely had his horse's hoofs ceased to echo down that mournful, deserted place in which now lay two bodies stretched upon their backs--the one, that of the poor dead woman at the lower end of it, the other, that of the wealthy and highly descended Armand, Duc Desparre--than forth from the porch across the street there stole the form of the skulking convict,--the convict who had been tracking Desparre from long before he entered the street, the galley-slave who had stood, or crouched aside, to see what should be the result of the meeting with the man who had dismounted from his horse to parley with him.

With almost the sinuous crawl of the panther, this convict--old, and with his close cropped hair flecked with grey--stole across the wide street to where the form of Desparre lay; then, reaching that form, he went down on one knee beside it, and, in the dark, felt all over it, lifting up his own hands now and again and peering at them in the night as though to see if they glistened with anything they might have come against, while feeling also one palm with the fingers of the other hand to discover if it was wet. Yet such was not the case.

"Almost I could have sworn," the *galérien* muttered, "that I heard his sword fall from him. That he was disarmed and therefore run through a moment later. Yet he is not wounded; there is no blood. What does it mean? That man was Walter Clarges--alive! Alive Alive! He whom I have deemed dead for months. Her husband--and alive! He must have slain him. He must. He must. He would be more than human, more than man, to spare him after all that he and she have suffered. He must have run that black treacherous heart through and through. Yet, there is no wound that I can find; no blood!"

Again and again--feeling the body all over, feeling, too, that the heart was beating beneath his hand and that there was no sign of cold or stiffness coming into that form as it lay motionless there--he was forced at last to the conclusion that, for some strange reason, Clarges had spared his bitterest foe.

"Spared him," he hissed. "Spared him. Why, why, why!" and he rose to his feet cursing Clarges for his weakness or folly. Cursing him even as he looked down and meditated on throttling the man lying there before him.

"He may spare him," he said. "I will not. My wrongs are as great, as bitter as theirs. I will have his life. Here--to-night."

He had touched with his foot, some moments before, the sword which Desparre had let fall from his nerveless hand, and the clatter of which had led him to imagine that the duke had been disarmed. Now, he picked up the weapon, tried it once against the stones, then bent over the miserable man with his arm shortened so as to drive the blade a moment later through throat and breast.

"Hellhound!" he muttered, "your hour is truly come. Devil! go to your master. You swore she should go unharmed if I would but assist you in your vengeance on him; that--that knowing I loved her--God, how I had learnt to love her! in spite of my trying to force her to marry such as you so that she might be great and powerful--she should be given back to me. Whereby we could yet have lived happy, prosperous, unmolested, together. Together! Together! And you sent her to exile and death, and me--your tool--to the galleys. Die!"

And now, he drew back his arm so as to drive the blade home. Yet, even as he did so, even before he thrust it through neck and chest, he whispered savagely. "It is too good a death, it is too easy. He is insensible from fear, he will die without pain. If there were any other way--any method----"

He paused with his eyes roaming round the street from side to side--then started. A moment

afterwards he went up the steps of the house with the sword still in his hand, and peered at the numbers painted in great white figures on the door. In the dark of the summer night, in the faint light given by the blazing southern stars, he could decipher them.

"Seventy-seven," he muttered, "seventy-seven." Then paused again as though thinking deeply, his empty hand fingering his grisly, unshaven chin. "Seventy-seven. Ay! I do remember. This house was one of them. One of the first. One of the worst. 'Twill serve."

He leant the sword against the side of the porch, muttering: "He would not stab you to the heart--so--neither will I," then went slowly down the steps again, and back to where Desparre lay unmoved. After which he took both of the other's hands in his, drew them above the shoulder, and stretched the arms out to their full length, and thus hoisted the burden on his own gaunt shoulders--while bending--almost staggering at first--under the weight. Yet he kept his feet; at last he was able to straighten his back, and to stagger up the steps into the house. Here, when once in it, he let the body down to the floor of the passage and stood gasping and breathing heavily for some moments, what time he muttered to himself:

"This will not do. Not here on the first floor. It is too near the street. He must go higher. Higher yet. Otherwise he may be found--and saved!"

Whereupon, having regained his breath, he lifted Desparre on to his shoulders again and slowly mounted to the first floor of the house. Then he rested there, and afterwards went on to the second. Here, as was ever the case in the houses of the well-to-do in the city, the sleeping apartments began; the principal bedroom of the master of the house being in this instance on the front, or street side, while that reserved for guests was on the back, and looked over a small plot of ground, or garden. The moon, now peeping up, showed that both rooms were in a state of great confusion--rooms to which, by this time, the man had crept laboriously with his heavy, horrid burden on his back. The bed, he could see, as still the rays stole in more fully to the front apartment, was in disorder, the upper sheet and coverlet being flung back as though some one had leapt hastily from them; the doors of wardrobes and cupboards stood open; so, too, did the lid of a huge strong-box bound and clasped with iron bands. Easy enough was it for Vandecque to see that, from this room a hurried flight had been made, and with only sufficient time allowed before the departure for the more precious and smaller objects of value to be hastily gathered up. For, upon the floor there lay--as he felt as well as saw, since his feet struck against them--the larger articles of importance, the silverware, the coffee pots and tea-pots, the salvers, and other things. It had been a hurried flight!

"If," said Vandecque to himself, even as his eye glanced round on all these things which he would once have deemed a rich booty had they fallen into his hands, but which now he scorned, since, if he could but gain his freedom by his conduct here and return to Paris a liberated man, he would want for nothing, having at last grown rich through the gambling house; "if I leave him in this house and he recovers consciousness--strength--he may be able to attract attention; to call for assistance from the window. He shall have no chance of that. Come, murderer, come," and again he lifted the insensible man upon his shoulders and bore him into the back, or spare, room.

This was not in a disordered condition. There would be no guests in Marseilles at this time; no visitors from a healthy place to such an unhealthy, stricken one as this. The bed was made and arranged, and on to it Vandecque flung the body of his victim. His victim! Yes, yet how long was it since he himself had been the victim? And, even as he thought of how he had suffered at this man's hand, any compunctions he might have had during the last hour--and, hardened as he was, he had had them!--vanished for ever.

"Arrested by your orders," he muttered, glancing down upon Desparre as he lay senseless on the bed; glaring down, indeed, though only able to see the dim outline of his enemy's form, since, as yet, the moonbeams had scarcely penetrated to this room. "By your orders, though not knowing, never dreaming that it was so; not dreaming that my betrayal came from you. Then the prison of La Tournelle--oh, God! for the third time in my life--the condemnation to the galleys, this time in perpetuity. I--I who had grown well-to-do, who had no need to be a criminal again, who might have finished my life in ease. And Laure--Laure--poor Laure!--whom I had hoped to see a Duchess, and great--happy--or, at least, not unhappy! Cut-throat!" he almost shrieked at the senseless man; "when I learnt, as we gaol birds do learn from one another, all that you had done, I swore to escape from these galleys somehow, to make my way back to Paris, to slay you. Yet, it is better thus; far better. Lie there and die."

