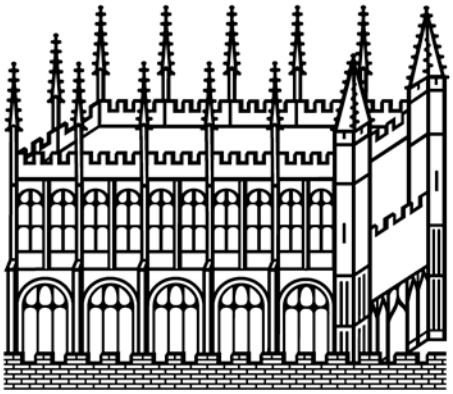

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THE THREE RED KNIGHTS;

OR,

THE BROTHERS' VENGEANCE.

CHAPTER I.

"THE HOUR HAS COME."

NINE o'clock on an October morning, in the year 1824. All was bustle at the posting office of Frankfort-on-the-Main. The noise and movement were incessant. It was the opening hour, as the postilions well proclaimed with the cheery, piercing notes of their horns. Every one had letters to receive, places to retain, or fresh relays of horses to order. The travellers'-room was all alive with an ever-changing throng, speaking many languages and wearing the garbs of various countries. Of these but two personages claim the reader's notice. They were separated by the entire length of the room.

The first of the two travellers had bespoken a seat in the coach to Heidelberg. He wore a scarlet cloak, cut after the style of those worn by German students, and his broad-brimmed felt hat, resembling the head-dress of the Cavaliers, completely hid his forehead and his eyes. All that could be seen of his face indicated youth and an almost feminine beauty. His black hair fell in rich and luxuriant curls on his shoulders.

The other traveller was waiting his turn at the pay-place for saddle-horses. He was aged about forty. His features had lost all the joyous light of youth. The face seemed that of a man formerly proud and happy; but gloom was now its sole characteristic. Lost in a reverie, he allowed others to slip before him. He drew from his bosom a locket, suspended from his neck by a gold chain, and looked with devotion at the portrait of a fair, sweet face, whose tender blue eyes seemed to smile at him. The face was framed as with a halo by a blonde curl. The eyes of the traveller grew dim. Then he appeared suddenly to arouse himself, and hastily restored the locket to his bosom.

"I want to go to the Castle of Bluthaupt," said he to the clerk, who was now free.

"Between Obernburg and Esselbach, there's no public vehicle," replied the latter, "and the posting road does not go farther than Obernburg."

"How many leagues?"

"Eight German miles: two across the fields. Will you have a guide?"

The stranger asked the price. It was some florins extra. He reflected an instant, then said, "I will go alone."

The stranger paid, and moved towards the door. At the same moment the young man in the scarlet cloak also left the travellers' room. They crossed the court. A few paces divided them. Still, neither noticed the other: both were too pre-occupied to observe passers-by. As they simultaneously gained the street, a courier on horseback arrived at a gallop before the posting office. He wore the Bluthaupt livery—red and black. The effort which he made to stop short his horse, whose breast almost grazed the elder of the two travellers, drew his attention towards the latter, although his eyes had been fixed on the young man in the scarlet cloak.

An expression of astonishment passed over the courier's face, red from the rapidity of his journey. It was plain that the two travellers were equally well known to him. He hesitated a moment. When he at length turned, the elder one was mounting the steep street to the right, while the other was proceeding in the opposite direction.

"I will never touch another drop of beer," murmured the courier, "if that fine figure does not belong to one of the three sons of Bluthaupt! As for the other, his hair was blacker five years ago, when he married the Countess Helen; but still he must be the Viscount d'Audemer!" Acting on his thought, the courier nimbly leapt on to the pavement, threw the bridle to an ostler, and hastened in pursuit. Here the same hesitation seized him. Which should he follow? Debating this question, he lost a few more precious moments.

The courier, whose named was Fritz, ultimately ran up the Zeil in the direction taken by the traveller whom he thought to be the Viscount d'Audemer. In vain! The traveller was out of sight. The same ill-luck attended the courier's search for the other, in the scarlet cloak. So Fritz consoled himself with the reflection, "After all, it may not have been one of Count Ulrich's sons. And if it had been, Count Gunther and his steward don't care for visitors. Besides, Master Zachæus charged me with a message; and my most pressing duty is to deliver it."

Proceeding on his way to the new quarter of the town, Fritz soon arrived at his first destination. He stopped at the door of a bright, charming little mansion. Of the servant who answered his knock, Fritz asked to see "Monsieur the Chevalier de Regnault."

He was conducted to a perfumed boudoir, in which a young man, attired in a silk dressing-gown, had luxuriously resigned himself to the skilful manipulation of a Frankfort hairdresser. The young man was about thirty years of age, small in figure, and with a smiling face, the pleasant expression of which, however, seemed forced. It was, indeed, a look of honeyed craftiness—a face that could be masked at will with studied frankness. Nor was the mask worn in vain. In the eyes of people who could not see beyond the surface, the Chevalier de Regnault might have passed for one of those loyal but frivolous beings ob-

stinately regarded by the foreigner as a chosen type of the French character. "What does the good man want?" he asked without turning his head.

"I come from the Castle of Bluthaupt," answered Fritz.

"Oh, ah! And you have a letter from Zachæus Nesmer?"

"I have no letter," said the courier. "Master Zachæus ordered me to deliver a message to you, but it must be delivered in your hearing only."

The chevalier shrugged his shoulders. "The Germans are as mysterious as the ghosts of their ballads," he muttered. "Come closer, my good fellow, and whisper your great secret in my ear."

The hairdresser, taking the hint, moved to the other end of the room. Fritz advanced, and said in a whisper to the chevalier, "*The hour has come!*"

"Well?" exclaimed Regnault.

"That's all."

The chevalier laughingly replied, "Why this honest fellow brings me an invitation to supper with the same precautions as if there were a crime in the wind. Thanks my good fellow. Here, Germain, give him something to drink before he goes." M. de Regnault resigned his head again to the coiffeur, and the laconic message seemed not to have had the slightest effect on his spirits.

Fritz drank a good draught of Rhine wine; and would willingly have tossed off another glass, but his task was not yet finished. Quitting the new quarter of Frankfort and the delicious gardens which had displaced the old walls, he made for the centre of the city, catching glimpses here and there on the road of the fine quays on each side of the Main. It was at the door of an old house near the town-hall that Fritz now knocked. A servant in blue livery with plenty of silver buttons opened the door. "I wish to see Herr Yanos Georgyi," said Fritz to him.

Following the servant, Fritz found himself in a large paved hall. Two men in armour were engaged in a vigorous bout with sabres. At sight of Fritz one of the combatants lifted his iron mask. He was a man of a commanding figure and military bearing. He wore the red trousers and spurred boots of the Hungarian magyars. He had thrown his embroidered dolman and furred calpack with brilliant red lining on the sofa. He was a man of handsome, but coarse and brutal, appearance.

"I have come, sir," said Fritz, "from Master Zachæus Nesmer, the steward of Count Gunther of Bluthaupt."

The magyar fixed on him a piercing glance. He hastened to the further corner of the hall and beckoned the courier to follow him. "Well, what is your message?" he inquired.

"It is not long," whispered Fritz. "*The hour has come*," he added in a louder tone.

The magyar waited a moment. Then, seeing that Fritz had nothing further to communicate, he replaced his mask and dismissed the courier with the order to the servant, "See this man has something to drink."

Descending the staircase, Fritz heard the clashing of the sabres.

which went clang-clang again as though nothing had interrupted the magyar. The courier drank a second glass of Rhine wine, and set off afresh to complete his mission. He now sought the Jewish quarter of Frankfort. It was difficult to find his way through the narrow streets, thronged with busy Jews, who went their ways, however, with noiseless activity. At his wits' ends to find the place he was bound for, the courier at length asked of a passer-by, "Which is the Judengasse?"

"You are in it," was the reply.

Fritz gave a sigh of relief, and then inquired, "Can you direct me to Moses Geld, the money-lender's?"

"That's his place."

Glad to have found the house, Fritz entered the poor little shop, and asked the old woman inside for her master. She rose without saying a word, and preceded him through a dark passage. There was a room on each side of this corridor. Glancing through the open door of one, the courier's eyes opened with amazement at the luxurious carpet and rich furniture, exceeding in grandeur anything he had ever seen before. Three charming children—a boy and two girls—were seated on silken cushions, laughing as they played. Their childish gaiety now and again drew the attention of a beautiful woman, their mother, from a velvet-bound book she was reading. In equally strong contrast with the miserable outside of the house was the office of Moses Geld himself. It was encumbered with piles of pictures, silken curtains, harps without strings, guns, gilt clocks, poor crockery, and rich porcelain vases.

Moses Geld, mean of appearance, yellow and thin, was the living result of fifty years of sordid greed and usury. A man was standing by his side offering him a gold ring in exchange for a sum of money. "I've already told you that I will only give you eighteen crowns," said the Jew in a dry voice. "Take it or leave it."

"Twenty crowns, my dear sir!" begged the stranger. "I need twenty crowns."

The Jew at this moment heard the approaching footsteps of Fritz. He placed his spectacles on his nose and looked up like a bird of prey. "What do you want?" he asked.

"I come from the Castle of Bluthaupt."

The stranger started at these words. The face of Moses Geld showed evident signs of agitation. "You can go," said the Jew to the stranger, who still held his ring.

"Twenty crowns!" was the reply. "But don't let me detain you. I can wait." Fritz tried to see this person's face, but did not succeed.

"You are charged with a message for me?" the Jew said, in a low, quick voice, to the courier.

"Yes; a message from Zachæus Nesmer, steward of Bluthaupt." The grey eyes of Moses Geld was fixed on him with a strange look of earnestness. "Master Zachæus," continued Fritz, "bade me repeat to you these words—*The hour has come.*"

The Jew, far from hearing this message with the stolidity shown by M. de Regnault and the magyar Yanos, involuntarily betrayed his emotion. His hands trembled. His mind was plainly greatly per-

turbed. "The hour has come!" he repeated mechanically; "The hour has come!" Then he mentally added to himself, as he lowered his eyes, "I am a poor man, and I have children. Heaven, who has given them to me, will not punish me for wishing to make them powerful on the earth." Then recollecting Fritz, the Jew said, "It is all right."

"I am rather dry," was the ready answer of the courier, who longed for a third draught of Rhine wine.

"Rebecca!" called the Jew to his old servant, "Give this man some water."

Fritz turned away in disgust. Moses Geld then quickly rose. He had forgotten the stranger, who had again drawn near him, and who again requested of the Jew twenty crowns in exchange for the ring.

Moses Geld opened a drawer without another word, and counted out the sum. The stranger gave him the ring. Looking straight in the usurer's face, he uttered with emphasis these parting words, "We shall very probably meet again, worthy Herr Geld, at the Castle of Bluthaupt."

The Jew, alone now, pressed his hands to his wrinkled forehead. "Good heaven!" he murmured; "did that man hear and divine the secret? Alas! what I am about to do is only for my poor children." He entered the splendidly-furnished apartment of which Fritz had caught a glimpse. "Ruth," he said to his lovely wife, "I am going. I am only waiting for the two friends who accompany me to the Christian's whose patrimony I have bought. I shall be absent two days, no doubt—perhaps more."

"May heaven be with you, Moses!" replied the young wife, uplifting her sweet face, on which the Jew pressed his withered lips.

His three children gathered smilingly round him to be caressed. He pressed them to his breast, and regarded them with fond delight. "My little Sarah," he murmured, "how pretty you will be! Esther, my sweet hope! Abel, my darling son! It is for you. It is for you!"

CHAPTER II.

"HE MUST DIE."

A FEW minutes later the clatter of horses' hoofs resounded through the street. Three horsemen stopped before the Jew's door. They were the Chevalier de Regnault, Yanos Georgyi, and a groom, holding the horse destined for the Jew.

"Mount!" exclaimed M. de Regnault. "Make haste, friend Geld; we have a long journey before us; and I fancy I saw just now the figure of one I shouldn't care to meet a second time."

They traversed the Jewish quarter at a trot. More than one Judith, more than one Rachel, cast a furtive glance at the fine figure of the Hungarian, whose bold bearing was not without attraction to feminine eyes. M. de Regnault looked anxiously right and left at first. When

the Judengasse had been left well behind the chevalier regained his composure, and his lively conversation did honour even to French gaiety. But all at once he became pale as death. A projected pleasantry froze on his lips. They were at the corner of a street near the old ramparts. A man on horseback—French from his garb—was in the act of crossing so near them that his mount nearly came into collision with the magyar's. The cavalier went on his way without turning. Regnault reigned in his steed abruptly. His features were strangely discomposed. His forehead was damp with the dew of fear. "Did he see me?" stammered he, without daring to raise his eyelids.

The magyar regarded him with an air of astonishment. The Jew trembled, and his mouth opened with amazement. "He did not see you," at length said Yanos.

M. de Regnault drew a long breath, and raised his eyes. He threw a quick look in the direction of the man whose appearance had stunned him. The stranger was the same we saw earlier at the posting office—the one named by Fritz the Viscount d'Audemer—the one of whom the Jew bought the ring.

"You know that man?" demanded the magyar of Regnault.

"We must use our spurs, gentlemen," was the reply. "If he takes the posting route, the cross-road will do for us." Regnault pushed on his horse, and added, endeavouring to hide his face with the collar of his cloak, "I might have expected it. Sooner or later, he was bound to come. Now he has come, it must be a duel to the death. Gentlemen," continued Regnault, in a deliberate tone, "that man has in his hands our fortune, and possibly our lives. He is on the road to the Castle of Bluthaupt. I am sure of it. *He must die on the way!*"

The magyar remained cool. The Jew's face blanched. "Good heaven!" he murmured, "it is true, then, that his destination is the Castle of Bluthaupt."

They were now passing the line of gardens on the site of the ancient fortifications. To their right the coach for Heidelberg dashed by. Outside was seated the young man in the scarlet cloak whom we also met before at the posting office. But the Son of Bluthaupt, as Fritz styled him, seemed to be multiplied. Near him were two other young men, likewise in scarlet cloaks. For some minutes the brilliant colour of their cloaks could be distinguished. The blood-red stains in the landscape, as it were—so ominous of impending crimes—soon died out, however, and were lost in the distance.

To the left, the Viscount d'Audemer pursued his lonely route in the direction of Obernburg. The other three horsemen took the narrow cross-road leading straight to the same town, and put their horses at a gallop, with the evident object of outstripping the solitary traveller.

CHAPTER III.

REGNAULT'S TREACHERY.

THE Viscount Raymond d'Audemer listlessly held the bridle of his horse, and gazed vacantly around him. He thought of two dear ones in France, anxiously awaiting his return home. Discovery of a villain who had stolen all his fortune was one object of the viscount's visit to Germany. The other reason was the clearing up of the mystery surrounding the death of Count Ulrich de Bluthaupt, his wife's father.

The latter was a dark history. It was a poniard that gave Count Ulrich his mortal blow. The names of the murderers had reached the ears of the Viscount d'Audemer. But the murderers were under the secret but powerful protection of certain eminent personages—so it was supposed. They were six in number. Three are already known to us : Yanos Georgyi the Hungarian, Regnault the Frenchman, and Moses Geld the German usurer. The others were Zachæus Nesmer (steward to Count Bunther of Bluthaupt, the elder brother of the unfortunate Count Ulrich), Fabricius Van Praet, a Dutch physician, and the Portuguese Dr. José Mira. No one had ventured to disturb them, although Count Ulrich had plenty of friends.

His three sons, who had reached manhood, doubtless charged themselves with the duty of vengeance. But they themselves were compromised in the conspiracies of the *Landsmannschaften*. They had even been proscribed for complicity in the plots of this secret society. Their voices, therefore, could not be heard in the courts of justice.

Their father, one of the most ardent enemies of royalty, had worthy successors in them. Young though they were, people regarded them as chiefs of the University League. They were twenty years of age—all three. Their birth was illegitimate. During the lifetime of their father they lived at Rothe Castle, on the banks of the Rhine, the other side of Heidelberg. Since the assassination of Count Ulrich they had led a wandering life in Germany, which they had traversed in the endeavour—fruitless hitherto—of revenging themselves on the murderers of their father. When their liberty was menaced they sought refuge in France, where they ever found a loving host and hostess in the Viscount d'Audemer and his wife, their sister and brother-in-law.

In the Parisian mansion of the Viscount d'Audemer the three young men forgot for awhile the political task imposed upon them by their father. Still, one thought often filled them with gloom—the fate of their poor sister Margaret was a constant source of anxiety. By means of a special dispensation from the Pope their second sister had been married to her uncle, the old Count Gunther. Margaret was a sweet and lovely girl, incapable of resisting the will of her father. She may very likely have already felt that first delicious throb of love which disturbs the hearts of maidens. May be, among the visitors to the noble Castle de Rothe there had been one at sight of whom the

warm blood had flushed her fair cheeks and her eyelids had timidly drooped over her pure blue eyes. Nevertheless, duty to her father brought words of obedience to her lips, and she consented to become the wife of the old count.

Margaret embraced her three brothers, in tears, and then departed. The heavy gate of Bluthaupt Castle closed after her with a dread clang, separating her for ever from those she loved most; the count forbidding the visits of her three brothers, whom he refused to recognise by reason of the stain on their birth. Yet at this very moment the old count was in dire need—if he only knew it—of protectors as strong and valiant as the three young men. Were not Regnault and his comrades in crime hastening to do for him what they had done for Count Ulrich?

This Regnault had become acquainted with the Viscount d'Audemer in Paris, before the viscount's marriage. He passed in society for a gentleman. Where he came from was not known exactly, though he often spoke of his noble origin. He had some connections in Germany. This circumstance brought him into contact with the Viscount d'Audemer, who received from his hands the annuity which Count Ulrich sent him as the dowry of his daughter. M. de Regnault acquitted himself of this duty with a genial willingness and a regularity beyond all praise. He seemed all devotion to the viscount's interests, wherefore the latter soon made a firm friend of him. M. de Regnault was not the man to remain long without profiting from this token of confidence. He obtained loans from the viscount, and at the end of some months the unsuspecting Audemer had intrusted to his care a sum which composed all his private means.