Then he went forth from the room, finding the key in the door and turning it upon Desparre.

But, as he descended the stairs and returned to the street, taking no precaution to deaden his footfall in the empty corridors, since he knew well enough that there were none to hear them, he muttered to himself, "Clarges spoke of her to him as 'his wife.' Also he said 'Your daughter.' Mon Dieu! was she that? Was she that? And if so, how should the Englishman know it, how have found out what I spent years in fruitlessly trying to discover?"

Musing thus, he caught up the sword which still stood in the porch, flung it down a drain, and went slowly through the deserted streets towards the Quai de Riveneuve where the galleys were, and to which the convicts returned nightly to sleep--if they had not succumbed during the day to the pestilence.

CHAPTER XXVII

"I LOVE HER!-SHE IS MY WIFE"

Down the Rue de la Bourse, wherein the women of la Chaine had passed the latter part of the night, the rays of the sun began to stream horizontally as it rose far away over the Mediterranean and lit up the side of the street in which stood the house where the weary creatures lay.

A month before this period daybreak would have dawned upon a vastly different scene from the one of lifeless desolation to which it now brought light and warmth. The great warehouses at the back of the merchants' residences--in which position most of those buildings in Marseilles were situated--would have already begun to teem with human life; with bands of sailors coming up from the harbour, either bringing, or with the intention of carrying away, bales of goods and merchandise; workmen, mechanics, clerks, and *employés* of every kind would have been passing up the street to their early work. Now, the Rue de la Bourse, like scores of other streets in the City, was absolutely deserted or only tenanted at various spots by the dead--human and animal!--who lay about where they had fallen--on doorsteps, in porches and stoops, sometimes even in the very middle of the road.

On such a scene as this Marion gazed as she looked forth from the room she and Laure had slept in; her mind full of sorrow and perplexity--not for herself nor on her own account, but on that of the other unhappy one over whom she watched. For herself she cared not--she knew that her past, and the consequences resulting from the actions of that past, had shut the door for ever against any sweetness of existence for her in the future, nor was she much concerned as to whether the pestilence slew her or not. Only--she had sworn to stand by Laure until the end; therefore she knew that now, at this present time and for some weeks or months at least, she must live, she must take care of her own health if she would do what she had vowed to perform. Afterwards, if she should see Laure spared by the hideous scourge which now ravaged the place they had arrived at, spared to be in some manner restored to the husband she had come at last to love--then it mattered little what became of her. But she must live to see that!

Marion went over to the girl now and once more gazed at her, observing that she was sleeping calmly and easily; then she returned to the window and continued her glances up and down the street. She was watching for those who, as the convict had said, would come for them soon after daybreak to lead them away to where their services would be needed as nurses and helpers, and she wished to be on the alert to prevent them from troubling Laure. She meant at once to tell them--her teeming brain never being at a loss for an expedient!--that the girl was ill or, at least, too weak to take any part in the proceedings for which they might all be required on that day, and to beg her off. She determined also that, whether the request was granted cheerfully or not, Laure should rest for the next twenty-four hours. Her confidence in her own powers and strength failed her no more now than they had ever failed her in the most violent crises of her life--she was resolved that what she desired should be accomplished.

Presently she saw them coming--or, rather, saw coming up the street a band of men and women who, she could not doubt, were a party of nurses and "crows," as the males were termed who attended to the work of removing the dead and, if possible, to the disposing of them elsewhere, namely, in the vaults of churches, the hollow walls of the ramparts, and, in some cases, in old boats and decayed vessels which were taken out to sea and there sunk. Whereon she went swiftly down the stairs to the door to meet them.

Among this body of persons which now drew near she saw her acquaintance of last night, the convict, who at once greeted her in his strong Breton accent, he being, as he had told her at their first meeting, a native of that province.

"Bon jour, Madame," he now cried with an attempt at cheerfulness,--poor wretch! he had made some sort of compact with himself that nothing should depress him, nor any horrors by which he was surrounded frighten him, while forcing himself to regard his impending liberty as a certainty which no pestilence must be allowed to deprive him of. "Bon jour, Madame. And how is the young one?"

"She is not well," Marion answered, while glad, in a way, that she so soon had an opportunity given her of declaring that Laure could not go nursing that day; "also, she must rest." Then she regarded the members of the group accompanying the man, while observing who and what they were.

Two were monks; good, holy men, who, working cheerfully under the orders of the bishop (as

dozens of their brethren were doing in other parts of Marseilles) were now acting as doctors, since--horrible to relate--there was not one physician or surgeon now left either alive or unstricken. In the beginning of the pestilence, the doctors of Marseilles had scoffed at the disease being the plague; they had called it nothing but a trifling malady, and, unhappily both for them and all in the city, they had suffered for their obstinacy or, rather, incredulity. They had been amongst the very first to break down under the attacks of the loathsome fever which they had refused to recognise. Consequently, the work which they should still have been able to do had to be done by amateurs--such as these monks--or the surgeons of the galleys, or any stranger in the city who understood medicine and its uses, and was willing to risk his life in administering it.

Of the others who formed the group some were "crows," as has been said, while there were five women, three of them being under sentence for life at the travaux forcés, yet now with a fair prospect of freedom before them should they perform faithfully all that was demanded of them at this awful crisis, and--also--preserve their lives! Of the other two, one was an elderly lady whose whole existence had been devoted to good works, she even having voyaged as far as Siam with the missionaries sent out there; the second was a young and beautiful woman of high position among the merchant families of the place, who had broken her father's heart by her loose conduct and was now endeavouring to soothe her own remorse by self-sacrifice.

There was also a Sheriff--not the same as he who had accosted La Chaine overnight--but another one, older than the former, and seeming also much grief-stricken.

"If," said this man, addressing Marion, "the young woman of whom you speak is indeed ill, let her rest; later, she may be able to be of assistance. God forbid we should do aught to add to the sickness here. She is not attacked with the pestilence?" he asked.

"Nay," said Marion. "Nay. But she is young and delicate. She is a lady. Think, monsieur, of what she must have gone through in the past few months. We others are mostly rough creatures, especially those who have survived, since the loose women, the dissolute ones who set out with us have--well--been left behind. But--but---"

"What was her crime? That of your friend? For what was she condemned?"

"She was an innocent woman!" cried Marion; and as she spoke her lustrous eyes blazed into the man's before her. "God crush for ever the scoundrel who bore false witness against her."

"There are other women in the house," the Sheriff said, almost unheeding Marion's tempestuous outburst. "They at least can work, can they not?"

"Oh! as for that," Marion answered, "I imagine so. I will go in and see. Yes," she exclaimed, glancing up at a window in the house above the room in which she and Laure had slept, she being now in the street and amidst the group, "it would seem so. Behold, they look forth."

It was true that they did so, since, when all eyes were directed upwards, the unkempt heads of the other surviving members of the gang--heads covered in some cases with black hair, in some with yellow, and, in one, with grey--were seen peering down into the street.

"*Hola!*" cried Marion, "come down all of you. Come down and assist at the good work. You have slept well, have you not?"

"Ay, we have slept. But now we are hungry. We want food. We cannot work on empty stomachs; if we do the pest will seize on us."

"Descend," cried the Sheriff, "we bring food with us. For to-day," he muttered to himself, turning aside his head. "To-morrow there may be none. Already the country people will not enter the city nor take what they deem to be our poisoned money. God help all!"

As he so muttered to himself he made a sign to one of the men who carried a great copper pot, and to one of the condemned women who bore in her hands a tin box, and bade them prepare some food, the man lighting at his bidding a little brazier at the bottom of the big pot. At the same time the female produced from her box some hard ship's biscuits, and began, with a stone she picked up, to break them into pieces.

By this time the other women had come down into the street, and, inhaling the odour of the soup which was warming in the utensil, betrayed intense desire to be at once supplied with some nourishment.

"A half cup to each," said the Sheriff, "and some biscuits. Later, you shall have more. A warehouse is to be broken open at midday; it is that of a merchant who supplies vessels with necessaries for long voyages. God grant that we shall find enough for many days. Otherwise, starvation will soon be added to our other miseries. Already seventy such warehouses have been ransacked."

Obtaining a portion of soup and another of biscuit, Marion went back to the house to Laure, though not before she had filled up the other cup with her own share of soup, reserving only a scrap of the food for herself; and, when there, she found the girl sitting up upon the couch

listening to the voices of those in the street.

"Have they come for us?" Laure asked wearily. "Must we now begin to work? Well, so be it! I am ready."

"Nay, dearest," exclaimed the other. "You need not go forth to-day. I have begged you off, because you are so worn and delicate. And see, sweet, they are serving out food. Here is some good broth and biscuit. Take it; it will nourish you."

"But it is not right," Laure exclaimed, "that I should stay behind. They--you, too, Marion, my guide and comforter--are all as weary as I. I will go also."

"No; no. Rest here till we come back. Then, to-morrow, if you are stronger, you shall assist. Nay, you must do so if you can; thereby the better to entitle you to your freedom. Oh! Laure, we must work for that freedom. Then--at last--we can go away and live together, and I can earn subsistence for both. Until we find your husband."

"You are in truth an angel, Marion," the girl exclaimed, flinging her arms around the other's dark swarthy neck. "Oh! how--how could one as good as you have ever come within the law's clutches. How----"

"Hush! Hush! I have been an awful sinner; I have deserved my fate, I have been swayed and mastered by one passion after another--by love, jealousy, hate, revenge. God forgive me! We southern women are all like that! Yet--if I should live----"

"If you live! You shall, you must live! Oh! Marion, my guide, my sister----"

"Ah, your sister! Yes! Say that again. Yet," she cried, springing to her feet, "not now! Now we have to earn the freedom we long so for. I must go; I must do my best and work for both of us. Ah, God! how good it is, how peaceful, to be doing something at last, no matter if danger lurks in it, that is not evil. Let me go, sweet. I shall come back to you at night; therefore sleep well all day. And, see, I will lock you in the house so that no harm may come anigh you. You will not fear?"

"Never; knowing you are coming back to me."

Then they tore themselves apart, Marion taking every opportunity of leaving Laure as comfortable as was possible, which opportunity was not lacking since the room was, as has been said, furnished luxuriously, and nothing was wanting that might make the couch of the wearied girl an easy one. And so, after more embraces between them, Marion went forth once more, falling in with the rest of the women and following the Sheriff and the convict and the "crows," to do the work they might be appointed to perform.

The bravest heart that ever beat--even her own, since there was none braver!--might well be turned almost to stone by that which they had to do; the sights they were forced to witness. And the daylight made those sights even more terrible and more appalling than the night had done, which, if it produced a weird and wizard air of solemnity that spread itself around all the terrors of the pestilence, had; at least, served also as a cloak to much. For now they saw the dead lying in heaps upon each other--with, among them, the dying; they saw the awful chalk-like faces turned up to the bright morning sun in the last agonised glare of a hideous death, and the still whiter eye-balls gleaming hideously. They saw, too--but description of these horrors must cease. Suffice it that these women stood among a hecatomb of victims such as other stricken cities had shown in earlier days, but which none, not even London with its plague, had equalled for more than a hundred years.

Gradually the women of the gang were distributed about in various spots where it was thought they might be of service; to some fell the task of holding cups of broth or of water to the lips of the dying; to some the casting of disinfectants over the already dead; to others the removal of newborn babes from the pestiferous atmosphere in which their mothers lay. And Marion's task, because she was strong and feared nothing, was to assist in the removal of the dead to the carts that were to transport the bodies to the ramparts, in the hollows of which many scores were to be interred in quicklime.

Engaged thus, she observed near her a gentleman--a man clad in black, as one who wore mourning for a relative; a man young, handsome and grave. One, too, whose face was white and careworn as though it had become so through some poignant grief. He was talking to one of the "crows" as her eyes fell on him, and--with an astonishment in her mind which, she noticed, was not all an astonishment, but rather an indistinct feeling that gradually merged itself into something that she seemed to feel, did not partake altogether of the unexpected--she observed that both men were regarding her. They were doing so, she understood, by the glances cast at her by the "crow," and followed by others from the stranger talking of her. Why, she asked herself, why? Yet even as she did so, something within again apprised her, whispered to her, that it was not strange they should be doing so. Then, with the habit of years strong upon her, she cast one penetrating glance at the new-comer from out of her dark eyes, and went on with the loathsome work she was engaged upon.

Presently, however, she felt that the man clad in mourning had drawn near to her--she knew it

though she had looked round no more: a moment later she heard him addressing her.

"You will pardon me," he whispered, "for what I have to say. But-but-that unhappy creature with whom I have been conversing has told me that--you--alas! that I must say it--have recently made a journey from Paris. That you are----"

"A convicted woman," Marion replied swiftly, facing round on him, her eyes ablaze; "a criminal! One of the women condemned to deportation to the colonies. Well, he has spoken the truth. What then?"

"Forgive me. I speak not with a view to wound you, or to be offensive. But, God help me, I seek one dear to me. An innocent woman condemned to the same penance as you, and by one who is a double damned scoundrel. She was of your chain. And--heaven pity us both, I love her--she is my--wife."

"Your wife!" Marion repeated, standing before him, gazing full into his eyes, holding still in her hand the white leprous-looking hand of a dead woman whose body she had been helping to place in the cart. "Your wife." And now her voice had sunk to as deep a murmur as it had ever assumed, even in the softest moments of her bygone days of love and passion. "Your wife. Amongst us?"