Then came the news of Count Ulrich's sudden death. Of Regnault's complicity in the murder the viscount at first had not the slightest suspicion. So great was his confidence in him, indeed, that he charged Regnault, who was in Germany, with the sale of his share in the succession, and left it to him to place the sum realised to his credit. Regnault wrote back that he had acted upon the viscount's instructions, and that the money resulting from the sale had been deposited with a rich banker at Frankfort, with whom he advised him to let it remain. Returning to Paris, Regnault led a life of pleasure. His presence would have assured the viscount of his honesty had he needed any assurance.

The Viscount d'Audemer deemed himself rich. He was happy in the joys of home. His wife, true as she was beautiful, loved him with an unalterable devotion. His little son Julien, blonde and beautiful as his mother, grew every day more winning. The viscount had all a husband and a father could wish. One morning a poor woman, whose worn dress revealed her misery, called upon him. She remained a long time with him in his study.

The same day three travellers from Germany—three fine young fellows, wearing scarlet cloaks—arrived, and were welcomed by the viscount as though they were his sons. The poor woman who had the interview with him that morning had many times pronounced the name of Regnault. The same name also fell many times from the lips

of the three young travellers. When the Chevalier de Regnault then called to pay his usual daily visit, the Viscount d'Audemer received him with a cold and severe demeanour.

That morning had apprised him of the present and the past of the audacious adventurer who had betrayed his confidence. The noble family of the Chevalier de Regnault kept a shop in the Temple market at Paris. James Regnault, who had borne a bad name from infancy in that perpetual fair, deserted his paternal roof one fine day, carrying with him all the savings of his parents. His father, old and feeble, died before he could recover from the loss of the sum he had counted upon for support in his last days ; and since that time his mother and brothers and sisters had lived as they best could in the misery into which he had plunged them.

It was the widow Regnault who had that morning revealed her son's baseness to the viscount. As for the three travellers—Otto, Albert, and Goetz, the sons of Count Ulrich—they told him what they had learnt of the murder of their father. They could even name the assassins ; Regnault was one of them. The man whom the viscount had called friend was at once a robber, a police spy, a murderer, and almost a parricide !

The viscount, overwhelmed with indignation, acted on the spur of the moment. Regnault was ignominiously expelled—he did not delay his flight, for he feared something worse. When the Viscount d'Audemer would have arrested him he had left Paris—no one knew whither he had fled.

In two days the viscount found himself penniless. Regnault had despoiled him of all. The future, so radiant for him just now, seemed darkened with a veil of mourning. It added to his bitterness when, one day, a tender flush suffused his wife's brow during the first morning kiss. With drooping eyes, but with a sweet smile on her lips, she whispered a few broken words. What joy a few months ago, but what pain to-day, at this unexpected announcement ! Helen was again about to become a mother. Raymond pressed her to his heart and tried to answer with a smile.

The next day he received intelligence from Germany announcing the presence of Regnault in the environs of Frankfort. He had been seen at Bluthaupt Castle with Count Gunther. The Viscount d'Audemer, in fond solicitude for the health of his wife, had kept from her the whole story of Regnault's perfidy and their consequent ruin. Giving as a reason for his absence the necessity of looking after Count Ulrich's estate, the viscount at once started for Germany. He arrived at Frankfort in the morning, and lost no time in setting out for Bluthaupt, where he counted upon Margaret giving him all the assistance in her power. To find Regnault and to constrain him to a restitution of his moneys—such was his first duty.

CHAPTER IV.

THE "HŒLLE" OF BLUTHAUPT.

REGNAULT, Moses, and the magyar arrived first at Obernburg. They changed horses there. Darkness began to fall as they quitted the town. Bluthaupt Castle rises a league from the badly-kept road they were now following. As they trotted along Regnault related to his comrades the preceding history—that is, as much of his villany as he chose to reveal.

"Who could have told the viscount?" asked the magyar.

"I've never seen the 'three sons of Bluthaupt,'" replied Regnault; "but I would wager they were there that day with M. d'Audemer."

"But how could they have known?"

"People say they know many things. What is certain is that the viscount pronounced all our names, one after another."

The Jew muttered a pitiful plaint. The magyar gave the pommel of his saddle a violent blow, as if to emphasise his words.

"We have this Viscount d'Audemer in our hands. But the others, confound it! how can we get at them?"

They now left the roadway, and entered on a steep path leading straight to the castle. It was a wild night. As they drew near their destination the moon glided from under the clouds, violently rent asunder by the storm.

"There's Bluthaupt!" exclaimed Regnault, pointing to the peak of the height before them. "The viscount will soon be here. Let us decide at once!"

They had gained a spot as savage as the deed contemplated by Regnault. It was crossed here and there by thickets of young oaks and stunted pines. Fifty paces from them there commenced a sombre curtain of tall larch trees, which added to the sinister aspect of the scene. Regnault stopped his horse short. "The Hœlle is at the end!" he muttered, pointing to the avenue.

"I don't understand you," blurted out the magyar. "A man is expected. His presence means danger to us. It is night. I am armed. What more do you want?"

Regnault shrugged his shoulders. "Pistols are but babbling friends," he answered. "I tell you the Hœlle is at the bottom of that avenue!"

The Jew at this juncture gave utterance to a stifled cry. "Look!" said he, pointing towards the avenue.

Regnault and Yanos quickly turned in the direction indicated. They fancied they saw something moving between the pines. It was the fancy of a moment. The moon, now shining and now veiled, changed the shadows each instant, and gave to the still face of nature a kind of fantastic life.

"Good luck!" said the magyar to Regnault, with a certain disdain. "Every one to his own mode of fighting! But I don't care for yours!"

Regnault, left alone, waited stiff and motionless in his saddle. The night, very dark at this moment, hid the mortal paleness of his face, and the nervous trembling which inwardly agitated him. He was cold with fear; but there are some natures which fear and yet dare.

. . . . . .

Night had overtaken the Viscount d'Audemer half a mile from the castle. He followed the beaten track without hesitation. He rode at a trot, though ignorant whether the route he was pursuing was short or long. At length he stopped at a spot where the path branched off in two directions—resembling the letter Y—one leading to the castle, the other to the Hœlle. The viscount appeared doubtful which route to take. Regnault, who had foreseen this, advanced behind him.

"The road to Bluthaupt Castle, if you please, monsieur?" exclaimed the viscount.

"I am going that way, meinherr," replied Regnault, imitating, naturally enough, the German accent. "Turn to the right, and keep straight on!"

The viscount thanked him, and pressed on, without the slightest suspicion, towards the Hœlle. The Hœlle of Bluthaupt was an enormous hole. It opened in the middle of a plateau, the eastern slope of which denominated the cross road running from Esselbach to Heidelburg. Larch trees projected like a suspended bridge over the mouth of the abyss, the avenue leading to which seemed, particularly at night-time, to be planted for the very purpose of luring unwary travellers to destruction.

Some seconds after gaining the plateau, the viscount's horse came to a sudden stop, his legs stiffening with fear. If his rider had been on foot, all would have been over for him ere this; but the instinct of animals goes even further than the prudence of man. The moon, concealed by a thick cloud, left the chasm in complete darkness. The viscount endeavoured to pierce the veil of night. In vain!

"What is the matter?" asked Regnault, in the calmest voice the trepidation of guilt would allow him to command.

M. d'Audemer answered by spurring on his horse afresh; but the horse would not budge. Regnault was about to fly. But first, as a last effort, he seized his whip by the thong and brought the handle down with great force on the horse's flank. The animal sprang forward. The brambles opened. The dry leaves harshly crackled as the branches sprang back.

A great cry rose from the depths of the Hœlle, and with it the noise of a heavy fall of an inert mass at the bottom of the abyss. Echoing, as it were, the cry of agony from the unfortunate viscount, there came a cry of horror from behind the sombre larches.

Regnault sought safety in flight. The jerk he gave the bridle to turn his horse caused the raised collar of his cloak to fall down. The moon darted at this moment from her prison of clouds. The gaping mouth of the Hœlle was revealed, and the white visage of the murderer could be seen as distinctly as by daylight. Regnault, shrinking from the light, raised the collar of his cloak again to hide his

face; but two eyes were fixed on him. Fritz, the courier, moved from behind a tree, and recognised the murderer as he galloped off at full speed.

The courier softly advanced to the verge of the precipice. He knelt on the grass, and listened for the slightest cry that might reach him. No sound rose from the Hœlle. He only heard the mournful soughing of the wind through the trees, and the heavy thud-thud of the retreating steed, bearing its master, ripe for fresh villany, swiftly to Bluthaupt Castle.

CHAPTER V.

THE CASTLE OF BLUTHAUPT.

THE CHEVALIER DE REGNAULT regained in a few minutes the spot whence Raymond d'Audemer had been ensnared by him to the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. It was with difficulty he drew breath. He rolled in his saddle like a drunken man. Fear—not remorse—troubled him. He still heard that cry of mortal agony, echoed and re-echoed in the darkness. He still saw the flash of those eyes that witnessed his crime the awful moment when the moon rays lit up the sombre mouth of the Hœlle. But the chevalier's courage returned upon reflection. No enemy now barred his way. The field was clear for him. Thus re-assuring himself, the adventurer turned at the cross-road and rode at a smart trot towards the Castle of Bluthaupt.

The grand avenue was soon before him. The Castle of Bluthaupt towered above—a tall, black, mystic mass against the clearing sky. From this point Regnault commanded all the surrounding country, which seemed to lose its veil of darkness, opening to his view wide meadows colouring the valleys a beautiful green, bits of ploughed land on the hill-sides, and forests crowning the heights.

"At least half of all this belongs to that old fool Gunther," thought Regnault, "and, therefore, to us. If there were not so many of us it would be a magnificent estate. But the best dish would be scanty for six hungry diners!" A large black cloud rose from the west and rapidly hid from sight the bright patches of blue in which the stars sparkled. A slight fall of snow began to whiten the trees.

"Six!" repeated Regnault. "When too many wolves surround the prey the wolves eat each other. But the prey first; then we shall see!" He let his whip play lightly on the neck of the horse, which, feeling the falling snow, and thinking, mayhap, of the shelter of the stable, quickened his pace and trotted on with fresh vigour.

"Nothing but fortune and misfortune for horses and men alike!" muttered Regnault. "This good horse, as well as his master, will sup well to-night, while the viscount and his mount sleep in the bed of the Hœlle! Ah! ah! that devil of a viscount knew too much!"

"You were victor in your combat, then, M. Regnault?" exclaimed a voice near him.

The chevalier started in his saddle, for he recognised the rough

accent of the magyar—one of the six hungry wolves round the scanty prey to whom Regnault alluded in his soliloquy just now. He soon recovered himself, and replied, with forced gaiety, "I know how to be never vanquished," Herr Yanos.

"Ah!" answered the magyar, "and may I know your secret?"

"It is to never strike your blow until you are certain of success."

Yanos Georgyi rode up to Regnault and trotted by his side. "Very well," he replied, in a low but firm voice; "but I can tell you, Monsieur de Regnault, that you will never be able to attack me thus." The chevalier, by a gracious gesture, disavowed all intention of making any attempt on his comrade.

They had by this tims arrived at the foot of the castle walls, round which the flakes of snow were whirling. Bluthaupt was a massive stone castle, which had well withstood the siege of time. More than one bullet of the Thirty Years' War, red with rust, was incrusted in its hoary walls. The great bulk of the buildings, nevertheless, remained intact, save a few breaches in the ramparts, made by the hands of men or by the rolling years. This fine castle, then, which had outlived centuries, bravely rose from the extreme summit of the mountain and dominated all the country round. It was an inaccessible eyrie amid the clouds, from which the sovereign eagle could dart at will upon its earthy prey.

Regnault regarded the old castle with a look of supreme disdain. "What an old, tumble-down ruin!" he said. "Luckily, there are enough stones to build a fine mansion with."

Yanos pointed to the highest turret, from which a red light streamed. "The old fool!" said Regnault, shrugging his shoulders with contempt.

Light glistened from only two or three windows of the castle. The whole building seemed silent as the grave. The magyar had to knock many times at the outer gate. At length the swing-doors, grating on their hinges, were flung back, and the two travellers found themselves inside the first courtyard of the castle. It was not the Count of Bluthaupt they asked for, but Zachæus Nesmer, his steward.

. . . . . .

It was about half-past six in the evening. In an ante-room, feebly lit by two lamps, four men were seated in front of a high chimneypiece of black marble. A wood fire flickered fitfully. Leading out of this apartment was a room, the principal object in which was a handsome bed, with closed curtains. The eyes of the four men were frequently directed towards this bed—as frequently as a moan told of the suffering of the fair patient who occupied it.

At the other end of the ante-room a page and a young girl were seated in the deep embrasure of a window. They were engaged in a whispered conversation. The page was about eighteen years of age. His fair hair fell in long curls on each side of his forehead, white as a young girl's. With all this sweetness of appearance there could yet be seen in his face the signs of a firm will. Now and again a piercing light shone from his fine blue eyes, which dropped timidly the next moment. Hans Dorme was his name.

The girl was about sixteen, pretty, naïve, simple, trustful. The charming freshness of her complexion seemed dimmed. She had a frightened look, save when some pleasantry from her companion drew from her a gay laugh, her sweet coral lips opening to display two rows of pearls whiter than snow. But this gaiety soon vanished. Gertrude appeared to be remorseful even at her faint laughter. Her eyes turned towards the bed and beamed with an expression of respectful pity.

The four men, seated in front of the fire, only broke their grave silence by a word spoken in an undertone now and then. One of them rose at intervals and walked stealthily into the next room in order to examine the patient when her cries grew more touching. He mixed the contents of three phials in a silver cup, and passed the potion between the curtains. Then he returned to his seat in the ante-room. Each time he did so Count Gunther of Bluthaupt, seated in the arm-chair of honour, uncovered his white head and bowed his thanks.

CHAPTER VI.

COUNT GUNTHER AND HIS YOUNG WIFE.

COUNT GUNTHER was broken down and feeble in his old age. Extreme weakness of mind and puerile obstinacy were stamped upon his pallid face. Yet his features were not without a certain pride—he retained something of the grand manners instilled into him in his youth. Strange contrast! While the grey head was still carried erect with a certain hauteur, his subdued looks gave expression to timid respect.

He was lord and master of Bluthaupt. His chair was as a throne compared to the seats of his companions. Yet a keen observer could easily have seen that some mysterious slavery held possession of him. There seemed almost to be a submissive deference in the glances he bestowed on those around him. On the mantelpiece, just over his head, stood a gold goblet, marked with the Bluthaupt coat-of-arms. At his feet, in a corner of the hearth, was a small stove, supporting a vessel in which a black liquid was gently boiling.

The man seated next the count was round and fat, and his bright little eyes seemed half closed in slumber. A forest of yellow hair covered his large, projecting forehead. His ruddy double chin rested on a turned-down collar. The rest of his figure was not unlike a huge ball clothed in black. This was Meinherr Fabricius Van Praet, Dutch physician, and the favourite of the old count. Beside him was the tall and lean form of Dr. José Mira, Portuguese by birth, more skilled in his craft than all the physicians of the German Confederation put together. The fourth personage of the group sat face to face with the count on the other side of the hearth. He had one of those smooth -man faces, displaying neither goodness nor malice on the cold sur-

face; that indexed, in short, not the slightest grain of the craft and villany animating his scheming nature. Zachæus Nesmer, steward of Bluthaupt, knew thoroughly well how to look after his own interests, if not his master's, as we shall presently see.

Count Gunther placed the most absolute confidence in Zachæus. To the steward the count surrendered the sole management of his castle and all his lands, just as he had confided to Mira the care of his health, and the fat Van Praet was charged with his dreams of the future. For Count Gunther had two dreams, cherished through a long life, the delight of his soul. The first was a reasonable hope to be found in the heart of every man. But the old age of the count made this desire now appear a chimera of his disordered brain. He hungered after an inheritor of his name. He was the last Bluthaupt; for the three sons of Count Ulrich, whom he would never see, and whom he fervently hated, had no right to the escutcheon of their father.

Natural and lawful enough though his first dream was, the second was a foolish and miserable idea. As with some of his ancestors, so with Count Gunther the morbid studies and brooding of his youth and early manhood developed in him a passion for alchemy. He became an alchemist in the nineteenth century! His laboratory was a chamber in the highest turret of the castle. Of course, he arrived no nearer the secret of making gold than his predecessors possessed with the mania of alchemy had done. Still, he worked and worked. He was entirely occupied in his alembic or his books, his books or his alembic. No more repose! The day's task was continued throughout the night; but the task was never, never achieved.

In default of the gold, which would not come, Count Gunther's labours had another result. The old walls of Bluthaupt had, from time to time, the reputation of being haunted; and this superstition was revived when the strange red light shone of nights from the turret, terrifying the servants who had to pass along the sombre ramparts of the castle. When Margaret, brilliant with youth and freshness, entered the gates for the first time as bride, every one pitied the sweet girl who was going to sleep by the side of a follower of Satan, for as such the alchemist was regarded.

Zachæus Nesmer was even then steward of Bluthaupt. He robbed his master of a good sum every year. But he wished to become wealthy more rapidly. Zachæus perceived the long and frequent visits the count paid to his laboratory. He said to himself, if he could only discover his master's secret there would be a mine of wealth opened to him. One night Zachæus mounted, barefooted, the watch-tower. He looked through the key-hole. He saw the old count leaning over his furnace, regarding with eager eyes the contents of a crucible he was about to empty. Zachæus did not wish to see more. He rubbed his hands with satisfaction as he descended.

Some days later Meinherr Van Praet was introduced to the castle. Van Praet had been a skilful prestidigitateur and aëronaut, but had grown too fat to follow his craft. He had a slight knowledge of the science of physic, but had no trouble in passing for a profound adept

in the credulous eyes of the old count. Shortly after Dr. José Mira was installed in the same manner at Bluthaupt.