"It is so. Oh, speak; answer me. Is--is--yet almost I fear to ask. Still--still I must do it. Is she still alive?"

"What?"--mastering herself, speaking firmly, though hoarsely--"What is your name?"

"Walter Clarges. I am an Englishman."

"Laure's husband! Laure's husband!"

"You know her! You know--ah! does she live?"

"Yes. She lives."

"God! I thank thee!" the other murmured.

CHAPTER XXVIII

THE WALLED-UP DOORS

Marion Lascelles had hoped, had prayed that this moment would come at last; that at some future day Laure's husband would stand face to face with his wife again; that he would seek her out and find her even though, to do so, he had to follow La Chaine to the New World.

But now--now that what she had hoped for had come to pass, there almost swept a revulsion of feeling over her. Standing before that husband of the woman whom she had tended and nurtured, she smothered within her bosom something that was akin to a groan. For his coming brought, would bring, in an hour, in half-an-hour, in a few moments, the joy unspeakable to Laure for which she had so much craved, while to her--to Marion--the outcast, it brought also separation from the only thing in all the wide world that she loved or could ever love again. She had been racked by her love for men who had treated her badly and on whom she had taken swift, unerring vengeance for their infidelity; yet that was passed. Her heart had died, or, if not dead, had steeled itself against all other love of a like nature (since the condemned man whom she had married in the prison had been only accepted as a husband because, in the distant land to which they had been going together, such a union would be a matter of convenience and profit, as well as, perhaps, safety). Yet into that heart had crept another love, pure, unselfish, almost holy. Her love for Laure. And now--now it would be worthless, valueless, of no esteem. At what price would her fostering, her sister's love be valued when set off against the love of husband?

Had she been a bad woman instead of an erring one only, a woman resolved to attach to her for ever the one creature with whose existence her own was, as she had vainly dreamed, inseparably bound up; had she been the Marion Lascelles of ten, five, perhaps one year ago, it may be--she feared it must have been--that she would have lied to Walter Clarges standing there before her, his sad face irradiated now, since she had not lied, with joy extreme. She would perhaps have denied Laure's existence, have said that she had long since fallen dead upon one of the roads along which she and the other women had plodded weary and footsore; she would have done anything to have kept the girl to herself. But not now. Not now. Not even though her heart

broke within her. Never! She loved Laure. Perish, therefore, all her own feelings, her hopes of happy days to come and to be passed by the other's side. She loved her; it was not by falsehood and treachery and selfishness that that love must be testified.

"I cannot leave this work to which I am put," she said, speaking to him as these thoughts continued to flow through her mind. "I have to earn remission of the remainder of my sentence. Pardon for--for myself. Yet, if you would see her now, she is to be found in the Rue de la Bourse. The number is 3. Upon the first floor in the front room you will find her."

She spoke calmly, almost hardly, Walter Clarges thought, and, thus thinking, deemed her a cold-hearted, selfish woman, studying nought but her own release and the swiftest method of obtaining it. Wherefore he said:

"You know her. You must have marched in the same cordon with her."

"Yes, I know her."

"How can she have borne the terrors of the journey? How? How?"

"All had to bear it," Marion Lascelles answered, glancing up at him, "or die."

"This house?" he asked, while almost shuddering at the cold, indifferent tones in which the woman spoke, even while reflecting that, since she had borne as much as Laure had done, it was not to be expected that she should show any particular sympathy for a companion in misfortune. "This house? Can admission be obtained to it? And why is she there, when--when her companions in misery and unhappiness are here?"

"This key," Marion said, drawing it from her pocket, "will admit you. She is alone, sleeping. She is not as strong as some of us--us, the outcasts, who are the rightful prey of the galleys and the scaffold. Mercy has been shown her. She has been relieved from her work in these streets to-day."

He took the key from her as she held it out to him, glancing at her wonderingly as he did so, though understanding nothing of the cause which produced her bitterness of tone--her self-contempt, as testified by her speech. Then, thanking her, he repeated:

"No. 3, of the Rue de la Bourse. That is it?"

"That is it. You will find her there." After which she turned away and slowly followed after the cart proceeding up the street with its terrible burdens.

If Marion Lascelles had never before wrestled with all the strong emotions which were born of her fiery nature day by day, and month by month, she had done so this morning, was doing so now. And at last--at last--she thanked God the better had overcome the worse--she had conquered. None knew but herself, none should ever know, what hopes she had formed in her bosom of happy days to come when she and the delicate girl, whom she had supported all through the hideous journey from Paris, and during their still more hideous entry into this stricken city of death, should have escaped away to some spot where they might at last be at peace. She had pictured to herself how she would work and slave for Laure so that she should be at ease; how work her fingers to the bone, bear any toil, so that--only that--she might have the sweet companionship of the girl as recompense. And now--now--the dream had vanished, the hope was past; they could never be aught to each other. The husband was there, he had come to claim his wife, as she herself had told Laure he would come; now he would be all in all to her and she would be nothing. Yet she must not repine; the prayers that she had forced herself to utter, almost without knowing how to frame them, had been heard and answered. The God against whom her life had been so long an outrage had granted her the first request she had ever made to Him. Was it for her now to rebel against the granting of it? Nay, nay, she answered to herself, never. And, even in her misery and her awful sense of desolation, in her appreciation of the solitude that must be hers for ever now, she found a consolation. She had done that which she should do; she had sent the husband straight to his wife's arms when she might so easily have prevented him from even discovering that wife's existence. One lie, one false hint, one word uttered to the effect that Laure had succumbed upon the road and had been left behind for the communes to bury her, and it would have been enough. She would have remained to Marion; the husband could never have found her--he could never find her. No, no! God be praised! she had been true and faithful; she had not yielded to her own selfish hopes and desires.

"Take," said a soft and gentle voice in her ear at this moment; the voice of the unhappy Sheriff who accompanied the carts that were removing the dead, "take, good woman, more heed of yourself and your own life. See, the cloth with the disinfectants has fallen from your neck--it is lost. Beware of what you do. Otherwise you will be stricken ere long yourself."

Turning, she glanced up at the speaker, then shrugged her shoulders and went on with the loathsome task she was engaged upon--that of bending over prostrate bodies to see if their owners were, indeed, dead or not, and, if the latter, of assisting in their removal to the carts. But that was all, she uttered no word in answer to the warning.

"You do not value your life?" the man continued, while thinking how fine a woman this was;

one so darkly handsome too, that, surely, she must have some who loved her, criminal though she must undoubtedly be since she had formed one of the chain-gang.

"No," she answered, looking up at him now. "I do not value it. Yet, they say, 'tis to such as I am that death never comes."

"But, ere long, if you survive this visitation, you may--you shall--be free. I will charge myself with your freedom."

"Free!" she answered, her eyes fixed on him with so sad a look that, instinctively, he turned away. There was something in this woman's life, he understood, which it was not for him to attempt to probe.

Left in peace by the Sheriff, Marion continued her work, following close by the cart; yet bidding the man who led the horse to halt at intervals wherever she found some poor body with distorted features which told only too plainly that the last agony had been experienced; halting herself sometimes to be of assistance to those who were still alive. But always saying over and over again the words, "Free! Free!"

Free! Of what use was freedom now to her? What! Supposing she were free to-night, to-morrow, what should she do with that freedom? Laure wanted her no more, she would not miss her if she never went back to the Rue de la Bourse; she had her husband now, the man whom, she acknowledged, she had learned to love. Therefore, Marion resolved that she would never go back. Never! Of that she was determined. She would but be an incubus, be only in the way of their love. She would never go back. Not even if the pestilence spared her, which, she hoped, it might not do.

They had come by now to the street of the Barefooted Carmelites--a street in which she perceived that there were no dead--or, only one, a woman lying on one side of it. And here, strong as she was, she felt that she must rest. Her limbs trembled beneath her--from fatigue and want of sufficient nourishment, she thought, not daring to hope that already the fever had stolen into her veins and that a better, surer freedom than the one the Sheriff had suggested might be near at hand. He, that Sheriff, had left them by now to attend to other duties in the city, therefore there was at this time no living person with her but the carman, who, with his ghastly burdens in his cart, walked ahead of her.

"I must rest here," she said to him, "a little while. See, there is a fountain in the street. We will drink," and she went towards the fountain, which was represented by a statue of Cybele, from out of whose bunch of keys the water gushed in half a dozen streams.

"Drink not," the carman exclaimed, warningly. "They say the source is impregnated. All the water of Marseilles is poisonous now. Beware!"

"Bah! It must come from the bowels of the earth. There are no infected bodies there. And," she muttered to herself, "even though there were I still would drink." Whereon she drank, then sat down on the base of the statue, which was large and spacious and would have furnished a dozen persons with seats.

Presently, still sitting there--she saw come down the street a number of men, some of them galley slaves, two of them officers. Then, when all had advanced almost to where Marion sat observing them, one of the latter drew from his pocket a list and began to read out several names, while giving the convicts instructions as to what each had to do. But what truly surprised Marion was that, behind all these men there came some others leading the horses which drew two carts--carts not filled with dead, but the one with mortar and the other with bricks.

Gazing at these, and almost with interest for one whose mind was as troubled as hers, she perceived that, of the galley slaves, one had drawn away from the group, and, approaching the base of the fountain, had sat down upon it near her and on the other side from that on which the carman whom she had accompanied was sitting. An old criminal this; a man of nearly sixty, grey and grizzled, and with a frosty bristling on his unshaven chin and cheeks and upper lip. A man who sat with his elbows on his knees and his face in his hands, staring in front of him--at a house numbered 77.

"What do they do?" Marion asked of this staring man, while looking round at him and noticing how worn and white he was, "and why are these carts piled with bricks and mortar? What is it?"

"They brick up the houses that are infected; those in which the dead lie. Those that are the worst."

"But--but--supposing there should be any living left in them. See, they have commenced there, at 76, and without entering to make inspection. That would be even more terrible than all else."

"The inspection has been made. The houses are marked already. Observe, there is a chalk mark. Regard No. 76, at which the masons work."

"By whom has the inspection been made?"

"By me and another," the convict answered, turning his white and ghastly face on her. "Three hours ago, this morning. At daybreak."

"All are not marked."

"No, all are not marked. Not--yet!" Ere she could, however, ask more, one of the officers strode towards where they sat near together, and, addressing the convict, who sprang respectfully to his feet, said:

"Have you thought, remembered yet, which is the house you had forgotten. Idiot that you are! to have thus forgotten. Reflect again. Recall the house. Otherwise we shall brick up one in which there are no dead to be left to decay in it."

"I think--I think," the other answered--white and almost shivering, as Marion, who was watching him curiously, observed, "it is that," and he pointed to No. 77.

"You think! Yet are not positive? Go in again and see. Make sure this time. Go."

Slowly the man obeyed him, walking over to the door of No. 77, and then, after turning the handle, entering. And, while he was gone, the masons went on with the bricking up of one or other of the houses which bore the chalk-marked cross beneath their numbers.

Five minutes later the convict appeared again at the door and said, loud enough for his voice to reach the officer's ears and also to reach Marion's:

"This, Monsieur, is the house," while, as he spoke, his left hand went to the pocket of his filthy galley's dress.

"You are sure?"

"I am--sure!"

"Mark it."

Therefore, in obedience to the order, the man drew forth a piece of chalk from his pocket, and slowly marked the cross beneath the number 77. "Now," said the officer, seeing that the masons were ready to begin upon that house, "fall in and lend assistance." Half-an-hour later it was done, finished. Not for a year would that house be opened again. By which time those who were in it--if any--would be skeletons.

CHAPTER XXIX

Oh! let me be awake,
Or let me sleep away.

Left alone by Marion's departure, Laure endeavoured to sleep once more and to obtain some return of the strength that she had lost in that long, horrible march which she, in common with all the other women, had been forced to make from Paris.

"If I could only sleep again," she murmured to herself, "sleep and forget everything. Everything!"

Yet, because, perhaps, the early morning sun streamed so brightly through the handsome curtains of the windows in spite of their having been drawn carefully together by Marion ere she went forth, or because the sparrows twittered so continuously from the eaves--the pestilence brought neither death nor misery to them!--she could sleep no more. Instead, she could only toss and turn upon the luxurious couch on which she had lain all night, wondering, as she did so, if the unhappy owner and his family who had fled affrighted from all their wealth and sumptuous surroundings had now as soft a one whereon to rest--wondering, too, what was to be the end of it all.

"As for him," she murmured, for her thoughts dwelt always, hour by hour and day after day, upon the man who had sacrificed his existence--his life for her, perhaps--if Desparre had spoken truly; "as for him--oh, God!" she broke off, "if I could only see him once again. Only once! To tell him how soon I had surrendered, how he had conquered, even as he stood before me sad and unhappy on his own hearth. To see him only once!"

Again she turned upon her pillows and cushions, again attempted to sleep; but it was in vain.

She was neither nervous nor alarmed at being alone in the great, desolate house; since what had she, this worn, emaciated outcast to fear!--therefore she thought that it must be owing to her heavy slumber of the past night that she was now wide awake. Or owing, perhaps, to her thoughts of him.

"If he were not slain," she pondered now while lying there, her eyes open and staring at the richly painted and moulded ceiling of the vast saloon, "he may be by this time in that land to which he was going. And he will think, must think, that I fled from him the moment he had left his house. Even though I should go on in the transports to the same place wherein he is, and we might meet, he would cast me off, discard me as one who is worthless."

Why had she not spoken on that night, she mused? Why? Why? Had she said but one word, had she but held out some promise that, in time, her love would grow, he would have stayed by her side, would never have left the house. And, thus, there would have been no danger of his being slain, if slain he was; nor could that crawling snake, Desparre, have made his way to the house to which Walter had taken her, nor, having done so, would he have been able to effect any harm.