Van Praet's special duty was to make gold. The grave José Mira, thanks to his transcendant knowledge of medicine, was to afford Count Gunther the means of perpetuating the name of Bluthaupt. The steward Zachæus aided his two accomplices in leading his master by his weaknesses. Zachæus was by this time on the high road to gain his own fortune besides that of his confederates. But it was not in the steward's power to stop at this point. In addition to the doctor and Van Praet, he had three other associates to make rich. So he had set his mind upon acquiring possession of every farthing of Count Gunther's wealth.

The revenues of the count were considerable. But nothing costs so dear as the desire to change lead into gold, especially with a Meinherr Van Praet as assistant. Zachæus declared to his master that if he followed his researches the domains of Bluthaupt must soon be sold. In announcing the threatened evil he suggested the remedy. He knew a Frankfort Jew, a man of scrupulous probity, who would gladly come to the succour of the count for an honest consideration.

Moses Geld, in his turn, thus gained entrance to the castle. His repeated loans with heavy interest soon heaped up real monetary difficulties for the infatuated alchemist. Then, Zachæus Nesmer, ever anxious for his master's welfare, discovered an excellent way to release him from his embarrassments. The faithful steward proposed the sale of the castle and lands of Bluthaupt for a rent double the sum of the actual revenue. The purchaser was found: Moses Geld could refuse the noble count nothing. Count Gunther, though accustomed to see everything through the eyes of Zachæus, remained at first undecided before he took this extreme step. In his cold fashion he loved Margaret, who obeyed him with an almost filial affection; and he hoped to have a son to inherit his lands as well as his name.

The steward was equal to the occasion. "God forbid," said he, "that I should propose to my gracious master a contract that would injure the noble countess or the future heir of Bluthaupt! The rents would revert to the Countess Margaret in the event—which heaven forbid!—of her becoming a widow. As to the second supposition, it is well understood that that shall form one of the conditions. The birth of a son, which we all hope for, will annul the sale in the sight of the law."

This plausible argument naturally had great weight with the old count. He re-assured himself, moreover, with the thought that his grand work, once accomplished, would make his son richer than all the kings in the universe. He accepted and signed the bill of sale.

From that date Count Gunther deemed himself the luckiest lord in Germany. Zachæus had plenty of gold at his disposition. The great work was progressing finely—so said Van Praet, truth personified. The Portuguese doctor assured him that at last one hope was about to be fulfilled, and he would be a father. The same precious doctor composed a potion which he pretended would prolong the count's life to a hundred years.

Aware that the countess, to their wonderment, bade fair to present the count with a son or daughter, the six associates had some months in which to prepare for whatever event might happen. The time was now at hand! The time had expired. In the words of the message delivered by Fritz to Regnault, the Hungarian, and the Jew—*The hour had come!*

CHAPTER VII.

THE WOLVES AND THEIR PREY.

FROM the bed enshrouded with thick curtains there still escaped the occasional cries of one in deep pain. They were the cries forced from the countess in her agony. By a coincidence which was not the result of chance, Van Praet had promised the old count the definite accomplishment of their great work that same night. The furnaces were lit in the laboratory. The liquid metal bubbled in the crucible. Silence reigned round the hearth, broken only by the touching sobs from the bed and the whispered converse of Hans and Gertrude.

A strange music stole into the ante-room. It was the carillon of Bluthaupt. When the chimes ceased, the old clock struck seven, and the vibrating sound lasted some seconds, so wierdly still and quiet was it. The doctor regarded the enamel face of the ancient clock, which was about to strike the hour in its turn. "Before the hand has made another revolution," he said, "the noble count will have seen the face of his heir."

"Within the same time," added Van Praet, "there will be gold in the crucible."

The visage of the old count was lit up with a sudden expression of joy and pride.

"It will be a happy night for the house of Bluthaupt," joined in Zachæus, whose voice sounded strange even to himself.

"O, happy me! happy me!" cried the count. But how slowly the time passes."

The doctor rose and filled the gold goblet with another dose of the smoking liquid. The count lifted the goblet to his lips. "I seem to drink fresh life into my being," he said, casting a look of gratitude at the Portuguese doctor.

His dry and hollow cheeks flamed for an instant. His eyes were lit up with a momentary flash. Then his face became more livid than before, and all brightness left his eyes. He breathed with difficulty, and pressed both hands against his panting breast. "I wish I could drink for ever," he faintly uttered. "When I cease, my breath stops, and I feel a burning weight against my heart."

The count's head fell heavily on his chest. Van Praet, Zachæus, and Mira furtively exchanged sinister glances.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE STAIN OF BLOOD.

A FRESH groan escaped from the curtains enshrouding the bed, and a woman's sweet voice murmured an appeal to God in a heart-rending accent of suffering. The furrowed brow of the count cleared. He turned his head as if listening for a cry that came not.

The doctor softly walked to the bed-side. The light from the lamps darted obliquely between the curtains as he parted them, illuminating an angelic face, white as the pillow on which her head rested. A few locks of fair silken hair fell like a golden halo round her pale cheeks. Her eyes were half closed, and her white lips parted to give utterance to a timid plaint. The doctor felt her pulse without saying a word, drew the curtains to, and returned to his seat in the ante-room. The old count had fallen back into his helpless state of gloomy apathy.

Hans and Gertrude, to whom no one paid attention, had discontinued their confidences on hearing the cry of the young countess, and had looked towards the bed with extreme pity in their eyes. Again silence was restored in the ante-room. Naught was heard but the movement of the pendulum and the sad whistling of the wind outside. Hans and Gertrude paused yet a while longer, and then resumed their low converse. "I was but a child," said Gertrude, "when the poor countess came to the castle. She never smiled as they say young brides always do. Her sweet eyes were always sad; and when she passed the threshold of that room in which she now lies suffering, it ever seemed to me that a tear trembled on her eyelids."

"Poor dear lady!" exclaimed the page, with sympathy. "How happy she was at Rothe Castle! Her father loved her; her three brothers adored her; and all the cavaliers in the neighbourhood sighed for love of her. I know what would have been best for the honour and happiness of the family," he added, in a yet lower voice. "Her three brave brothers, recognised in their father's will as his legitimate inheritors, would have nobly sustained the honour of his house. But, alas! that could not be; and some people say that it was their own fault. I know I am very young; but I have seen the time when all was gaiety at the fine Castle de Rothe! The noble Count Ulrich was in his prime. Our three young masters had not their equals in all the country round. The two young countesses, Helen and Margaret, fair and lovely both, seemed to bring down blessings upon us all." Hans stopped abruptly. The noise of some one knocking at the gate was heard. The old count raised his eyelids feebly, and gave utterance to a few inarticulate words.

"They're here at last," said Van Praet.

Zachæus Nesmer rose and looked out of one of the embrasures. He saw the gate opened, and a man on horseback enter. "It is only Moses," Zachæus said, resuming his seat. Mira and Van Praet made a gesture of disappointment.

"Always some fresh adventurer arriving!" murmured the page, moving closer to the pretty attendant of the countess. "Ought such men to surround the Count of Bluthaupt? As true as I love you, Gertrude, something ominous and terrible is about to take place in this castle."

The fresh colour left the face of the young girl. "You fill me with fear," she said, "and yet I cannot gainsay you. I cannot tell what dread presentiment makes my heart beat. Night has scarcely begun, and yet I wish it were morning!" Gertrude was silent for a few moments. But she had a woman's weakness and a woman's tongue. Wherefore she soon asked her companion, "Do you believe in the Three Red Knights, Hans?"

"The Three Red Knights?"

"Yes," replied Gertrude, pointing with her plump arm at a dummy in armour, indicating the three red busts on the black field of the Bluthaupt escutcheon. "The Three Red Knights worn on the Bluthaupt armour for a thousand years. The three guardians who watch over the destinies of Bluthaupt. It is impossible, Hans, that you've never heard of them!"

"Well, I must confess that I have heard something about them," smilingly answered the page. "Doesn't their appearance portend some important event? Don't they always come to every marriage, birth, and death in the family?" Hans interrupted himself with a gesture of incredulity. "Why, Gertrude, you superstitious girl," expostulated he; "how can you take any notice of the host of foolish legends connected with Bluthaupt?"

"This one is true," firmly replied Gertrude.

"What! you really believe, then, in the existence of the Three Red Knights?"

"I cannot do otherwise, Hans."

"Why?"

"*I have seen them!*"

The page was laughingly about to rally the young girl for allowing her senses to be tricked by the tradition, but the serious look in her eyes prevented him. Besides, his curiosity was piqued. "*You* have seen them, Gertrude?" he asked, involuntarily dropping his voice.

"Yes."

"When?"

"Just nine months ago to-day. It was a night like this. Only it was colder, for it was in the heart of winter, and the north wind blew the snow heavily against the windows. The Countess Margaret was asleep in bed, as she is now. The doctor's physic had made her ill. Some one knocked at the gate—just as somebody knocked a little while ago. A stranger entered. Not one of the servants knew him. A large black cloak covered him. His face was proud and noble, and his hair fell in ringlets on his shoulders. When she saw him the countess gave a cry—whether of joy or pain I cannot say. The stranger sat at supper at the count's table, and then retired to the apartment assigned to him by Zachæus Nesmer. About midnight I was in vain trying to go to sleep in my little room yonder, when I

thought I heard something moving in the bed-chamber of my mistress, but, of course, attributed the noise simply to her restlessness. You know that little door to the left of the countess's bed, Hans?"

"Yes."

"That door," continued Gertrude, growing paler as she proceeded, "leads into the oratory of the countess. Well, I was just dozing off, when a sudden shock made me spring from my bed. The noise sounded as if a door had been forced open not far from me. I ran to my mistress's chamber, which was only faintly lit by a night-lamp. What do you think I saw? The countess, still under the effects of the potion Dr. Mira had given her, lay with her head thrown back on the pillow, and her beautiful blonde hair scattered in confusion around her pale face. She seemed to sleep profoundly. Between her and me was the stranger who had arrived that night at the castle. His head was bare. His black cloak had fallen on the floor. He rested with one knee on the bed, motionless, as though a thunderbolt had struck him. His eyes seemed fixed with a kind of stupor towards the door of the oratory. My eyes followed his. On my honour, Hans, I am telling the truth. The Three Red Knights stood on the threshold! Each had a long sword, whose blade reflected the vaccillating light from the lamp. Two of the Red Knights were about to rush into the centre of the room; but the third restrained them by an imperious gesture. He seized the sword at once, and advanced towards the stranger.

The stranger at last quitted the position in which he had been surprised by the Three Red Knights. He stepped forward to meet the other. The Red Knight, his eyes on fire with anger, handed a sword to the stranger. The blades clashed, and sparks flew from them, but not a word was spoken. It was terrible to hear the clashing of the cold steel, and to see the fierce determination of the Red Knight. At length he made a rapid thrust, and the stranger fell to the floor, a moan escaping from him. This awakened the countess from her deep sleep, and I vanished."

"And you saw nothing more?" asked the page.

"I don't know how long my fright lasted," continued Gertrude. "When I came to myself two of the Red Knights were seated near the bed of my mistress. The third was kneeling on the spot where the combat took place. He was rubbing the floor with a piece of his cloak, as if trying to efface the blood-stains. The countess could not see him, for some drapery hung between them. The body of the stranger had disappeared. When his task was ended, the third Red Knight went in his turn to the bedside; and I heard vaguely that they were all four conversing together in a low voice—softly and gently, as though they loved each other dearly. I could not catch a word they said. I can only remember seeing the one who had fought with the stranger take up a parchment and tear it into a thousand pieces, after kissing the countess, who was weeping. All this passed before my eyes like a vision. My heavy eyelids closed in sleep at last. When I awoke the dawn was stealing into the chamber. The countess slept with that tranquil smile on her lovely face which makes her resemble an angel.

No one else was in the room ; neither a Red Knight nor the stranger in the black cloak. Each chair was in its proper place. I looked in vain for a single morsel of the parchment I had seen torn into a thousand bits. 'It must have been a dream after all,' I said to myself. But it was not a dream. Look!"

Gertrude softly walked on tiptoe to the bedroom door, the page following. Pointing to the centre of the floor, she said in a trembling voice: "Look! The Red Knight had good cause for rubbing that spot on which the murder was committed. The traces of human blood can never be wiped out!"

Hans, looking in the direction pointed out to him, saw a large black stain, which seemed still damp. An involuntary shiver passed through his frame. Reseated in their secluded corner of the ante-room, Hans asked the young girl, "Did you see the faces of the Three Red Knights, Gertrude?"

"Only one : the noble face of a young man."

"And the next day : what happened at the castle?"

"Search was made everywhere. All the doors of the castle were firmly locked as usual. Yet the stranger had disappeared."

"But how could he have left the castle?"

"No one knew. The events of that memorable night were only wholly known by me, however. The countess herself asked several times what had become of the stranger. Nobody could tell her save me, and a strange fear held me dumb. I should mention," added Gertrude, "that there was an old falconer belonging to the castle, who is dead now, and who recognised the stranger directly he arrived. He told us he was a nobleman living near the Castle de Rothe, Baron Stephen de Rodach, who had formerly sought the hand of my mistress in marriage, but had left the country on the union of the Countess Margaret with Count Gunther."

"Yes," answered the page, "I remember to have often seen Baron de Rodach at Count Ulrich's castle. But it was believed that he died long ago."

CHAPTER IX.

THE KEY AND THE LETTER.

"HALF-PAST seven!" exclaimed the steward. "The Jew's already been here half-an-hour. Are Regnault and Yanos going to fail us at the last moment?"

"If they would only go, some fine day, where I wish them to," grimly replied Van Praet, "it would be a happy release for us." Doctor Mira contented himself with thinking the same as Van Praet had said.

"Regnault's a cunning blade," put in Zachæus Nesmer ; "we shall doubtless see him arrive when the work is finished."

"And the bold Hungarian," said Van Praet, "does not relish any little bit of business in which the sword and pistol are not concerned."

The curtains of the bed in the next room were heard rustling at this moment. The fair patient was suffering from a fresh attack of agonising pain. "Gertrude!" shrieked the poor countess, who thought she was dying, "Gertrude! help! help!" Gertrude tremblingly quitted her seat in the ante-room, and was hastening to the bedside of her mistress. But Doctor Mira stood in her way.

"Gertrude!" again cried out the countess, "have you also abandoned me?" The young girl endeavoured to pass, her eyes wet with tears of compassion and anger.

"You must retire, my dear!" said the Portuguese doctor, in his gravest voice.

"But my mistress calls me."

The doctor led her from the room and appealed to the old count. "This girl, by her foolish persistence," he said, "increases the danger at this critical moment."

"Go back to your seat, miserable girl!" cried the old count. "How dare you resist my doctor? He is master here, understand, and everybody must obey him."

"Gertrude! Gertrude!" again called the countess, in a weaker voice. Gertrude wept, and covered her face with her hands. The name of Gertrude once more came from the curtains, this time like a dying echo.

"Margaret, my darling wife," appealed Count Gunther, "try and keep quiet, for your husband's sake. Gertrude has left. She is dead mayhap. If you will not cry out so, I promise you a ruby ring worth ten thousand florins, my dear countess."

The crisis had passed. The curtains were still. Margaret was calm as death. The old count rubbed his bony hands together and gave a childish laugh. "Are you satisfied, doctor?" he asked.

"One word from the noble count," replied the Portuguese, "suffices to subdue pain itself."

Gertrude, sad and overwhelmed, resumed her seat beside the page, who had followed the movements of the doctor with mute astonishment. "Is this the first time they have forbidden you to approach your mistress?" he whispered to Gertrude.

"The second," answered the trembling girl. "This afternoon the countess called me. I was about to answer the call when that man prevented me."

"Do you know what his motive can be?"

"Yes. This morning he saw the countess slip into my hand a key and a letter. The moment I was leaving the room he tried to pursue me; but I ran more quickly than he."

"What was the message?"

"The countess gave me the key and the letter and charged me to hand them to Klaus, the huntsman, like you, formerly a faithful servant of Count Ulrich. Klaus at once mounted on horseback and started off. He has not yet come back."

Hans turned his eyes towards the three silent men seated near the old count, who had now fallen back into another fit of stupor, the effect of a fresh draught of the potion. "The more I think of it," said

Hans, as if to himself, "the more menacing all this mystery seems."

"What do you fear?" whispered Gertrude.

"I can scarcely tell. But look at Count Gunther. He has the appearance of a dying man. The countess is in the hands of this mysterious doctor; and there are some men as wicked as demons—"

"What do you mean, Hans?" The page rested his head on his hand and did not answer. After a short silence, Gertrude brightened and said, "I think you are mistaken."

"God grant that I am!"

"If any misfortune should threaten us," said Gertrude, "the Three Red Knights will be sure to come."

"They may," he replied, with a smile. At the same time Hans rose and cast a look through the window. There escaped from him a slight cry of surprise, which drew Gertrude to his side. The large court of the castle was white with snow.

The young girl pressed the page's arm with strange agitation. "The court was just like this," she murmured, "the very night I saw the Three Red Knights in the bedroom of the countess." As if in answer to Gertrude, a loud knocking at the gate was heard at this moment.

CHAPTER X.

THE WOLVES' SUPPER.

It was not the Three Red Knights whose rude summons at the gate of Bluthaupt Castle had struck terror into the hearts of Hans and Gertrude. The new arrivals were the Chevalier de Regnault and the Hungarian. While a groom led their horses to the stable, they mounted the steps; passed first through the vestibule of Bluthaupt; then the armoury and the old justice-room—an imposing chamber, adorned with allegorical sculpture, but now given up to the servants of the castle.

The passage of Regnault and the magyar occasioned a slight stir in the ancient hall of justice. The majordomo, butler, huntsmen, grooms, valets, and domestics cast curious glances after the new comers, and indulged in whispered comments as to their business. The women occupied themselves with their looks; some admiring the Frenchman, others the bolder bearing of the magyar.

"Whether they're ugly or handsome," grumbled Johann the groom, "I don't care to see these new faces."