"Slain! Slain!" she continued, musing, "slain! Yet some voice whispers in my ears that it was not so, that Marion is right. That he is alive. Still, even so, what can that profit me; how help me to put aside my misery and despair? Alive! he would deem himself lawfully free of me by my desertion, free to become another woman's lover--or husband--free to whisper the words in her ears that he whispered once in mine, to see his and her children grow up at his knee."

Excitedly she sprang from the couch and paced the floor, her thoughts beyond endurance.

"No! no no!" she gasped again and again. A dozen times she cried out, "No," in her despair. "Not that, not that! I loved you, Walter," she murmured, "I loved you. If never before, then, at least, on the morning when you risked everything in the world to obtain my freedom from that fiend incarnate, when you led me through the garden, stood at the altar by my side, made me your wife. Then, then, I loved you, worshipped you. I cannot bear these thoughts, I cannot bear to deem you another's. Oh, Walter! Walter!"

Soon, however, she became more calm; she recalled what she was now. An outcast, a woman condemned to deportation; in truth, a convict, and none the less so because, through one strange and awful circumstance, it was almost certain that the exile to which she had been doomed would never now be borne by her or her companion.

She became sufficiently calm now to speculate, while she paced the floor of the vast room, as to what her and Marion's future would be if spent together as both hoped; as to what poverty and struggles both would have to contend with. Of how, too, they would grow older and older together, until at last the parting came--that awful moment when, of two who love each other dearly, one has to go while leaving the other behind, stricken and prostrate.

But, suddenly, these meditations were broken in upon; to them succeeded a more bodily fear, a terror of some tangible danger near at hand.

She had heard a grating sound in the passage beneath, a sound that she recognised at once in the hollow emptiness of the house to be that of a large key turning in a lock; she heard next the hall door pushed opened and a man's step below. What was it? Who could be coming? Perhaps the *galérien* of the night before who had escorted them to this place, the man whose familiarities had been sternly repressed by Marion. If so, what could he want? How could he have become possessed of the key which Marion had at the last moment said should never quit her possession until she returned in the evening? Yet, as she heard the man's footfall below, while recognising as she did so that he was entering each of the rooms on the lower floor one after the other, she was able to calm her trepidation by reflecting that, whatever purpose he might be there for, it could scarcely bode harm to her. What had she--a beggar, clad in the rags of the galleys, with no remnants of beauty, scarcely any of womanhood, left in her sunbaked, emaciated face--to fear? What had she to tempt any man with, even if he were the most ferocious and hardened of his sex. Then she heard the steps of the intruder coming up the stairs. To this floor on which she was! Well, she feared nothing; she would go forth and encounter him, whosoever he might be, instead of locking herself in the saloon as a moment ago she had thought of doing.

He might be bringing some message from Marion, some news she ought to know. But, suddenly, her heart almost stopped beating. What if her one friend in all the wide world, her one support and comfort, should be stricken already! She must go forth on to the landing and learn what the entry of this man into the house might portend. Reaching the head of the stairs, looking down at him who was ascending, she knew that, at least, this was no knavish galley-slave who mounted slowly towards where she was; no thief, nor, did it seem likely, anyone who had been sent with a message to her from Marion. More like, she thought, it was the owner of this great, luxurious house. She could not see the man's face as he ascended, since it was hidden by his three-cornered hat, yet she observed that the rich mourning he wore--doubtless for some of his family who had fallen victims to the pest--was, although smirched and travel-stained, of the best. The black satin coat, the lace of his cravat and ruffles, the costly sword, were those of one such as the master of this house might be.

Then the man looked up, and their eyes met.

And, even as they did so, even as she clasped her breast with both her hands, drawing back with a gasp, she knew, she understood, that her husband had not recognised her! If, in her aching heart, there had ever arisen any doubt of the ravages which her sufferings and tribulation had caused to her beauty, that doubt was dispelled now; it existed no longer. She was so changed that her own husband did not know her!

But still he came on, step by step, up those stairs. On and up until they stood face to face.

Then he knew her!

And, with a loud cry, he strode forward. A moment later his arms were around her, her head was upon his breast.

"My wife! My wife!" he cried, "ah, my wife! Thank God, I have found you."

* * * * *

Whatever havoc those sufferings and tribulations might have wrought upon Laure no sign was given by her husband that he perceived them. Instead, as hour after hour went by and still she lay in his arms sobbing in her happiness, she learnt that to him she was as beautiful as in the first hour he had cast his eyes upon her; that, always, even though never more the fair rose and white should return to her complexion, nor the mark left by the hateful carcan become effaced, she would be to him the one woman in all the world. That he had observed that devilish mark, and understood the story it told, she perceived at once, as again and again he kissed the ring upon her neck which the iron had stamped in, while murmuring words of love and deep affection as he did so. But he heeded it no more than he did the sunburn upon her face and throat and breast, the hollowness of her eyes or the emaciation of her frame. All, all of her beauty would come back amidst the pine-scented breezes and mountain air of the land to which he would bear her, while she was surrounded, as she should be, by everything that wealth and happiness could offer.

Wherefore she could only murmur again and again:

"What I feared most of all was that you deemed me heartless and intriguing, that I had used you only as a means to my own end. Walter, my love, my husband, I feared that I was banished from your heart. I feared it even as I recognised that I had loved you from the first."

"That will be," he whispered back, "only when my heart has ceased to beat."

So the day drew on and the sun had left the front of the house; over the street, up which none came, and in which no footfall was heard--over which, indeed, there reigned a silence as of death--the shadows of the evening began to creep, ere they had told each other all. Laure had narrated Desparre's visit to the Rue de la Dauphine, far away in northern Paris, as well as everything that had befallen her since she was cast into prison as a would-be murderess. Walter, too, had told the tale of his misery when he returned to his apartments, his discovery of what had been her fate, his instant departure for this stricken city, and the encounter with Desparre.

"He here!" she had exclaimed, almost affrighted at the thought, in spite of her husband's statement that, even though Desparre should not be struck for death, he still was harmless for further injury, "what could have brought him here? What!"

That Walter could not answer this question is certain; but that he could divine how, in some way, Desparre must have learnt who and what the woman was whom he had condemned to such fiendish punishment, he felt assured. But he had vowed to himself that this fact should never be made known to Laure; she must never learn that it was from her own father's hand that the blow had fallen which consigned her to the horrors of the past months. There was only one man who, if he were still alive, could tell her now--since he was resolved that Desparre should never again stand in her presence, nor be face to face with her--only one, Vandecque. But it was not likely that Laure and he would ever meet again. Had not the beggar, the miserable, shrinking wretch whom he had saved from a beating in Paris, and who had informed him of all, told him, too, that Desparre had made sure of Vandecque and had silenced him for ever? No more was it likely that she and that scoundrel would meet again than that she and Desparre would do so.

In the now swift-coming twilight of the summer evening they heard the voices of women in the street below, and he, looking out inquiringly, learned that they proceeded from her fellow-sufferers who were returning to this house for the night. It was the time at which Marion had told her that, according to what the man who had brought them to this house had said, they would be released from their duties in the streets.

Of Marion herself they had long since spoken when Walter came to that part of his narrative wherein he narrated how he had found Laure out, and had been able to reach her through this woman's assistance; while his wife had described the other as one who had been her saviour and

guardian, one to whom she owed the fact that she was still alive.

And again they spoke of her, wondering how soon it would be ere she returned.

"She is an angel of goodness," Laure said, "turbulent as her life has been. Oh, Walter, Walter, I can never part from her. She must stay with me always."

"Always," he answered; "always. If her life can be made happy, I will make it so out of my deep gratitude for all that she has done for you. If she will come with us her happiness shall be for ever assured."

"You will tell her so when she comes back to me? Now, at once, when next she enters this room? You will not let her think, Walter--not for one moment--that--that my new-found happiness shall bring misery in its train for her?"

"At once I will tell her."

As he spoke, the women were coming up the stairs, heavily, dully, gripping the balustrades as they did so; thanking God that, as yet, not one of them seemed to be affected by the horrible contagion they had been amongst. Thanking God, also, that there was another long night of rest before them in which they could sleep soundly.

"Where?" asked Laure, leaving her husband alone in the vast saloon, and going out on the landing as she heard the footsteps of the last woman receding as she mounted to the floor on which the others had slept the night before, "where is Marion? Has she not returned with you all?"

"Nay, I know not," said one, who had also received much help from the strong Southern woman whom they had come to regard as their leader. "I know not. We have all been together, excepting her alone. Is she not back?"

But as she asked the question and before Laure could answer it, another woman who had mounted higher than the other looked over the balustrade rail, and calling down, said:

"She is attending a convict who has been struck; who is, a monk said, doomed. He fell in the Flower Market, writhing. One who was engaged in walling up the doors of the infected houses. I saw her half-an-hour ago."

Then descending a few steps of the stairs, so that now she stood but little above where Laure was, she continued:

"The man wanders in his mind. He told Marion that your husband had come here to seek for you in Marseilles; that he knew him; that he had seen and recognised him."

"My husband has come here!--it is true--and has found me God be praised," while, as she spoke, there was a look of such supreme happiness in her eyes, on her whole face, that the other women could not withdraw their gaze from her. "He has found me. Yet, how can this stricken man, this galley slave, know him?"

"He says he does; and avers that it is so. He says, too, he must see him ere he dies."

Then, because the woman was one who was more righteously sentenced to deportation than most who had toiled in her company from Paris to Marseilles, she having been a thief and a receiver of stolen goods for many years in the Capital, she lowered her voice as she said:

"If he is here, best bid him go see the dying man. He may know of hidden goods, of appropriated treasure securely put away, of wealth easily to be acquired. Tell your husband, if he is in truth his friend, if he has any such a friend----"

"My husband the friend of such as that!" Laure exclaimed. "God forbid! He is an honest man! A gentleman!"

"All our husbands are!" the woman exclaimed with a grimace. "We can all say that! Yet they cannot preserve us from such a fate as this!" and she turned and recommenced the ascent of the stairs.

Relating this to Walter when she returned to the saloon, Laure perceived that the information the woman had given her was surprising to him.

"A dying convict!" he exclaimed, "who knows and recognises me! Impossible. I know none. Yet," he continued, "it may be some man whom I have met in the past. My own countrymen have found their way to the galleys ere now. I will go."

"For God's sake beware of what you do," Laure whispered. "Put yourself in no danger of this infection. Oh! Walter, if-if I lost you now that you have come back to me, my heart would break."

CHAPTER XXX

"IF AFTER EVERY TEMPEST COME SUCH CALMS!"

The darkness of the night was over the city as Walter Clarges went forth; a darkness that was almost weird and unearthly in that gloomy street--far down at the other end of which could be seen the lurid flames of the braziers burning. A weird and ghastly blending of sullen flames, of gloaming and of night, through which no living creature passed and in which one dead woman lay huddled up against the kerb, neglected, unheeded. And, from above, the southern stars looked down from their sapphire vault, they twinkling as clear and white as though the city slumbered peacefully beneath them and all was well with it.

Meditating upon whom the unhappy man might be who had asked for him while adding that he knew him, that he desired to see him ere he died, Walter went on to where the braziers flared; went on, yet with his thoughts also occupied with many other things besides this dying galley slave. He went on with his heart beating with happiness.

He had found her--his life! his soul! the woman of his heart! Found her! Found her alive! Thank God! Now--now--so soon as any vessel could be discovered that would take them away from this stricken spot--no matter though he paid half of his newly-inherited fortune to obtain the use of it--now, they would be happy and always together. He would bear her to England--his peace was made with the Government, henceforth he was a subject of the new dynasty. He had paid that much for the right to retrieve his wife if she should be still alive; there, in England, health should come back to her body, beauty to her face. In the pure, cool breezes of the northern home which had been that of the Westovers for so long, she would gain strength, recover fast. When he entered George's throne-room to personally testify his adherence to a House which, for years, he and his had opposed with all their power, one thing should at least be beyond denial. All should acknowledge that the woman who leant upon his arm was fair enough to excuse a thousand apostacies and that the determination to save the life of one so beautiful as she, and this beautiful one his wife, justified him in what he had done.

The braziers still burned and flared fiercely as he drew near them; through the night air the aromatic odours of pine and thyme, of vinegar and pitch, were diffused: around those braziers the sufferers lay--some dead, some dying.

Asking his way to the Flower Market, and being directed thereto, Walter went on until at last he reached the place; a little open Square surrounded on all sides by tall, grey houses, from the windows of which no light from candle or taper gleamed forth. Like all others in the stricken city these houses were deserted, the inhabitants either having fled or, if remaining, being dead within their own walls.

But there was light in the close, stuffy Square itself. Placed on the lumber of the stalls around the open market were pots and pans of burning disinfectants that cast flickering shadows upon everything near them; upon, too, a little group of persons gathered in the middle of the spot where once the Provence roses and the great luscious-scented lilies of the south, and the crimson fuchsias, had been sold in handfuls by the flower-girls. Now, in their place, there lay a man dying, Not in agony, as many had died who had been stricken by the pest, but, instead calmly, insensibly.

A man old and grizzly; yet, looking, perhaps, older than he actually was; white as marble, his lips grey, and, upon his chin and cheeks, a white rim of unshaven beard of three or four days' growth. By his side stood a monk muttering prayers and heedless as to whether the plague struck him or not; at his other side knelt the dark woman who had directed Walter to where he should find his wife--the woman whom he had thought cold and dead of heart, yet whom he now knew to have been Laure's friend and comforter. She was engaged in moistening the dying man's lips with spirits, and in wiping the dank dews of death from off his face, as Walter drew near.