"Birds of prey—that's what they are!" added Hermann. "Each time they come 'tis to announce some new calamity."

The courier, Fritz, just returned from his eventful ride to Frankfort, entered at this moment. Though his clothes were soaked through and through, he did not go near the hearth. His face was as white as the snow which covered his livery. He sat in a corner, and would

not even answer the questions of his wife, pressing as she was. His eyes had a fixed look. The frightful vision of the Hœlle seemed still before him. That despairing cry still rang in his ears.

In a little while the servants appeared, bearing the suppers of Count Gunther and of his steward, who likewise came in with Van Praet. The old count's supper was frugal in the extreme—the repast of an anchorite. Zachæus Nesmer's, on the other hand, was abundant and sumptuous. The smoking viands left behind them odours deliciously savoury—so much so that Van Praet, judging from his dilating nostrils, enjoyed a snack of supper in advance.

"Now, then," cried the steward, "fill your glasses and drink to the health of the coming heir!"

The glasses were filled. Each one seemed to drink, but not a single lip touched the generous liquor.

"And now," said the rotund Van Praet, taking the lean steward's arm, "nothing prevents you from coming to supper. Come!"

Directly they had gone one of the windows was opened, and the contents of every glass were thrown into the court-yard. Superstition possessed the domestics. Not one would drink to the sorcerer's child—imp of the Evil One, as they thought.

. . . . . .

Doctor José Mira was alone absent from the steward's supper-table, his duty keeping him by the bedside of the poor countess. The five other associates in crime were seated round a bountifully laden table, at each end of which rose a pile of plates. A good reserve of bottles and glasses cumbered the floor. Not a single waiter was present, plainly for some very good reason.

Zachæus Nesmer rose and securely fastened the double door of the adjoining chamber. "We are quite private here," he said, resuming his seat. "Be as much at ease, comrades, as if you were a hundred leagues from Bluthaupt!"

"Then let us drink!" cried Regnault. The fat Dutchman pressed the Frenchman's hand under the table, so thoroughly did he agree with his gay suggestion.

The amphitryon Nesmer sat between Moses Geld and Regnault. Van Praet and the valiant magyar were on the opposite side of the table.

"Well, my friends!" airily remarked Regnault, after the soup, "All goes well. Had it not been for the lucky state of the countess, we might have had to wait for years; but now we are forced to finish our work."

"My dear chevalier," replied Van Praet, "your speech is golden; and you're the best fellow I know. But we were beginning to fear you would not be true to your tryst."

"But I am!" exclaimed Regnault. "Your Frankfort merchants are not quite ravishing enough to keep me from a business engagement. I was detained on the way by a little adventure, and a slightly disagreeable one. Some poor devil picked a quarrel with me. You know one is exposed to that." Regnault grew rather pale, but he still smiled.

"You killed him?" inquired Van Praet, "And Herr Yanos was your second?"

"No," interrupted the magyar drily.

"No," also said Regnault. "Herr Yanos had nothing at all to do with it. I'll tell you all about it at dessert. Meantime, to business! What's the news, Master Zachæus?"

"The count is in a very low state," coolly answered the steward, sipping his wine. "Ask Meinheer van Praet. The doctor has led him a fine life these last few days. His famous elixir has done its work admirably well."

"Yes," confessed Van Praet, with an oily laugh, continuing the diabolical irony. "And all the time the crucible has been on the fire up in yonder turret. The grand work is being quietly accomplished; and there will be the deuce to pay if Gunther is not able, before his death, to change all the leads and gutters on the castle into gold." The Jew regarded Van Praet timidly, as though not seeing the raillery of his remarks.

"It is I," resumed Van Praet, with a sudden access of pride in his tone. "It is I who have provided you, dear friends, with the means of bringing our task to a speedy conclusion!"

"And I!" cried the steward.

"And I!" pleaded more humbly Moses Geld, swallowing a deep draught of wine.

"I will not diminish the merits of any of my comrades," said the unctuous Dutchman. "It was you, Zachæus, who first opened the doors to us. I propose your health!" All drank the steward's health with a show of heartiness.

"It was you, Moses Geld," continued Van Praet, "who furnished us with the sinews of war, who provided the twelve thousand florins necessary for the conclusion of the sale. So here's your health!" The Jew's health was drunk with the same honours.

"But it was I," proudly added the oily Dutchman, "who invented those ingenious arrangements by means of which the ten or twelve thousand florins of Moses here sufficed to pay for the hundreds of thousands of francs. You might have continued rifling the strong box, Master Zachæus; you might have gone on lending at two hundred per cent. Moses; but neither of you could have accomplished what I have with my retorts, my crucible, my learned formulas, and all the rest of it!"

"You're a remarkable juggler, Van Praet," broke in Regnault. "Who can doubt that?"

"The ducats of Moses," went on the doctor in his deep, guttural voice; "the scrapings of Zachæus, and the revenues of Bluthaupt all passed through my hands and served to pay the rest of the rent. Comrades, let us drink to my health twice over!" The toast was vociferously drunk.

"To cut it short," exclaimed the magyar, "how much will there be coming to each of us?"

"I have in my pocket," replied the steward, "the detailed statement of all belonging to Rothe and Bluthaupt, which served as the basis for

the contract of sale. I have divided the whole into six portions as equally as possible. We can draw them by lots."

"Let me see the account," said Regnault.

Zachæus drew a piece of parchment from his pocket and unfolded it on the table. It at once became the centre of interest to his companions, who all rose together and greedily scanned the figures.

The magyar was the first to resume his chair. "I don't understand any of that scribble," he said, "but let him look out who would make his portion larger at the expense of mine!"

"We will try," answered Van Praet, "to reduce the figures to the level of your noble ignorance, Herr Georgyi, by-and-bye. Put up your parchment for the present, Zachæus. Let us have another glass or two, like honest comrades!"

Regnault took no part in this debate. Since the commencement of supper he had been drinking with an apparently inextinguishable thirst, eating meanwhile with an excellent appetite. The sanguinary scene in which he had so recently been engaged seemed to be utterly forgotten, or else his mask of candour was most cleverly assumed. "And the pretty Countess Margaret," he presently asked, "what does the doctor say of her interesting state?"

"It's certain the child will be born," answered Van Praet.

"What's to be done, then?"

"In our opinion," replied Zachæus, "and I speak for Meinheer Van Praet and Doctor Mira as well as for myself, things should take their natural course in the event of the countess having a daughter. The birth of a girl will not annul the sale, according to the terms of the contract. There might be a delay of a few days—at the utmost, of a few weeks. In any case, neither Count Gunther nor his wife can live much longer."

"But if it should be a son?" demanded Regnault.

Zachæus did not answer for some moments. He appeared to be choosing his words. "We are not greenhorns," he said, at last; "and if we are associated together it is assuredly for some purpose."

"Clearly," coincided Van Praet.

"Not only," continued the steward, with emphasis, "would the birth of a son deprive us of our rights as purchasers, but we should also lose all the money sunk in the affair!"

The Hungarian seemed to consider for a second or so, then bluntly asked, "Whom are you going to do for to-night?" The Jew clasped his hands and cast his favourite glance at the ceiling, as he murmured a protest against so terrible a suggestion.

"Our friend Yanos," said Regnault, "has such a ferocious way of expressing himself! Poor Moses has quite lost his appetite, see; and our supper will end in melancholy. What nonsense! We understand each other well enough. The explanations of Meinheer Van Praet seem perfectly satisfactory to me."

"But they are not satisfactory to me," loudly declared the magyar; "and for the second time I ask who is to be killed to-night?"

"Who?" replied Regnault, with equal loudness. "Why, it's clear enough—*Count Gunther, his wife, and their son!*"

"What!" exclaimed Yanos, with a gesture of disdain. "An old man, a woman, and an infant!" He drank off a glass of Rhine wine, as if he would wash away the very thought of so cowardly a deed. Zachæus and Van Praet raised their shoulders.

"Herr Yanos," expostulated the steward, "if you share the gains, why hesitate over the means?"

The magyar refilled his glass and again drained it. His face reddening, his dark eyes sparkling with angry light, he exclaimed, mastering his powerful voice by a great effort, "A lady, beautiful and good, whose love all the gold in the world would not buy! A lady lying on a bed of suffering, and yet no sword to defend her from the attack of assassins!"

"This is a pleasant charge to make against us," sneered Regnault, in an undertone. "But it will soon pass over. He is always a little dramatic early in his cups. When he's quite drunk he'll be himself again—a knave without scruple."

"By the name of my father!" continued the magyar, indulging in an oath that was rather mild for him. "I will have no hand in putting women and children to death. I wish to be rich, it is true, because I am young and noble, and I only lack gold to resemble a prince."

"Well," interrupted Van Praet, "and you will have gold——"

"What a terrible picture!" went on the Hungarian. "A mother in agony beside her murdered infant. If they were only men—armed men—then it would be another thing. When the blades clash, one's blood gets on fire, one's heart beats, the brain's in a whirl. You remember the blow I gave Count Ulrich?"

"'Tis not impossible," replied Van Praet, coolly, "that there may yet be a sword for you to fight against to-night."

The magyar, rapidly yielding though he was to the fumes of the wine, was almost sobered by these words. Regnault winked with a knowing air, thinking that Van Praet made this remark simply to indulge Yanos in his pot-valiant humour. The Jew and Zachæus Nesmer cast a curious glance at the Dutchman. Truth to tell, the spirit of the band generally was rather pacific, and the news of a possible combat gave pleasure to no one save the Hungarian.

"What was that you said about a sword?" hoarsely demanded the magyar.

"Count Ulrich left some friends, you know," answered Van Praet.

"Is that all?" exclaimed the steward. "Have no fear of them. 'Tis a long way from here to Heidelberg."

"It is a good distance from here to Heidelberg," said Van Praet; "but it is also some time since Klaus, the courier, left on horseback."

"I knew nothing of this," uneasily answered the steward. Regnault pinched his arm, and, supressing his laughter, whispered in Nesmer's ear, "Don't be frightened! Can't you see he's only making fun of Yanos?"

"This Klaus," broke in the Hungarian, with a thick and unsteady voice; "has he gone in quest of any one worth fighting with?"

"Yes," said Regnault.

"Ah! Give me a few swordsmen round the bed. Then—let the

lady be as lovely as she may—then —— the combat——" The Hungarian, overcome by drink, could not finish the sentence, but fell simply back in his chair, and was soon in a heavy sleep.

"I forgot to tell you, Zachæus," now said Van Praet, in a serious tone, "that this morning, during your absence, little Gertrude went to the bedside of the countess, who stealthily handed her a letter and a key. It was impossible for Mira to stop the girl, so quickly was it all done; and he was only in time to see Klaus leave the castle at a gallop."

"A capital story," laughed Regnault.

"It is not a story. Yanos is asleep; and so the story would have been thrown away."

There was silence for some time. The associates looked anxiously at each other. At length the names of "the three sons of Ulrich" escaped from Regnault, and an electric thrill seemed to pass through his hearers.

"After all the gate is strong," re-assuringly said Van Praet.

"And the doors are well barred," added Regnault.

"Yes," answered Zachæus Nesmer slowly, with an impressive movement of his head: "but it is nine months ago this very night that a stranger arrived at the Castle of Bluthaupt. He entered the castle. Who can say by what door he left?"

"Can there be a secret entrance, then?" asked Regnault, now really alarmed.

"I have been only a few years at Bluthaupt," answered the steward; "but I've often heard the old servants of the castle say that the Three Red Knights need no key of the gate to enter the castle."

CHAPTER XI.

THE GREEN TREE INN.

THE Green Tree inn, at Heidelberg, was a house in bad odour with the German police. It was, nevertheless, a fine tavern. Its sign was an oak with leaves bright as emeralds. A good deal of wine and strong beer was drunk at the Green Tree inn. Its landlord, Elias Kopp, had gone through his course at the University with much distinction. He was, therefore, naturally well supported by those of his old fellow-students who now lived near him. Every Tuesday night, the chief room of the Green Tree inn was transformed into a ball-room. The ball was a model of respectability. Doctors even brought their fresh young daughters and wives thither. It was quite a learned family fête, for one heard scraps of Greek and Latin escaping from the dry lips of agile professors as they whirled their plump partners round in the waltz, while here and there a learned doctor held his fair fraulein entranced, not only by nimbleness and fleetness in the dance, but by his irresistible arguments on the rights of man. The Green Tree inn was also the head-quarters of a formidable political society.

The *Landsmannschaft* smoked such long pipes, indulged in such loud speeches and noisy songs, and drank so much beer, that royal heads were supposed to shake with fear at the mere mention of Elias Kopp's name.

It was the same evening that Regnault, Moses Geld, and the magyar were journeying together to Bluthaupt. The large room of the Green Tree inn was already pretty full. It was cold, and the landlord had carefully closed the windows against the wind, and also against the long ears of the police. Each newcomer did not knock at the door. He pressed a secret spring near the ground with his foot, and the heavy door swung back on its hinges directly. This gave to the réunion a strange air of mystery. Long pipes were smoked by all, and a haze of smoke enveloped each table, rendering the Germans thronging round it almost invisible at times. As the smoke thickened and increased in volume, you might have thought yourself in London during one of those heavy fogs which make it necessary to light the gas at mid-day.

Not far from the landlord's little counter stood a table, occupied by a young man in a scarlet cloak, and by a few friends who plainly regarded him with deference. From his broad-brimmed felt hat escaped a wealth of black hair, which fell on his shoulders, contrasting markedly with the pallor of his noble face. His regular features yet bore the freshness of early manhood, but were stamped by a firmness of character beyond his age. His bearing was imperious and manly, and his lips seemed made to command. The clouds of smoke became dissipated at intervals. Then there might have been seen, in other parts of the room, two more young men in scarlet cloaks. One was playing at cards with evident skill; but the gains or losses occasioned no change in his calm face. The other was gesticulating amidst a smiling party, and recounting some story about the fair sex, a gay smile lighting up his bright face, and his eyes sparkling at the thought of the fraulein whose charms he was recalling. The name of the first of the trio was Otto; of the card-player, Goetz; of the gay story-teller, Albert. They were all three brothers, and had no right to anything but their Christain names.

The companions of Otto tacitly acknowledged his superiority. One of them, Michael, resuming the conversation, said, "I know this, Otto; if the police were to come to-night for you, more than one would regret it."

"Why should they come?" answered Otto. "We have only this evening arrived from Frankfort, and there's no false friend in the Green Tree inn."

"It would be bad for him if there were," broke in the poet Dietrich. "Were there a spy amongst us, I would not sully my sword with his blood, but would break his head with a blow of my fist."

"And we would finish him," laughingly added Michael. He then asked of Otto, "Do you intend to remain any time with us?"

"Till to-morrow only. Heidelberg is not safe for us, my friends. We are too near Rothe Castle, and our father's assassins have too much interest in getting rid of us also."

There were a few moments of respectful silence as each of his listeners thought of the cruel and mysterious murder of Count Ulrich. Michael at length broke this silence: "They have commenced an action against you, Otto. You are all three charged with conspiracy. If they once get you in a Bavarian or Austrian prison, it's all up with you."

"Then we must not remain long in Germany," repied Otto. "We are proscribed. We are weak. We can do absolutely nothing in our work of revenge at this moment. We bide our time."

A sombre and menacing light shone from the young man's eyes. In his heart of hearts he had made a vow of vengeance, fulfilment of which might be long delayed, but he counted upon his heroic patience for ultimate triumph. "My brothers and I," he continued, "must cross the Rhine. In France we have a devoted friend, almost a father: the husband of our sister Helen. He will come to our aid now as he has formerly. Thanks to his dear friendship, we shall not want bread, at least."

His companions smiled at this disconsolate speech. Michael protested: "Don't be too gloomy in your forebodings, Otto! The will of Count Ulrich divided his property into five equal parts. Surely his sons should not want bread!"

"Count Ulrich's will," answared Otto, after meditating awhile, "has been torn into a thousand bits. Thenceforth we have no more right to his fortune than to his name. If we still wear the colour of Bluthaupt, it is because our purse is not full enough to replace the time-worn cloth of our scarlet cloaks."

"But who destroyed the will?" angrily inquired Dietrich. Otto did not answer, and the question was repeated.

"Shall I tell you? Our sister Margaret, then, is, as you know, the wife of Count Gunther, who despises us. How we loved both Helen and Margaret! Helen is happy. Poor Margaret is a martyr! My brothers and myself have long been banished from the castle; and we have only seen Margaret once since her marriage. It was a moment of joy and tears. We found our sister sweet and pure as an angel. But, for an instant, God had ceased to protect her. Near her bed stood a vile monster . . . "

Otto paused at the sad reminiscence, and his eyes were bent to the ground as he recalled the peril that threatened Margaret. "My poor sister!" he at length resumed with bated voice, "She tried to smile, and the tears ran down her cheeks. We had to force from her the cause of her trouble. Count Gunther knew the will of our father made us all three rich and gave us the titles of Counts of Bluthaupt. This touched his avarice and his blind pride. He threatened ——. Poor Margaret trembled. The old castle is so sombre; and so many gloomy fancies are bred in the cold atmosphere of its dark and cheerless rooms! She trembled, and the words fell with difficulty from her pale lips. I consulted with Goetz and Albert. We ever have but one thought when Margaret is concerned. I took my father's will from my breast and destroyed it."

The eyes of Dietrich and Michael were involuntary dimmed by the

simple recital of this noble act. They each grasped his hand in warmest sympathy and admiration. "You have a noble heart, Otto," they said; "and, sooner or later, God will make you happy."

Otto gently shook his head. "We are strong—my brothers and I," he answered; "and we know how to suffer. If there is to be any happiness in this world for the house of Bluthaupt, Margaret and Helen will both need it all. But a toast!" continued Otto in a more cheery tone. "It is scarcely the thing to greet old friends with a sad face and a sadder story. Here's to the health of the free men of Germany!"

Goetz was seen through the smoke raising his glass to the toast. "It is a long time," said Albert to his comrades, "since my brother has spoken so bravely."