"God bless you," he said, touching her brown hand with his as he came to her side. "God bless you. She has told me; I know all. God bless you."

Yet, even as he spoke to her, he wondered why she drew her hand hurriedly away from his, and why, in the flicker of the flames around, her dark eyes seemed to cast an almost baleful glance at him.

"My son," the monk said, gazing at the stranger while thinking, perhaps, how good it was to see one so strong and healthy-looking amidst all the surrounding disease. "My son, is it you for whom he waits? But now, ten minutes past, he was sensible and averred he could not die until he saw him for whom he looked. Knowing him to be here, in Marseilles. Is it you?"

"It is I, holy father," Walter answered. "Yet, how should he know me? Let me come nearer and observe him." He passed thereupon to the front of the dying man, so that thus he might regard his face, while heeding however, the monk's injunction not to put his own face too near the other's, and to envelope his nostrils and mouth with a cloth which he handed him. Then, this done--Walter remembering his new-found wife at the moment, and how he must preserve his life for her sake--he bent over a little nearer and gazed at the livid features beneath him.

At first he did not know the man. How should he? The now bristling face had, when he last saw it, been ever scrupulously shaved; upon the head, where now was only close-cropped grey hair, there had been a tye-wig of irreproachable neatness; dark clothes of the best material and cut had been the adornment of this dying man who, to-night, lay prostrate in the hideous garments of the galleys. How should he know him! Hardly might he have known his own father had he met him thus similarly transformed.

Then, suddenly, the man opened his eyes--and he recognised him!

"Merciful God!" he exclaimed. "It is Vandecque."

"Vandecque!" a voice hissed close to his ear, a voice he would scarcely have recognised as that of the southern woman, he had not seen her lips move. "Vandecque! the betrayer of Laure! Heaven destroy him!" while, as she spoke, her hand stole to her breast, opening her dress as it did so.

"Be still," he said sternly; "be still. What! Is not the heaven you have invoked about to punish him? Let go whatever your hand holds."

Yet, as he spoke, he recognised how great and strong had been this woman's love for Laure when it could prompt her even now, at the man's last hour, to desire to slay him.

Then Vandecque began to mutter; his eyes being fixed upon Walter with the dull and filmy look which the dying ever have.

"I," he whispered, "I--loved her. The little child--that--that--wound itself around my heart. She had been--wronged--by those of his--that devil's own order. I would have made her prosperous--rich--one of that order. A patrician instead of an outcast. I loved her. You thwarted me. Therefore I helped him--to--slay you, as I thought."

He closed his eyes now and those around him thought that he was gone, while the monk began the prayers for the dying. Yet, in a moment, he spoke again.

"Save her--save--her. If she still lives."

"She lives," Walter said. "She is saved. By the woman at your side."

"All--is--therefore--well." Vandecque gasped. "All--all. And--listen--listen. You spared that monster--Desparre--last night. Fool! Yet--I was there to--finish the work."

"To finish the work! You! You slew him! He is dead!"

"Ay. Dead! Dead! And--" writhing as he spoke and with his agony upon him, his last moment at hand. His lips were white now, not grey; his eyelids were but two slits through which the glazed eyes peered. "Dead--and *buried!*" Then the monk's voice alone uprose, reciting the prayers for a passing soul.

* * * * *

The Mediterranean sparkling beneath the warm sun of the early autumn sky; the blue waves lapping gently the sides of a French bilander which, with all sail set on both her masts, is running swiftly before a northern breeze past Cape de Gata towards Gibraltar. A northern breeze with a touch of the west in it, that comes cool and fresh from off the Sierra Nevada mountains and brings life and health and strength in its breath. Towards Gibraltar the vessel goes on, its course to be set later due north for the tumbling Bay, and then, at last, to England--to happiness and content.

To obtain that bilander, to find seamen fit to work it, and to assure the owner of his payment when once she should reach our shores (a payment of a thousand louis d'ors being made for the voyage!) had been no easy task for Walter Clarges, who now took his title openly; yet, at last, it had been done. In Marseilles it was impossible; there was no sailor to be discovered fit and strong enough to do so much as to haul upon a halliard, while, in Toulon it was no better; but, at last, at Istres in the mouth of the Rhone, to which they proceeded in an open boat, the ship had been found and their escape from all the tainted neighbourhood around assured. They were free! Free of the poisoned South, free at last.

And now Lord Westover walked the deck of the rolling, pitching craft, saying a word here and

there to the rough sailor from Aude, who was the master; another, now and again, to the dark-eyed woman who sat by the taffrail beneath the swing of the after-sheet; and going next to a cabin upon the deck and peering in through the window while speaking to his wife within.

At first it had been hard to persuade that dark-eyed woman to accompany them, to induce her to throw in her lot with theirs and bid farewell to the land in which she had sinned and suffered. For she was, indeed, almost distraught at the thought that never more would she struggle and toil for the woman she had come to love so dearly; that, henceforth, no sacrifice on her part was needed.

"Go back to her," she said to Walter after Vandecque had breathed his last, while, since there was nothing else that could be done in a place so encumbered with the dead as Marseilles was, they had left the dead man lying where he died. "Go back to her. She needs you now. Not me. Return to her," and, as she spoke, she cast herself down near the market place as though about to sleep there.

"And you--Marion?" Walter said softly. "You! What of you? You will come with me?"

"She wants me no longer. She has you."

"She needs you ever. You must never part. What shall become of her without you; what will your life be in the future if you have no longer her to tend and care for?"

"My life! My life!" she cried with an upward glance at him from where she had thrown herself down. "What matters that! Every wreck is broken to pieces at last. So shall I be."

Yet still he pleaded, repeating all that Laure had that day said of her and telling of how she had declared that she could never go away unless Marion came too; and, finally, he won. He won so far that, at last, she consented to return to Laure, even though it were but to say farewell to her and then go forth into oblivion for ever.

Yet now she was in the bilander with them, on her way to England to pass the rest of her life in peace. How could she have refused--how!--when the girl wept tears of joy in her arms and murmured that, since she had her husband and Marion by her side, she asked for nothing else? And so the ship went on and on, bearing those in her to freedom and to peace. To a peace and contentment that Laure had never dreamed could come to her again; to a happiness which once Walter Clarges had never dared to hope should at last be his.

FOOTNOTES

[Footnote 1](#): This street served as the Bourse of the period.

[Footnote 2](#): "Archers" were servants of the Provost Marshals and of a position between gendarmes and policemen, but in the service of the prisons. "Exempts" were a kind of Sheriff's officer.

[Footnote 3](#): A slang name for the scaffold.

[Footnote 4](#): The total number of deaths in Provence was finally estimated to be 148,000. Aix and Toulon suffered the worst after Marseilles.

THE END

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