As the two young men in the scarlet cloaks were again settling down, the one to continue his game of cards, the other to launch into some fresh amorous tale, Otto's voice once more interrupted them. "It's time for us to retire. We must start early to-morrow morning. We have to say farewell to Margaret, and it is a good distance to Bluthaupt."

Otto rose and shook hands with his friends. The moment he was saying good-bye, there came a gentle knock at the door of the Green Tree inn. There was instant silence in the room. "It's some one who doesn't know the secret," muttered Dietrich, looking anxiously at Otto.

The three young men in the scarlet cloaks, who were about to depart, drew the brims of their felt hats well down over their eyes. The landlord seemed uneasy behind his counter. There came a second knock, louder this time. All the company rose to their feet, and some exclaimed, "The police!"

Not a word was uttered. Ten or a dozen young men darted towards the "Armoury of Honour," drew aside the brown curtain, and each grasped one of the long swords, whose blades glittered in the light.

CHAPTER XII.

THE SISTER'S SUMMONS.

THE landlord did not wait for the third knock before he rose from his well-worn leathern stool and left his little counter. Addressing the most menacing of his customers, he said: "Gentlemen, the privileges of the University above everything! But, if it is the police, the door will be burst open after the third summons. Perhaps a little diplomacy will serve us best."

"Open the door on those conditions, Herr Kopp," grumbled Dietrich; "but don't forget to say there are plenty here to make holes in their coats or to cleave their skulls!" Dietrich gave force to his words by brandishing a long sword. Otto and his brothers were without arms.

The landlord, profiting by the permission granted, walked towards the door, meditating, meanwhile, some conciliatory speech. A compact band of students marched behind him, ready to oppose force with force. Dietrich and Michael were the leaders. The door opened; but there seemed to be nothing to call for so brave a demonstration. No Austrian uniforms, no unwelcome Prussian or Bavarian agents greeted their angry eyes. There was only a poor fellow, whose red livery was white from head to foot with snow.

Elias Kopp suddenly regained all his brusqueness of voice at sight of this peaceful figure. "What do you want?" he loudly demanded.

"Count Ulrich's three sons," answered the newcomer, at the same time fastening the reins of his horse to the iron bars of the window.

"Why, they've left Heidelberg a long time ago!" cried Elias Kopp.

Otto, who remained at the farther end of the room, did not overhear this conversation.

"Some rascally spy!" muttered Dietrich.

"Shut the door, Elias!" added Michael.

The landlord was about to obey this order, but the stranger, robust in figure, easily pushed by him, and made one or two steps into the room. "You will not want your swords against me, gentlemen," he said. "You see I am unarmed. And the sons of Count Ulrich would pay a high price for the message I bear them."

"I know that voice!" exclaimed Goetz.

The new arrival quickly looked in the direction of Goetz, and distinguished his red coat, even through the smoke. "They are here, thank God!" he cried. "Pray allow me to approach my master's sons. I have a message of life or death for them."

The three brothers recognised the voice of the huntsman of Bluthaupt, and at once rushed towards him. "You've come from the castle?" anxiously asked Otto. Instead of replying, the huntsman took a letter from his breast and handed it to him. Otto's hands trembled as he opened the letter, and a veil seemed to fall before his eyes.

His companions discreetly resumed their seats and their various games. The three brothers alone remained with Klaus, near the door.

"It is from our sister," said Otto in a subdued voice that betrayed the fear that was in his heart; "and Klaus says it is a matter of life or death!" Albert and Goetz bent over his shoulders, in their anxiety to read the contents at the same time as Otto. The note contained but a few lines :—

"My dearly-beloved brothers,—If God permits you to receive my message in time, I beg of you to come to my succour. The men around me fill me with the deepest horror. They have been speaking whilst they thought I slept : *they are the assassins of our father, and I believe they will kill me.*"

A cry of agony escaped from Goetz and Albert. Otto stood as if thunderstruck. "Kill her!" he murmered, as if unconscious that he was speaking. "Kill her, as they killed our father."

"The countess is already greatly changed," said Klaus, sorrow-

fully; "and, if you have not seen her since the happy days when she was gay and joyous under the roof of Count Ulrich, you would hardly know her. But, for God's sake, make haste! It's a long journey, and there's not a moment to lose."

"We'll be there as quickly as horses can carry us," replied Otto, thoroughly roused, his eyes flashing with a terrible fire. "Come, brothers! each minute's worth an hour now."

CHAPTER XIII.

THE RIDE OF THE THREE RED KNIGHTS.

A FEW minutes later the Three Red Knights were galloping at full speed towards Bluthaupt Castle, each with one of the long swords from the "Armoury of Honour" fastened to his belt. The falling snow whitened their scarlet cloaks. Though their hearts were oppressed with a keen sense of their sister's deadly peril, they rode on bravely, their spurs buried in their horses' flanks. The steeds bounded along, the noise of their gallop stifled in the snow. They pursued their furious course, flashing through the night like a mute whirlwind. It was sixteen French leagues from Heidelberg to Bluthaupt by the cross-road which leads to Esselberg and Carlstadt. The only resting place on the route was the posting station of Miltenberg.

Night was drawing to a close as the three brothers, still pushing on, though they and their steeds were ready to drop with fatigue, entered the mountainous district forming the steppes, as it were, of the ancient domain of Bluthaupt. The snow had ceased falling, but the whole country as far as the eye could reach seemed covered with a white table-cloth. The sky had dropped its heavy mantle of clouds, and the moon shone out clearly from the east.

Otto rode in advance, urging on his jaded horse by every means in his power. All at once his horse came to a dead stop. Neither spurs nor whip could move him. Otto looked before him. There was no visible obstacle. Glancing down, he only saw what seemed to be a snow-drift, which formed a mound at his horse's feet. He sprang from his saddle, fancying his steed might be frightened by some recent fall, for he had now recognised the spot as the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. His two brothers, who had caught him up, followed his example, and leapt to the ground also. All three approached the snowy hillock together. Otto leant down and thrust his hands through the soft snow. Suddenly rising, he exclaimed, "It is a dead man!"

"A dead man!" repeated Goetz. "Heaven save his soul. But Margaret calls us to the castle. We must hasten. Let's lead the poor horses by their bridles."

Otto knew too well that he ought not to delay a moment; but some irresistible power seemed to root him to the spot. "You go on," he

said; "my horse is stronger than yours, and I will soon catch you up."

"Our sister has need of us!" cried Albert, who had resumed the journey with Goetz.

Otto knelt down again without answering, and swept the snow away with his hands. There was soon uncovered the body of a man clad in a travelling-cloak. He lay across the road, his head pillowed against the side of his horse. Otto lifted the cloak, and felt his cold breast. The man had been dead several hours, it was clear.

Otto half rose with the intention of rejoining his brothers; but he could still hear the deadened fall of their horses' hoofs over the snow, and he yielded to the desire to see the face of the dead man. The moon sent down obliquely her last rays, which, reflected by the snow, gave an intense light. With his eyes fixed on the cold, white face, Otto speedily recognized the features. He remained as if petrified. When some minutes had passed by thus he pressed his hands to his brow, pale as the dead face he had been regarding so intently, and two tears rolled down his cheeks. The stiffened fingers of the corpse tightly held a locket, inclosing a sweet fair face, surrounded by a lock of a child's hair. Otto silently put the locket and chain round his own neck, and then drew from the dead man's pockets a few papers and a pocket-book, which he placed in his breast. Pressing a kiss on the brow of the man he had loved as a brother, Otto tore himself away from the body and remounted his horse, murmuring, "Helen! Helen! Helen and Margaret, my poor sisters!"

Urging on his steed, he yet looked back, now and again, at the bed of the Hœlle, where the remains of the Viscount d'Audemer soon became lost in the white waste of snow. Albert and Goetz had reached the end of the avenue leading to Bluthaupt Castle by the time Otto rejoined them. Instead of following the principal route, which rose gently up to the very gate of the castle, the three brothers turned to the left and traversed the old village, the sparse ruins of which were now scarcely discernable, veiled as everything was with the cold winding-sheet of early winter. The sombre castle towered above them, girdled by its heavy walls, and appeared inaccessible from the side they were approaching. The walls, built upon the naked rock, and commanding a deep ravine, added nothing at this point to the strength of the old citadel. Nature undertook to defend Bluthaupt here from any hostile advance. The massive bastions, built the by hands of men on the three other sides of the castle, were mere children's work compared with this gigantic rampart, which rose to the height of two hundred feet, and defied alike the mine and the shell.

It was, nevertheless, towards this seemingly inaccessible side that the three sons of Count Ulrich rode without a moment's hesitation. Arrived at the foot of the rock, they fastened their mounts to the trunks of some hardy oaks, and at once began to climb the stony slope with the aid of both hands and feet. No eye witnessed their nocturnal ascent. If anyone had seen those three men suspended over the yawning gulf of the ravine he could only have regarded them as fool-

hardy or bereft of reason. After fearlessly climbing for a quarter of an hour, they gained a place where the overhanging rock rendered it impossible for them to proceed higher without wings. They stopped with one accord. Still, they did not descend. Suddenly Otto disappeared—then Albert—then Goetz.

CHAPTER XIV.

SNATCHED FROM DEATH.

WITHIN the castle the night had passed mournfully in the bed-chamber of the Countess Margaret. Hans and Gertrude alone now heard the cries of their suffering mistress from the ante-room. Count Gunther still slept in his arm-chair, while Doctor José Mira seemed absorbed in deep meditation, and was heedless of the touching exclamations of his patient, appealing to heaven for help in her hour of trial.

The wind, hushed by the snow, had left the vast chords of Nature's æolian harp mute. All was silent without. At intervals the carillon awoke in the belfry, and gave forth its sad, monotonous music. The hours were struck slowly, and the vibrations lingered long in the air.

The noisy supper given by Zachæus Nesmer was at length finished. The steward left his guests towards three o'clock in the morning, and returned with Van Praet to the ante-room, in which Count Ulrich continued in a deep stupor, while Doctor Mira roused himself from his sinister reflections at the first sound of their approach. "Hans," said the steward to the page, who still sat up with Gertrude, "it is high time for you to retire."

Hans would have remained, for he saw that Gertrude trembled and grew pale at the thought of being left alone; but the steward pointed to the door with an imperious gesture, and Hans was compelled to obey him.

Stronger and more frequent were the cries of the countess on her bed of pain. Doctor Mira rose from his seat on the hearth of the ante-room. He knew that his services might now be required at any moment. Before entering the bed-chamber he cast a significant glance towards Gertrude. "And the girl?" he asked of Zachæus.

The steward looked at Gertrude, and replied, in a low voice, "Her duty keeps her here. We cannot send her away at such a moment as this without drawing upon ourselves the suspicions of all the servants."

"Let her remain," added Van Praet. "She doesn't trouble us yet; and if she should ——" He did not finish the sentence. But his companions had been long accustomed to interpret his pleasant smile; and both signified their assent.

The young girl sank into the embrasure, and endeavoured to divine their words by the movement of their lips. Her heart failed her. She had a vague presentiment of some terrible misfortune. Doctor Mira drew near the bed of the Countess Margaret. He was not a moment too soon. After a hasty glance at the poor patient he as

hastily quitted the bed-chamber for an instant. At the threshold of the ante-room he paused. "Wake the count!" he said. Van Praet softly shook the old man, who opened his eyes after a great effort.

"I am cold," murmured the count. "Ah, is that you, Fabricius? Have we made some gold at last?"

Van Praet's eyes twinkled gleefully. "The gold is coming," he answered. "If you don't see it in two hours I swear to you you will never see any!"

Count Gunther closed his eyes upon receiving this sweet assurance; but Zachæus Nesmer roused him afresh. "Come, count!" the steward said. "It is not gold only that we expect to-night. Rise at once and see the heir of Bluthaupt!"

The count made an effort to rise. But, as soon as he was on his feet, there was a rattle in his throat and his eyes seemed blinded. He fell back in his chair, murmuring, "Gold, and an heir! I shall die with joy!" His feeble hand seized the goblet standing above him. "I am very, very weak," he said in a broken voice. "Never have I been so weak before. My blood seems frozen in my veins. A little life doctor. Death seems close upon me when I am any time without your elixir." He held out the goblet, which shook in his enervated hand.

"Fill it, Mynheer Van Praet," called out Doctor Mira. "I cannot leave the countess." Van Praet lifted the saucepan in which the elixir of life was being warmed, and poured a double dose into the goblet. The count drank it greedily. All the blood in his body seemed to rush to his wasted cheeks.

"The dose was too strong," whispered Zachæus.

"Bah!" replied Van Praet; "you cannot have too much of a good thing."

Count Gunther again rose. He crossed the ante-room and entered the bed-chamber of his wife without help. A cry of deep anguish escaped from the countess and pierced the count's heart just as he gained the bedside.

"It is a son!" exclaimed Dr. Mira, from behind the curtains.

"A son! a son!" repeated the old count, half beside himself with joy. "Open the curtains! Light up the castle! Call all my vassals to bend their knees before the heir of Bluthaupt!"

The steward and Van Praet obeyed the first of these injunctions. The heavy draperies were drawn back over their golden rods. By the light of two lamps could be seen the still form of the Countess Margaret, her face white as alabaster. No further cry escaped her lips. She lay motionless. Doctor Mira held the child in his hands. Gertrude's heart filled with joy as she caught sight of the infant from the ante-room, and she thanked God for the safe delivery of her dear mistress. Zachæus Nesmer and Van Praet sought the cradle, decked with white gauze and flowers.

"A son! a son!" again muttered the old count, growing paler and weaker every instant. "He shall be called Gunther after me. That name brings happiness with it." His legs trembled under him, and he held fast to the bed to keep himself from falling.

The steward and Van Praet, upon a sign from Mira, looked earnestly at the old count, whose last flicker of life seemed to be rapidly vanishing. "You see the dose was a good one!" said Van Praet, with his placid smile.

"Who dares to put himself between my son and me?" faintly cried Count Gunther, becoming blind as life ebbed from him. "Let me see the child of my darling Margaret! Ah! thank God, she no longer suffers! How lovely and tranquil she looks in repose!"

Doctor Mira clothed the infant in linen, and placed him in the cradle.

Gertrude, unperceived by anyone, had approached the threshold of the bed-chamber. The doctor alone intervened between her and the countess. He still fixedly regarded the old count, who appeared to sink beneath his gaze; while his lips, ashy pale, in vain attempted to give utterance to aught but confused and inarticulate sounds. "He has only two minutes left!" said the doctor.

Gertrude overheard him, and retired in terror.

The count tottered, and murmured, with his dying breath, "Gold, and a son! Happy, happy night for Bluthaupt!" His cold hand dropped from the support, and he fell heavily to the floor.

Gertrude flew to him. She found only a lifeless body. Then a thought flashed like lightning through the young girl's mind. Before the three associates in crime could think of holding her back, she rose, and gained the bedside of her mistress with one bound. "Dead!" she shrieked, in heart-rending accents. "Both dead!"

She was about to cry for help, when the steward, who had followed her round the bed, seized her roughly. Van Praet fastened a handkerchief over her mouth, while Mira tied her hands and feet. They carried the poor girl thus to the embrasure of the ante-room where Hans had been her companion for the greater part of the night. The three men then returned to their seats on the hearth.

"The count has died of old age," said Mira. "The countess has died in childbirth. Nothing could be better, so far! There remains now only this young girl and the infant."

"As for the girl," answered Zachæus Nesmer, "who will notice the disappearance of a servant?"

Gertrude, more dead than alive, overheard his cruel hint, but felt she had no power to stir—no power to release herself from her bonds.

"And the infant?" repeated Mira, throwing the rest of the elixir into the fire, and carefully rinsing the saucepan.

"The child may have been born dead," softly suggested the oily Van Praet.

"If we let him live," continued the steward, "of what use will all our labours have been?"

Doctor Mira gravely shook his head. While he was considering his answer, a slight noise seemed to come from the oratory of the dead countess. The three confederates started.

Gertrude held her breath. She thought of the Three Red Knights who appeared in Bluthaupt Castle at every birth or death. There had been a birth and two deaths!

"Did you hear anything?" murmured the steward. Van Praet and Mira silently made a sign in the affirmative. The crime was powerless to move them, but now they trembled. Zachæus Nesmer, the German, thought of some supernatural punishment. The Dutchman and the Portuguese doctor thought only of earthly things; but their fear was not less than the steward's. The noise had now ceased.

"If you take my advice," resumed Doctor Mira, in a subdued tone, "we had better look after our companions. Regnault is a man whose help and council are worth something; and, in case of danger, Yanos the magyar is brave."

Zachæus Nesmer and Van Praet readily welcomed this suggestion. All three moved towards the door. They left together in quest of their comrades, their fears thoroughly roused by the mysterious sounds which came from the bed-chamber, not one of them daring to remain alone near the scene of their double crime. Hardly had they quitted the ante-room when the strange noise was again heard in the oratory. Poor Gertrude prayed to heaven for help. She feared she would be the next victim to fall this terrible night.

Ten minutes passed—an age, it seemed, to Gertrude. Zachæus Nesmer, Doctor Mira, and Van Praet then re-appeared, accompanied by their three confederates, whose approach was heralded by the loud voice of the magyar, full of threats about drawn swords and broken heads. Zachæus was the first to cross the threshold. He had scarcely made a step into the bed-chamber when a cry of terror escaped from him. "*The Three Red Knights!!!*" he exclaimed, seeking shelter behind his companions, who all stopped, as if thunderstruck.

In front of the cradle stood three men, clad in long scarlet cloaks. Their faces were hidden beneath the broad brims of their beavers. Each held in his hand a naked sword, the shining blades reflecting in brilliant flashes the light from the lamps. It seemed to be Gertrude's vision over again.

The Hungarian, still half drunk, was the last to arrive. His great height enabled him to see over the heads of his comrades. At sight of the three armed men a fierce exclamation escaped from him. "Make way!" he cried; poison for you; the sword for me!" He pushed his way through his fear-stricken companions, and strode into the middle of the bed-chamber, sabre in hand.

One of the Red Knights left the cradle and advanced towards the magyar. Before their blades could meet, the stranger in the red cloak threw his beaver behind him, and revealed the noble face of Otto. The magyar, instead of striking, passed his hand before his dazzled eyes. His red face grew livid. His sabre dropped from his nerveless fingers and fell on the floor. It also seemed to him like a terrible vision. He drew back and vanished without a blow. "Ulrich!" he exclaimed, with consternation. "It is Count Ulrich risen from his tomb!"

. . . . . .

The next morning the servants entered the chamber in which crime upon crime had been followed by the mysterious appearance and dis-

appearance of the Three Red Knights. Some of them declared they had heard the cries of a new-born babe during the night. They only found the corpse of Count Ulrich on the floor, and the lifeless body of the Countess Margaret on the bed. Her sweet face, framed by a wealth of fair hair in curls, wore a peaceful smile. Her lips were slightly parted, as if the last sleep had fallen upon her while she murmured a prayer. The cradle was no longer there, nor the infant, nor Gertrude, nor Hans.

A legal document was drawn up declaring that Count Gunther and his wife died natural deaths. It received the signatures of Zachæus Nesmer, Doctor Mira, Mynheer Van Praet, and the principal servants of the castle.

CHAPTER XV.

THE KNELL OF ZACHÆUS NESMER.

NINETEEN years had rolled by since the events recounted in the prologue of this history. It was the month of February, in the year 1844. Frankfort had grown larger and seemed rejuvenated—all save the old and gloomy Judengasse. This Jewish quarter was to-day more sombre than usual even from the solemn tolling of many bells reverberating from numberless church steeples in memory of Zachæus Nesmer, one of the richest bankers in the city, who had died just twelve months ago, pierced to the heart by a sword-thrust. The anniversary of his decease was now being celebrated in the churches of Frankfort.

Zachæus Nesmer's fortune appeared to have been acquired very rapidly. More than one old Jew remembered to have seen him in former times drive up to the door of Moses Geld, the money-lender, in a very modest vehicle. About the same time, Moses Geld received frequent visits from four or five persons, who had since become, according to common belief, men of importance in other countries. One was known to be a sprightly Frenchman, called Regnault; another an obese Dutchman, named Van Praet. Yet another was recognised—Doctor José Mira, the medical attendant of Count Gunther at Bluthaupt. It was noted as a strange coincidence that all these personages became wealthy about the same time, and yet that Moses Geld had alone purchased the fine estate of Bluthaupt, removing thereafter, as the report went, either to London or Paris, where he was regarded as a millionaire.

All but Zachæus Nesmer had quitted Frankfort. Why? One rumour affirmed that since the death of the last Count of Bluthaupt they had been engaged in a fierce and mysterious struggle, and that it was to save their lives they fled from Germany. It was vaguely reported that their adversaries were the three sons of Bluthaupt, who had not received a shilling of the rich family inheritance. At first sight they would seem to be opponents of little consequence. Proscribed by the Germanic Confederation, they did not dare show them-

selves in public. Their duel of vengeance had to be fought in secret.

Yet their enemies, powerful and rich though they were, had found the protection of the law an insufficient barrier against these three strong and resolute men. Zachæus Nesmer, who could not be induced to leave Frankfort, was found one morning on the banks of the Main, dead from a sword-thrust. Suspicion respecting his death attached to one of the most confidential clerks of Nesmer, and thought to be one of the three sons of Count Ulrich, all of whom were personally unknown to the despoilers of Bluthaupt. Whether this suspicion was well founded or not, the three sons of Count Ulrich at length fell into a snare laid by the police, and soon found themselves under lock and key in the gaol of Frankfort. As there was no positive proof against them, the tribunals deferred judgment from day to day; and the general opinion was that their imprisonment would be indefinitely prolonged. Sympathy for them was not wanting. The misfortunes which had clouded their lives were well known; their illegitimate birth; the murder of their father, Count Ulrich; the early death of their sister Margaret, so full of promise and beauty; the sad fate of the Viscount d'Audemer; and their own penniless state, all the harder to bear from the proscription that ever pursued them when they were not in prison.

It was commonly believed that the great banker, Zachæus Nesmer, had met his death at their hands; but the murder was not universally condemned. It was pretty generally regarded, indeed, as an affair of legitimate vengeance. Wherefore, though the bells were tolling in memory of the wealthy banker murdered but a year ago, the romance surrounding the joyless lives of the three brothers had excited a warm feeling towards them in many a fair bosom; and there were not wanting those who wished them free to complete the task of vengeance to which they had devoted themselves.

The Three Red Knights had wreaked their vengeance on the perfidious steward of Bluthaupt. Would the walls of Frankfort prison protect his murderous accomplices from *their* Nemesis?

CHAPTER XVI.

IN FRANKFORT PRISON.

NIGHT fell upon the city, dark and cold. The few citizens out, their chins buried in their cloaks, involuntarily hastened their steps as they passed under the high, grey walls of the Frankfort prison. Prussian sentinels were on guard at the gates of the old gaol. There still stole over the city the tolling of the bells in mournful memory of the rich steward of Bluthaupt Castle. The prisoners had long been locked into their cells for the night, and in the sombre interior silence was only broken by the slow march of the warders throughout the corridors. The Three Red Knights occupied three contiguous cells, the

windows of which, guarded by strong iron bars, looked upon the courtyard, only separated from the street by the outer wall of the prison. There was but one sentinel in the courtyard ; and Master Blasius, the gaoler in chief, was of opinion that the iron bars and the extreme height of the outer wall rendered the presence of this Austrian soldier unnecessary. His sole reason for maintaining the extra safeguard was respect for the old proverb, "Trust nothing to chance that can be avoided."

The Three Red Knights had a certain renown for address and audacity which might have frightened an ordinary gaoler. During the twenty years they had been incessantly pursued for political reasons they had been frequently imprisoned, but had always succeeded in escaping. Nevertheless, Master Blasius, ex-major domo of Bluthaupt, felt quite safe, so numerous were the precautions taken during his methodical *régime* in the Frankfort prison. Moreover, he placed implicit trust in the honour of the three sons of Count Ulrich, who would never, he thought, bring an old and faithful servant of the family into trouble. He treated them well, and lightened as much as he could the wearisomeness of their long incarceration. They were allowed to meet together every day. When the hour came for retirement to their cells the good-hearted gaoler made it as pleasant for them as possible, favouring each of the three captives in turn with his company, his constant pipe ever in his mouth, save when he clinked classes with them and tossed off a glass of good Rhine wine.

Otto was the favoured one this evening. Albert and Goetz had extinguished their lights ; they were asleep, no doubt, thought the gaoler. Light still shone from Otto's cell, and Master Blasius and he sat at a small table, on which were a large stone jug, two glasses, and a pack of cards. Master Blasius smoked like a German. He luxuriously prolonged each puff, and from time to time pressed down the fragrant tobacco in his large pipe with the dignity of an emperor. The cell was not without comfort, boasting a bed with curtains, a writing-desk, and easy arm-chairs. Otto was clothed with a bizarre elegance. Red was still the predominating colour of his dress. Twenty years had left but little trace on his noble face, pale and firm as marble. Indeed, he looked even more handsome than on that memorable night when we saw him, sword in hand, bravely confronting the cowering murderers of his father.

Master Blasius carefully and methodically shuffled the cards for a game of impériale,* upon which more depended than the honest gaoler could have imagined. This done, he addressed his companion, " Cut, Otto. It's my deal. I don't much care for anything that comes from France, but this jolly game is an exception. I'm quite in love with it. There ! I've played, and I mark one point."

* Impériale was a French game of cards much in vogue during the First Empire. It was something between picquet and écarté, and not unlike cribbage. Impériale was played with the thirty-two highest cards in the pack, and twelve cards were dealt to each of the two players, the last card being turned up on the pack as trump. In playing, the highest card won each trick, and the first to gain seven tricks scored one point, another point being made by every ace or picture card ; while the impériale, scoring five points, was formed by a run of ace, king, queen, and knave of one suit, or by four aces, kings, queens, or knaves. When the run comprised ace, king, queen, and knave of trumps, a double impériale of ten points was scored. Five impériales made the game of twenty-five points.

Otto spread out his cards. He sat motionless. Even a sharper person than the sociable gaoler would have believed him to be entirely occupied with the game. Yet now and then some almost imperceptible sign seemed to indicate a serious pre-occupation. In a moment of forgetfulness he would apparently gaze into vacancy, and a slight inclination of his head showed how keenly he was listening for something. When Master Blasius was not speaking, which was very seldom, and when the monotonous sound of the warder's footsteps died away in the distant corridor, a faint noise might have been heard in the next cell. It would have been difficult to define the nature of this strange sound, which was evidently the cause of Otto's inattention to the game. Master Blasius did not hear it, impériale occupying his every thought. "Five cards—forty-seven points!" he said, drinking to his success in a deep draught of Rhine wine.

"Another ace, and I should have had two impériales!" muttered Master Blasius to himself, closely scanning his cards to renew the attack. "I don't wish to flatter you, Herr Otto, but I like your company much better than Goetz or Albert's. Goetz can't help drinking a glass or two too much, as you know. Albert doesn't drink, and that's a fault also; on the other hand, he bores one with ever so many love adventures. As for you, if you have any defect, it is that you are too good. When I think, you have never told me a word about those little *billets-doux* which you have received from France!" A melancholy smile stole over Otto's face at this remark. "What pretty handwriting!" resumed the garrulous gaoler. "What a darling, gentle hand it must have been that traced it! Do you know it's a month since you answered your fair correspondent?"

Otto did not reply, but he scrutinised his cards more closely, in order that the strange light which flashed from his eyes at the question should not be seen. "The name is not so pretty as the writing, I must confess," added Master Blasius. "Of course, I know the name well enough, because I see your letters, or, rather, the envelopes; and it's a shame a pretty woman should bear the name of Madame Batailleur." Otto was still silent.

"But I see the topic's not palatable," continued Master Blasius; "so I'll stop it and play clubs." Otto was a second in finding his best card to play in his turn. The mysterious noise had ceased. Otto's mind was plainly far away from the game.

"What I like in your play," continued the gaoler, between his whiffs, "is that you reserve your strength. Another man would at once have beaten that ten of clubs. Clubs again!" This time, Otto was so long in finding a card that Master Blasius had time to refill his empty glass.

The echo of the warder's heavy footfall was again lost in the distance, so that Otto could distinctly hear a slight grating sound, as from the friction of two pieces of iron. The Red Knight moved his chair, and was suddenly seized with a fit of coughing.

"You have caught a cold," said the old gaoler. "When one drinks nothing, these winter nights are bad for the chest. Deal or cut, if you please. I've played clubs." Otto gave a searching glance at Master

Blasius to see whether there were any hidden meaning or raillery behind his last words. But the gaoler never indulged in raillery.

"Luck is on my side to-night, and you'll not gain a single game," said Master Blasius when the cards had been redealt, and he had assured himself that he had another good hand. "Let me clink glasses with you, Herr Otto. A draught of wine will cheer you!" Otto held out his glass, and laughed loudly as their glasses clinked, while the jovial gaoler, imagining he had said something good, joined heartily in the laughter.

The strange noise in the next cell increased as their merriment continued. It seemed like a succession of heavy shocks—as though a strong hand were impatiently shaking the half-sawn iron bars. Otto's hilarity was very timely. Had it not been for the loud laughter in which Master Blasius so readily took part, the gaoler could not have failed to have had his suspicion aroused. "I must confess you're a gay comrade, after all," broke in Master Blasius, when the mirth had ceased. "I don't know what made me laugh, but I know I laughed heartily. Well, well; I play diamonds."

The Red Knight now played with more care and precision. Despite the inferiority of his hand, he held his own against the simple devices of Master Blasius, and even managed to score two impériales in his turn. The gaoler consoled himself with copious draughts of Rhine wine. His forehead grew purple with excitement. He was more absorbed than ever in the game; and it must have been something very grave and important to have distracted him for a moment from the cards. He did not hear the fall of two heavy bodies on the pavement of the courtyard. Nor did he hear the brusque challenge of the sentinel, "Who goes there?" Otto heard all. His face became even paler than usual, and the cards trembled in his hands, though he had never trembled when his own life had been in danger.

Master Blasius now held a very poor hand. Luck had left him, and gone to his adversary. But the result of a battle depends upon the superior genius of the rival generals. Brute strength is vanquished by intelligence. Otto played at random. Beads of sweat stood on his forehead. He changed colour each instant. He seemed the prey of some overwhelming anxiety.

Master Blasius, absorbed in certain laborious calculations, did not notice Otto's perturbation. He skillully profited by the faults of his partner, and played as though all his future depended upon the result of the game. After winning the last trick, he look up triumphantly at his adversary, but surprised at his agitation, suddenly asked, "What is the matter, Herr Otto?"

The Red Knight did not answer. His eyes remained fixed, his head bent forward, as he listened with painful intensity. The moment Master Blasius was about to repeat his question two distant and singular cries stole into the cell. Otto gave a sigh of relief, and his face immediately brightened. "What was that?" anxiously said the gaoler, rising quickly.

"Nothing!" replied Otto, "except that you have won more golden sovereigns than I have kreutzers in my purse. But be calm, my

old friend. The game is finished; but we have still time for a chat."

Otto familiarly placed his hands on the shoulders of the ex-major-domo, and gently pressed him back into his seat. He then refilled the glasses to the brim.

"To your health!" he said. "Without knowing it, you are about to gain 5,000 florins by a game of cards!"

As the gaoler gazed at him with continued wonderment, Otto moved to a little wardrobe behind his bed. He took therefrom a suit he had not worn since his arrest: a well-worn overcoat for travelling, a water-proof cloak, and high boots, armed with spurs.

"Why, the poor fellow's mad!" muttered Master Blasius, with pity in his voice. "Not only in love, but stark mad! What a misfortune!"

Otto, meanwhile, donned his travelling-coat, and slipped some gold into his waist-coat pocket. "Now," he said to the astonished gaoler, "I only want your dressing-gown, and then I'll hand you the 5,000 florins!"

"A little sleep would do you good, believe me," responded Master Blasius, with pity. "A good night's rest will calm your excitement, Herr Otto."

Otto wheeled an arm-chair near the gaoler and took a seat, saying quickly and firmly, "Let us talk reasonably and to the point, for I have no time to lose." Master Blasius smiled indulgently at what he considered a new whim. "You're an honest man," hastily continued Otto; "and the German Diet has given into your charge three prisoners accused of murder. Two of these prisoners have escaped."

The gaoler sprang from his chair, and would have rushed from the cell, but the iron hand of the Red Knight held him fast. "Don't call out!" commanded Otto. "You would repent it; and the evil would be irreparable."

"But you're utterly mistaken!" cried the unfortunate gaoler. "No one has escaped. The prison walls are high. I put new iron bars to make the windows doubly secure. My sentinels are at their posts. Let me only re-assure myself!"

"In a minute," answered Otto, who still held him fast; "But first you must hear me. I tell you that Goetz and Albert are now well on their road to France. You can verify what I say in a moment. Meantime consider it an indisputable fact. The flight of those two prisoners would suffice to deprive you of your post; and you're getting old, Master Blasius!" The ex-major-domo heaved a heavy sigh. He was paying dearly for the delights of victory in his last game of impériale! "I propose to give you," continued Otto, "a sum which would place you beyond want, in case of destitution; and I also propose a means by which you need not become destitute." The gaoler listened intently for the coming proposition.

"You're a prudent man," said Otto; "you know too much of the world to let anyone about the prison into your confidence. So first look into my brothers' cells, and see whether what I have said is right." Otto released the arm of the gaoler, who gained the corridor with the celerity of a young man. He heard the keys turn in the

locks, and soon saw Master Blasius return with a look of despair in his face. The gaoler sank into his chair, moaning, "They *have* gone! —both gone!"

"And I must go also," said Otto. Master Blasius raised his shoulders in anger, and did not deign to reply. "I must go this very minute," resumed Otto, gravely; "and you must facilitate my departure!"

"I'll have you confined in a dungeon; that's my answer," said the gaoler.

"That will not restore your other two captives," replied Otto; "while, if you listen to reason, they will be both safe in your hands again. I mean what I say, Master Blasius; and you well know that a son of Bluthaupt never tells a lie."

"I know that," murmured the gaoler; "but, good heavens! what a risk! Besides, how can it all be managed?"

"My brothers and I," answered Otto, sadly, "have a heavy task to fulfil in this world. We have long been poor, and war without gold leads to certain defeat. Now we are rich, a few weeks will suffice to finish the great work that we have not been able to accomplish during many long years. If I take an oath, Blasius, will you trust to that?"

"Yes," said the gaoler, after regarding him closely for a few moments; "for the blood which runs in your veins is the blood of Bluthaupt."

"Very well," replied the Red Knight, earnestly, "I swear to you, in my father's name, that Albert, Goetz, and I will surrender ourselves to you, in Frankfort prison, a month from this day!" Master Blasius remained silent. "If you refuse to help me," continued Otto, "I will remain here; but neither Goetz nor Albert will come back, and you will be punished."

The gaoler sought counsel from the stone jug. "I know very well, Herr Otto," said he, "that you would be true to your word; but what if the magistrates should demand your appearance before them?"

"We have been prisoners for one whole year," answered Otto with confidence. "The judges have no evidence that could convict us, and so our trial will never come on." Otto, finding the old gaoler still hesitated, bent forward and made a final appeal. "Formerly, Master Blasius, you were a faithful servant of Bluthaupt. Then, you would have shed your last drop of blood on behalf of any of our race."

"I would do so still," was the ready answer.

"Do it, then!" said Otto, in a voice vibrating with emotion. "There lives at this moment the son of your old master, but ignorant of his father's name, and mayhap suffering from the persecutions of our enemies?"

"I thought so—I thought so!" cried the old major-domo of Bluthaupt. "But will you be able to find him, Herr Otto?"

"I told you we have a task to perform. That son is the child of our sister Margaret, whom we loved better than our own lives; and he is our son now, since we stood between him and the death that threatened him in his cradle."

"Were you in the castle that terrible night?" interrogated the agitated gaoler, with eagerness.

"We were," replied Otto; "but it would be a long history to relate, and my brothers await me."

"Only one word more," pleaded Master Blasius. "Was it you who bore off the infant with Gertrude?"

"Gertrude followed us with Hans, and it was they who brought up the child, loyal hearts as they were. I know where to find the page; and before another month, please God, my poor sister's son, Count de Bluthaupt and de Rothe, shall return as master to the castle of his ancestors!"

"By heavens!" said the old man, rising as he spoke, "I would willingly risk everything to see that joyful event happen!" He hastily pulled off his linen dressing-gown. "I know full well, Herr Otto," he said in a quivering voice, "that you have it in your power to deceive me; but I have eaten the bread of Bluthaupt for forty years! Take this disguise; and may heaven help you in your task!" He thereupon assisted the Red Knight in placing the dressing-gown over his travelling costume, and in hiding his face under the ample hood.

Otto grasped his hand. "To-morrow," he said, "you will receive the 5,000 florins! If we should not return in a month, we shall be dead." He then quitted the cell, and imitated the slow and heavy step of the gaoler-in-chief as he passed through the corridors. The warders drew aside and saluted him with respect.

In the cell Otto had just left, Master Blasius had dropped into his arm-chair, and fallen into a reverie as to the fate of the Countess Margaret's son. "Nineteen years ago!" he murmured. "He must be almost a man by this time. The Three Red Knights are brave, and will do all they can to help him. May heaven favour them; and may I live to see the young count back in his noble castle!"

CHAPTER XVII.

A CARNIVAL ADVENTURE IN PARIS.

IT is a fête-day in Paris! Le dimanche gras, or "fat Sunday!" The long line of the Rue de Rivoli and Rue St. Antoine, and the bright boulevards and the grand avenue of the Champs Elysées, are overflowing with a gay, good-humoured, carnival crew, some mere spectators of all the life, movement, and fun, others masked and bedizened as harlequins and columbines, and in every imaginable grotesque disguise, the maskers scarce able to pursue their joyous way by reason of the innumerable cabs and carriages which thronged the roads.

Sorely put out seemed the occupant of one vehicle in the long line of carriages brought to a full stop between the Château d'Eau and the Porte St. Martin. It was nearly four in the afternoon. The stranger, too impatient to enjoy the block longer, leaped from the cab, paid his fare, and was soon threading his way between the light-hearted maskers

who were hieing to dinner. He wore a long travelling-cloak, white with dust and reaching to his boots. His face was partially hidden by the collar of the cloak. The Temple Market was his destination. The pressure of the holiday crowd caused him to pause again at the corner of the Rue des Fontaines.

A few paces from him two men were engaged in a conversation round the corner of the street, where there were fewer passers-by. One was a fine young man, with pointed moustache and imperial. His black over-coat, closely buttoned, would have been considered elegant in the students' quarter. The other wore a light paletot, thrown open to expose to view a well-cut blue coat, bright with gold buttons, a double-frilled shirt-front, and an embroidered black satin waistcoat, from which hung a massive gold chain, each link of which was worth quite two louis. He wore rings, moreover, outside his kid gloves. Despite his fresh colour and the blackness of his hair, there were signs that he was more than forty. He was inclined to obesity, and had numerous wrinkles round his mouth. The stranger looked absently at the two men. The young man was quite unknown to him, and he could not see the face of his swellish companion.

An elegant carriage stopped at this moment at the angle of the Rue Philippeaux. There stepped from it a pretty young lady in a pelisse. She moved furtively through the crowd with the insinuating manner of a cat. Her feet seemed scarcely to touch the ground, and her boots gathered no mud from the pavement. A black veil fell from her bonnet, but did not effectually conceal the brilliancy of her eyes. Arrived at the opposite corner of the Rue des Fontaines, she caught sight of the stranger standing there. She trembled, and stopped. Lifting her veil to regard him more clearly, she revealed a very handsome face, of the Jewish type of beauty, dark and voluptuous, save that her lips were thin and colourless. But a sudden rush of vehicles and maskers now hid the stranger from her sight, and she turned away with impatience at not being able to make certain whether he was the man she at first took him to be. "I must be mistaken," she murmured. "Don't I know he cannot be in Paris?"

While she directed her steps again towards the Temple, Madame Batailleur, whose shop she was bound for, was engaged with a young girl, also of great beauty, but possessing likewise a charming expression of modesty and freshness. "Still nothing for you," said Madame Batailleur to the young lady. "The postman has been, but no letter!"

"I will come again to-morrow," answered the young girl with a sigh of disappointment. As she spoke she looked towards the Rue du Temple, and hurriedly drew her veil over her face, which turned quite pale. She perceived the lady whom we saw just now. "My sister!" she uttered in fright. "I beg of you, madame, not to betray me!"

"Fie!" smilingly said Madame Batailleur in an amiable tone, adding, as the young girl hastily left the shop, "I am the personification of discretion, my dear young lady!" She welcomed the other lady with the same smile, her perfidious finger pointing to the retreating figure, at sight of whom the new comer expressed her astonishment.

During this scene the stranger still continued at the corner of the Rue des Fontaines, having drawn nearer, however, to the two men, a word or two of whose conversation had excited his interest. He listened. "Tell me," he overheard the one in the light paletot remark; "are you sure of your hand?"

Verdier, as the younger man was named, made two or three passes with his cane in reply. "I practise at the school of arms two or three times a week," he said, "while my opponent does not even know how to hold a sword!"

The stranger in the travelling-cloak looked keenly at the speaker, and the brutal expression on Verdier's face as he continued to fence with an imaginary enemy impelled him to remain. "But how did you lead up to the duel if he doesn't know how to fight?" asked the man in the light paletot.

"That was easy as A B C. He insulted me; and the thing was done!"

"Ah! the young rascal insulted you?"

"Yes he did," replied Verdier, his bronzed cheeks reddening at the recollection. "It was at the Café Piron, in the students' quarter. He was playing at cards, and I accused him of being a trickster. Deuce take it! he answered me by throwing a glass of beer in my face!"

"Tell me more about it," said the chevalier, gaily. "It was capitally arranged. You will have your hundred louis, Verdier; and if the affair ends to my satisfaction, I shall have a little surprise ready for you." The chevalier took out his large gold watch. "Four o'clock so soon!" he exclaimed, after consulting it. "I am due at the Viscountess d'Audemer's. Still I must have a few more particulars. Do you fight with swords!"

"With swords," replied Verdier.

"Where?"

The noise of the passing carriages prevented the stranger from hearing the answer to this last question. Nor could he hear the next few words, his attention being arrested by the clear, frank voice of a youth calling upon his coachman to stop, and leaping at the same time from the vehicle. Directly he caught sight of the youth's fair face, of almost feminine beauty were it not for the bold glance of his blue eyes, the stranger became strangely agitated. His pale face instantly flushed, and he made an involuntary movement as if to overtake the youth. But at the same time some strange and irresistible influence seemed to bid him stay to watch the chevalier and Verdier, and learn more of their base plot. He yielded to this uncontrollable influence, and when he looked round again the handsome youth had vanished.

The Jewish beauty, who had before thought she recognised the stranger, stopped at this moment before him. She would satisfy herself now. The stranger drew on one side to allow her to pass; but she held his arm with her little gloved hand, and her little hand was strong. "I cannot have been mistaken twice in one day," she softly murmured, looking searchingly up into his face. "Baron de Rodach!"

The stranger gave a gesture of surprise, and inclined his head, as if to coroborate her statement. The lady lifted her veil. "Don't you remember me?" she asked.

The baron scrutinised the pretty face. It was clearly the first time he had seen it. Nevertheless, he did not answer directly. The lady moved her little foot with impatience. The baron, who plainly wished to conceal his ignorance, pressed her little hand softly between his.

His incognita smiled languishingly. "This place is not very convenient for an explanation," she said; "and I want to know the reason of your long silence. From two to four Monsieur Laurens is at the Bourse."

The baron's face remained calm as she pronounced the name of Laurens, but his heart beat rapidly. The pretty Jewess lowered her veil. "Come during those hours," she said, with a significant smile, "or at any other time, for my husband is no longer jealous." She shot a coquettish glance at him as she added, in leaving him, "Till to-morrow!"

The baron's eyes followed her until her graceful figure was lost in the crowd. Then a bright light shone in his eyes. "Madame de Laurens," he said to himself, "the eldest daughter of Moses Geld!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

A FRIEND IN NEED.

No sooner had the veiled Jewish beauty entered her carriage than the tall stranger, whom she addressed as Baron de Rodach, started in pursuit of the young man whose appearance in the Temple quarter had moved him so powerfully. The chevalier and his tool were no longer at the corner of the Rue des Fontaines. There was nothing to prevent the baron from at once entering the Temple Market, which was at its noisiest, as the hour for closing grew near, and the chaffering hucksters were burning to join the carnival in their turn.

The young man whom the baron sought seemed to have paid a fruitless visit to the Temple. He still carried his parcel under his arm. Vain had been his many attempts to dispose of its contents, and his fair face—usually frank and jubilant—bore traces of his deep disappointment. "Whatever shall I do?" he thought to himself. "Only five francs left, and I must go to the bal masqué for Julien's sake! I can at least save him from the sister of the siren who played with my heart. It will be my last night; but I shall die happy if I only knew that Denise loves me!"

In bearing and in dress he was essentially a gentleman. In purse, that night, he was one of the poorest in Paris. Franz was his name; he had no parents living; he was nineteen—that was nearly all he knew of himself. From shop to shop he went, offering for sale the suit wrapped up in his parcel. At length he reached the Place de la Rotonde end of the Temple as the clock began to strike the closing hour. The last shop was deserted and poverty-stricken, having only a few strips of tattered cloth hanging outside, and possessing half-a-

dozen trestles inside, doubtless serving to show the second-hand clothes to advantage when there were any for sale. In one corner sat a woman, grey and weak from old age. Not far from her sat a middle-aged woman, who seemed in great trouble as she tearfully regarded an idiot boy playing in the centre of the shop.

"Will you be good enough to purchase some clothes I have here?" asked Franz, doubting very much whether he would receive a favourable answer, as he glanced round the poor interior.

The old woman cast a look of despair at Franz, while her younger companion, drying her eyes, answered him in a sweet but sorrowful voice, "The clock has struck the closing hour, sir, and it is impossible for us to buy anything of you now. But if you particularly wish to dispose of them, I would advise you to go to that house you see over there in the Place de la Rotonde, and ask for Hans Dorn, clothes-merchant."

Franz fancied he could detect the pride of the poor woman struggling to conceal their poverty as she made the closing hour the reason for not bidding for his suit. Compassion took possession of him as he gave a look round the empty shop. He placed his last crown-piece on the counter; and, hastily quitting the place, walked quickly to the Place de la Rotonde. The almost penniless women he had just left were Madame Regnault (whose son was rolling in the wealth stolen from Bluthaupt Castle) and her daughter-in-law Victorine. The idiot Joseph, or Geignolet, was Victorine's son; and Franz heard the dolorous refrain the idiot was humming change into a cry of joy as he seized the crown and handed it to his mother.

Franz soon reached the house to which he was directed. He passed through a dark alley leading to the court-yard, and at one of the doors saw a charming young girl, fresh and pure as she was pretty, talking to a young organ-player about the same age as himself. "Does Hans Dorn live here?" asked Franz of the young couple, each of whom started and blushed at sight of the stranger.

"Yes; he lives here," replied the girl.

"Good-bye, Mademoiselle Gertrude!" said the young organ-player, gracefully doffing his cap.

"Good-night, Jean Regnault," answered she pleasantly. "Hans Dorn is my father," then said the young girl to Franz, tripping at the same time lightly up the staircase to show him the way. Franz followed close at her heels, and entered a room on the first floor almost as soon as she did.

"Father, this gentleman wishes to speak to you," said Gertrude to the clothes-merchant, who, seated at a little table, on which pieces of money were piled, was making up his accounts for the day by the light of a candle. Gertrude thereupon took a seat by her father. She looked ravishingly youthful and pretty in her modest grisette's dress—just as pretty and youthful as her mother looked some nineteen years ago, when she watched near the bedside of her dying mistress, the Countess Margaret.

Franz—himself endowed with all the lithesomness and grace of youth, and wont to wear a winning smile upon his fair face when

anxiety did not, as at present, overcloud it—felt an involuntary admiration for the young girl's beauty, and would doubtless have betrayed his feelings by the ardour of his gaze, had not the parcel reminded him of his mission. The parcel opened, Hans Dorn, who was intent on business, and had no eyes for the new comer, carefully examined the clothes exposed to view. He closely scrutinized the cloak, the black suit, waistcoats, and cravats offered to him, and demanded, "How much do you want for all this?"

"Two hundred and fifty francs," replied Franz.

"I'll give you half that," said Hans.

"Only half!" exclaimed the young man, indignantly. "Only half! when they're all new, and I gave a thousand francs for them!"

"That simply proves your tailors to be brigands," answered Hans. "I have told you the highest price I can give you."

Franz heaved a deep sigh, which gained for him the sympathy of Gertrude. Hans Dorn involuntarily raised his eyes. The moment he saw the young man's fair face, a look of astonishment came over him, and he changed colour. "Gertrude," he said in a low voice, "step into the next room. I wish to be alone with this gentleman."

When the young girl had gone, Hans regarded Franz searchingly for some seconds, then asked him in trembling accents, "What is your name?"

"Franz."

"Are you a German?"

"No," answered Franz; "I am a Frenchman—a Parisian."

After questioning Franz for ten minutes like this, Hans counted out two hundred and fifty francs, which the young man immediately pocketed. "Many thanks," said he, warmly shaking hands with Hans. "Through your kindness, I shall be able to enjoy my last carnival night well, and die decently in the morning!"

The clothes-merchant seemed lost in a reverie as Franz departed. "He would be about that age," he murmured; "and when I first looked at him I thought it was the sweet face of the countess before me. But then have I not also met in Paris a young girl with the same fair hair, and the very same angelic look of the poor Countess Margaret? She was so lovely!"

CHAPTER XIX.

THE FIRST KISS.

FRANZ, lighter in heart and lighter in step, hastened now to keep what might have been a lover's tryst, judging from his eager look and buoyant bearing. Crossing the Place de la Rotonde at a swift pace, he ran down the Rue Forez, sped along the Rue Beaujolais, and did not stop till he arrived at the corner of the Rue de Bretagne, where the chevalier in the light paletot and Verdier held their menacing inter-

view earlier in the afternoon. Here he walked up and down for some time, looking impatiently to the right and to the left. More than ever he seemed like one who was the first to arrive at a lover's rendezvous, and awaited his inamorata with concern at her delay.

Glancing through the window of a little tobacconist's Franz noted that it was five o'clock, and appeared slightly re-assured. "She should return about this time," he said to himself. He looked at the same moment up the Rue Saint Louis. His heart beat fast as he at length saw two female figures approaching. He instinctively knew the younger to be Denise. But how could he say the words he was burning to utter in her hearing alone, when he saw she was accompanied by her old servant?

There was not an instant to lose. They had stopped at a house a few paces from Franz. The old servant had opened the door, and entered the passage to hold the door open for her young mistress. Darkness favoured the young man's bold venture. When the young girl was about to enter, he darted by her and closed the door, leaving them alone on the step.

"Denise, Mademoiselle Denise!" called the old servant; "where are you? Ah! she must have passed me. The young are so nimble! I'll be bound she's up in her own room by this time."

The young lady thus addressed as Mademoiselle Denise was naturally frightened at first by the audacity of Franz. Surprise gave place to indignation when she recognised him. "Let me pass, sir," she said. "The Carnival allows many follies; and I promise you to forget this one."

Franz did not stir, nor could he reply for the moment. He seemed absorbed in admiration of Denise, in whose beauteous face there was a striking resemblance to his own features. She had the same azure eyes, and they were filled with an angry light as she said, "I thought, sir, you were a man of honour. You have cruelly punished me for my mistake!"

"Pray, pardon me!" stammered Franz, submissively. "If you knew—"

"Let me pass," interrupted the young girl, firmly. "The door will be opened directly, and we shall be seen here together."

"That's true," murmured Franz. "I did not think of that. I thought of nothing except to see you for the last time, mademoiselle?"

"I must go in," pleaded Denise in a softer tone. "If you're leaving Paris, Monsieur Franz, I wish you every happiness. I forgive your imprudence, but do not keep me any longer."

"I am not leaving Paris," answered Franz. "Yet I can never see you again. I thank you for your pardon, mademoiselle. If you had still been angry with me, my last night would have been a bitter one." Denise turned pale and trembled. "Adieu, mademoiselle!" continued Franz, making room for Denise to pass. "Adieu, Denise! Let me call you thus when I am about to lose you for ever! For I love you with all my heart and soul, and my last thought will be of you!"

The young girl made no effort to enter the house now. She looked

earnestly into his eyes, as if to find the true meaning of his words. "Why do *you* speak of death, Franz?" she asked softly.

"One may speak of death," he answered, "when there's nobody left to mourn one's loss. If some one had only given me a little pity in exchange for my love I would not have spoken of death, for I should have wished to live! One would be strong enough to vanquish a redoubtable adversary if one fought not only for one's own life, but for a well-loved wife as well!"

"Are you going to fight, then?" asked Denise, in a still gentler voice.

"Yes."

"And are you a swordsman?"

"No."

The charming face of the fair girl turned white as alabaster. Clasping the young man's arm, she beseechingly said, "Franz, for God's sake, don't fight this duel!"

Franz felt his heart beat with joy at this appeal. He took her unresisting hand and pressed it to his lips. "I must fight," he answered, in a voice vibrating with emotion. "My honour is in question. But death need not follow. I feel that with your dear love, Denise, my hand would be strong enough to defend my life."

The blood rushed to the young girl's face at this impassioned appeal; and she trembled, but did not draw back, as Franz clasped her to his heart. "Only tell me, Denise," he whispered, "that you love me, and I shall live to enjoy your love!"

Denise had neither will nor strength left, and her head drooped on the young man's shoulder as she murmured, with a sweet smile, "Franz, I will pray to God for your safety all night."

"Then you love me?"

"Oh! yes; I love you; and if you die, I shall die also!"

Steps were heard approaching as their lips met in the first blissful kiss of love. Franz, full of the fresh elation of love, pressed Denise to his heart in one last embrace. Then, murmuring "Adieu, Denise, darling!" he fled to steel his arm for the morrow's encounter, and to warn Julien, Denise's brother, against the siren of the bal masqué.

As for the young girl, surprised into this sudden avowal of love, she trembled like an aspen leaf. She looked cold and pale as a statue when she entered her mother's room a few minutes later.

The Viscountess d'Audemer was seated on one side of the fire. Glancing at the other side, Denise saw a gentleman, almost bent double, so low and profound was the salute he gave the young girl. "You are late, my dear," said the viscountess; "and Monsieur de Reinhold has been waiting to see you."

The chevalier Reinhold again bent low and attempted to smile. Denise acknowledged his presence, scarcely knowing what she did.

"Good news!" said the viscountess as she kissed her daughter. "I have received a letter from Julien. He will be here to-morrow."

Denise did not answer. One being held possession of her heart and soul. In the first moments of virgin love she could think of Franz alone.

CHAPTER XX.

THE FACE AT THE WINDOW.

OUR traveller, Baron de Rodach, whom we left in the Temple, looking in vain for Franz, dined in a neighbouring restaurant, and then set out afresh to continue his quest. On arriving at the end of the Rue de la Rotonde, he paused in front of a new house, which he regarded with an air of indecision. "Here's another vexatious delay," he said to himself. "The Temple is shut, and I must now wait till to-morrow to see Madame Batailleur. As for my friend Hans Dorn, he seems to have a very fine house."

To satisfy himself on this point, he rang the bell and summoned the porter. "Monsieur Hans Dorn within?" inquired the baron.

"Don't know any such person," brusquely replied the porter.

As the baron resumed his search, nothing daunted, Hans Dorn happened at the very moment to enter a wine-shop bearing the sign of the Giraffe. Its name arose from a little pleasantry of the customers, who christened it the Giraffe after the jovial and ruddy barmaid, "fair, fat, and forty," and blessed with a figure as short and stout as the giraffe is tall and lean. Mine host of the Giraffe, Johann, formerly equerry-in-chief of Count Gunther, was an old friend of Hans Dorn, as he was, indeed, of many of the little German colony settled near the Temple, and including most of the old servants at Bluthaupt Castle.

These German emigrants from Bluthaupt held their carnival fête to-night in a private room of the Giraffe, and they gave Hans Dorn a warm welcome as he joined their festive board and took the one chair left vacant for him. Johann had produced some of his best Rhine wine in honour of the occasion; and he did his utmost to make all merry.

Hans Dorn alone appeared distracted and pre-occupied—so much that the innkeeper at length rallied him upon his gloomy looks. Whereupon Hans forced a smile into his face as he said, "You're right, I was thinking of something rather serious—too serious for this merry-meeting. But I'll give you one of our old German songs, and then we'll have a chat about old times at Bluthaupt, my friends."

Hans cleared his throat with a good draught of wine, and began a familiar air which they had all listened to twenty years previously in Bluthaupt Castle, and in the chorus of which they all now heartily joined. More than one heart was stirred with emotion, and eyes were moistened at the plaintive song. It seemed as if some sweet zephyr had brought to the absent ones the sweet voice of their Fatherland. It was one of those simple and melancholy airs, harmonious and haunting, dear to German ears. Soul was put into song. The soft notes seemed to vibrate on the heart-strings, recalling who can tell how many fond remembrances, or cherished scenes, or dearly-loved faces? Eyes

were dim, indeed, as the last refrain died away, and their thoughts involuntarily reverted to the old castle, which had now passed into alien hands.

"Ah! that was a happy time," muttered Hermann, "when we were young together, and our master was a Bluthaupt!"

Hans Dorn quickly answered, "Who knows for certain that the last Count of Bluthaupt is dead? I wish you had seen him as I did," continued Hans, half to himself. "It was like an apparition! The name of Bluthaupt was on my lips." He stopped; and his compatriots regarded him with puzzled looks.

The window looking on the street was supposed to be veiled by a red curtain, which left enough space on each side, however, to enable curious passers by to see into the interior of the room. The moment Hans Dorn was about to resume his reference to the strange visit he had received that evening a slight exclamation came from Hermann, and he pointed to the window. Everyone looked in the direction indicated. The pale face of a man was seen there for an instant regarding one of their number with strange intentness. The next moment the face had vanished.

Hans trembled as he exclaimed, in an almost choking voice, "Again! another vision!"

. . . . . .

The sight of the pale face at the window, and Hans Dorn's ghostly allusions, acted as a damper on the party. Johann, to re-assure his friends, went outside; but no stranger was visible in the street, as he informed his comrades.

"Who was it that alarmed you so this evening, Hans?" asked Hermann. "You were going to tell us when we were interrupted."

"My visitor," replied Hans, "was a man of flesh and blood like ourselves. But why should I speak of these things? You know I am ever ready to note any resemblance to a Bluthaupt."

"Ah! no one knows all that occurred that fearful night at the castle," broke in Hermann, giving expression to his own thoughts.

"Outside as well as inside the castle walls," added Fritz the courier. "Yes, it was indeed a terrible night. The Hœlle was dark as the mouth of hell itself; and I fancy I still hear that dread cry ever ringing in my ears at night time."

"We have all heard," said Hans Dorn, to whom every eye was directed, as if to learn the particulars of that night of mystery—"We have all heard how that, near the break of day, the Three Red Knights appeared at the castle, according to their ancient custom whenever there is a birth or death at Bluthaupt. Klauss (who is now in the service of Geldberg and Co.) saw them riding down the mountain as he was returning from Heidelberg, whither our poor mistress had sent him. The first, whose scarlet cloak gleamed like a meteor through the mist, was riding at full gallop. The second carried an infant in his arms. The third supported the seemingly lifeless body of a young girl. The infant was the heir of Bluthaupt. The girl was the faithful attendant of the Countess Margaret—Gertrude, who became my beloved wife."

"Then," interrupted Johann, "you had charge of the infant, had you not, Hans?"

"Ah, yes!" answered Hans with a sigh. "After the death of Count Gunther, Gertrude and I went to live on the estate of Rothe Castle. We nourished the child in secret. The three sons of Count Ulrich alone shared the secret with us. Four years sped by. My poor wife gave birth to the darling child which bears her name, and who is now my only treasure on earth. The three sons of Count Ulrich ceased their visits about the same time. I learned that they had been arrested and imprisoned at Vienna. One day the young heir of Bluthaupt was playing outside our cottage while my wife was nursing little Gertrude indoors. Suddenly my wife heard his childish voice crying for help. She placed Gertrude in her cradle and rushed into the garden. The boy had disappeared. His feeble cries were still heard in the distance; and my wife saw amid a cloud of dust a tall man on horseback speeding away at full gallop. She fancied she recognised Yanos the magyar. Count Ulrich's sons escaped from prison, and came to see after the charge they had intrusted to us. We could only show them his empty bed. Many years have passed since then. My poor wife died. In vain I sought everywhere for the young heir of Bluthaupt. In vain, till to-day! I have just seen a young man, friends, the very image of the Countess Margaret. It is true, it may have been a mere resemblance. But, even if he were the heir of Bluthaupt, what chance could he have against his secret enemies?"

"We are a dozen strong fellows here!" exclaimed Hermann, with warmth. "A Bluthaupt should not lack defenders in Paris while we live!"

"Spoken like a brave man!" said Hans, grasping his hand. "But, alas! all help may soon be useless to him. He spoke as if he were going to meet death. Would that his natural protectors were here instead of in the Frankfort prison!"

Hans Dorn lifted his glass to his lips. He was about to drink when he felt a slight touch on his shoulder. He rose to his feet. There stood before him a stranger who had entered unperceived. He wore a travel-stained cloak, which reached to his spurred top-boots. The pale face visible under a broad-brimmed beaver was the same Hans had seen a while ago at the window. A name came to the lips of Hans. But he did not utter it. The stranger imposed silence by an imperious gesture, and motioned Hans to follow him.

CHAPTER XXI.

THE EVE OF THE DUEL.

HANS DORN and the stranger left the cabaret together, and walked slowly up the Rue du Petit-Thouars, one of the quiet streets free from the throngs of pleasure-seekers in masks and motley. "Thank heaven! I have found you," said Hans, breaking the silence which

both had observed since quitting the Giraffe. "I feared I should never see you again, my seigneur!"

"Tell me all you know about that young man," answered the stranger, pressing his hand in acknowledgment of his fidelity. It was the same cloaked cavalier whom the Jewess had recognised as Baron de Rodach.

"If you overheard what I said in the cabaret," said Hans in reply, "I have very little to add. He called on me this evening; and the moment my eyes rested on him I thought the Countess Margaret had risen from her tomb." A glad light shone in the baron's eyes at this corroboration of the opinion he himself had formed when he caught a passing glimpse of Franz. "He resembles her to the life," continued Hans. "He has her eyes and her winning smile."

"I know it," said the baron. "I have seen him too."

"And what do you think?"

"It is he. What made him call on you?"

"He came to dispose of some clothes."

"He is poor, then?"

"He had absolutely nothing. I had a long talk with him, and I know all his history. He was for some time clerk at a great banker's. He was dismissed without reason. For the last month or two he has been living on his savings. The suit he brought me was his best; and he spoke of spending all I gave him this very night."

"How much was that?"

"Two hundred and fifty francs."

"But how can he spend all that?"

"First, he had some debts to pay. Secondly, he had to buy a costume for the bal masqué, to which he was bound for some secret purpose."

"And then?"

"He had to fight a duel at six o'clock in the morning," replied Hans, his low voice betraying his fear. "He has never touched a sword, and he was going to take a lesson in fencing to prepare himself for his adversary."

"A duel!" exclaimed the baron, his face expressing the utmost anxiety. "Did he seem afraid?"

"Not of the duel, but of the bal masqué."

"Is his opponent a good swordsman?"

"One of the best in Paris!"

"Do you know his name?"

"The young man did not mention it before me."

Baron de Rodach paced up and down in great agitation. Involuntarily he recalled to mind the conversation he had overheard some hours previously at the corner of the Rue des Fontaines. The heir of Bluthaupt, then, was the unfortunate young man who had been trapped into this duel by a hireling, and who was manfully resolved to take part in this unequal contest, without the slightest hope of victory—nay, with the certainty of his falling a victim to his adversary's skill in fence. Undaunted by the almost hopeless task of discovering Franz amongst the medley crowds having their riotous fling on this night of the carnival in every

Parisian haunt of folly, the baron calmed himself, and said, with an air of determination, "I must find him! There's all the night before me!"

"Ah, I have sought him for fifteen years," was the discouraging answer of Hans.

The baron, as was his habit in moments of perplexity, raised his beaver, and passed his hand through his raven hair. Then, obeying the impulse of a sudden thought, he asked, "Did he not speak of a fencing lesson?"

"Yes, he was about to take one—his first and last, I fear."

"But did he not name the saloon he was going to?"

"The name: whatever was it? Ah! my poor memory. It was quite familiar to me. It was— Who is the first fencing-master in Paris?"

"Grisier."

"Grisier!" exclaimed Hans in a glad voice, his face brightening. "That's the very name. I am certain of it!"

"Then he shall be saved!" replied the baron, with confidence. "If he is the one we seek, thank heaven! If he is a stranger, so much the better for him."

CHAPTER XXII.

MOSES GELDBERG AT HOME.

THE bank of Messieurs Geldberg, Reinhold, and Company was situated in the Rue de la Ville l'Evêque. It was one of the finest mansions in the Faubourg St. Honoré. Built by some great lord in the reign of Louis XVI., it had suffered, like its master, from the Revolution, and had become one of the headquarters of the financial world of Paris. The leading spirits of the banking firm in 1844 were Monsieur Abel de Geldberg, the Chevalier de Reinhold, and a rich foreign physician, Don José Mira. To this trio, Monsieur de Geldberg, the father, had for many years given up the management of the bank; and the world considered he was enjoying the fruits of his industry in his ripe old age, worshipped by his devoted family and the faithful partners of his only son. It was, nevertheless, noticed as somewhat remarkable that during the business hours of the bank he invariably remained secluded in his private room, and that from nine o'clock in the morning until five in the afternoon, no one, not even any of his family nor his valet, would be seen by him. What Monsieur de Geldberg did all those hours was a complete mystery, which nobody could solve.

It was about eight o'clock in the evening. Monsieur de Geldberg was seated, with his family and his two most intimate friends, in a handsome drawing-room on the first floor of the mansion worthy of the high position held by the great firm of Geldberg and Company. Here Moses Geldberg liked to luxuriate after dinner, as he well might. On entering, his feet fell softly on the most velvety of carpets, his eyes

rested with gratification on paintings by the greatest masters, representing scenes from the Old Testament, he inhaled with pleasure the odour stealing from a golden censer by the fire, and as he sank into his cozy armchair on the hearth, he had the supreme enjoyment of his daughters' greetings.

His white hair would have given him a venerable look had it not been for his yellow face, furrowed with numberless wrinkles, and his piercing grey eyes, the sharp glances from which might have led a curious observer to recognise Monsieur de Geldberg as Moses Geld, the usurer of the Judengasse of Frankfort. The restless eyes were quiet now. There was nothing to excite his cupidity at this moment. Was he not surrounded by his loving daughters?

Near him there was his eldest daughter Sarah, Madame de Laurens, reclining on a cushion, her beauty so much enhanced by the soft light from the candelabra that it was difficult to think that she was the same lady whom we saw with Baron de Rodach near the Temple in the afternoon. The brilliancy of her dark braided hair, in which some red coral was coquettishly interwoven, added to the rich loveliness of the voluptuous brunette's complexion; and the seemingly unstudied abandon of her pose allowed the undulating beauty of her small charming figure to be admired to advantage. She held a book in her hand, and was reading softly to her father.

Behind her, a man of about forty was conversing with Esther, the second daughter of Moses Geld. His face was sallow and wasted; and his features were frequently contracted with pain, as though he were suffering from a severe neuralgic attack. When he looked at Madame de Laurens, as he often did in the pauses of the conversation, and when his eyes happened to meet hers, his face cleared and beamed with happiness, for Sarah was his wife, and Monsieur de Laurens loved her with a rare devotion. Esther did not resemble her elder sister in the least. She was tall, and of full figure. Her features were more regular than Sarah's; but they were less charming, lacking the ever-varying expression of her sister's. She bore the rank of countess—Countess Lampion. Esther was in love with the title, but detested the name borne by her late husband, if one apparently so placid and soulless could detest anything.

Heedless of Esther and Sarah—heedless of all in the room, in fact—seemed Lia, Moses Geld's youngest daughter. She mechanically stitched at her embroidery work; and when, pausing for a moment, she raised her sweet, blue eyes, it was simply to gaze dreamily into vacancy. Lia was only eighteen. Her figure, already developed, was more perfect than Esther's, and more graceful even than Sarah's. There was little of a Jewish stamp in her delicate features. Her skin was whiter than either of her sisters', and her dark hair, falling in rich colours over her slender shoulders, added to the lustre of her fair complexion. Lia's cheeks wore a faint rosy tint; and altogether it would have been difficult to find a more charming little beauty. An artist, or a poet, rather, would have chosen Lia to describe that vague emotion which first troubles or delights a maiden's heart of hearts—that unfamiliar weight which the young bear with joyous readiness.

Young as she was, Lia still had a secret to cherish in her soul, and a wistful smile stole round her sweet mouth as she held communion with her own thoughts.

Madame de Laurens, when she ceased reading for a while, occasionally shot a glance at her youngest sister. There was malice in the gaze and treachery in the smile that followed this look. Lia saw neither glance nor smile. She still held sweet communion with herself, and but one name occupied her thoughts. Unfortunately, in visiting Madame Batailleur at the Temple, Lia had placed her trust in a creature of Madame de Laurens, with whom the woman Batailleur had many secret dealings. Leaving Lia to her waking dream of love, let us note the other occupants of the drawing-room.

Her brother, Monsieur Abel de Geldberg, a young buck of fashion, was listlessly regarding the Chevalier de Reinhold and Doctor Mira, who were playing at dice. Pleading fatigue, Madame de Laurens presently put down her book and received the thanks of her father for entertaining him so long. She next moved to the card-table, whither the unquiet eyes of her husband followed her. She sat down beside the Chevalier de Reinhold, and met without flinching the strange, fixed gaze of Doctor Mira. "Pray continue your game," she said. "You can chat and play at the same time. Well, chevalier, what news of your marriage?"

"All progresses well, very well madame," replied Reinhold, placing his dice-box on the table. "My suit has not yet been definitely accepted by Mademoiselle d'Audemer; but her mother——"

"Fie, chevalier!" exclaimed Sarah, laughingly. "So you besiege the mother to gain the daughter!"

The chevalier answered with a forced laugh, which displayed his teeth; and airily tossed the dice on the table. Drawing closer, Madame de Laurens inquired of Reinhold in a low voice, "And what news of our young hero?"

"Whom do you mean?"

"The heir of Bluthaupt!"

"Madame," stammered Reinhold, "I was not aware you were in the secret!"

"I know all, chevalier!"

Reinhold was ill at ease; for the question of Madame de Laurens had reference to Franz, and the chevalier had been too closely concerned personally in the plot with Verdier to relish the idea of his secret being in the possession of a woman. But it could not be helped now; so he made a virtue of necessity and answered openly, "The firm of Geldberg, madame, need not be alarmed. The young man you allude to, whoever he may be, were he even the heir of Bluthaupt, as you said just now, will soon have no power to hurt us."

"Then he is not yet disposed of?"

"He will be to-morrow morning."

Madame de Laurens sank back in her chair, and a murmur of satisfaction escaped her lips. Looking up, she caught a significant glance from Doctor Mira, and said lightly, "What an interminable game! Excuse me, chevalier, if I deprive you of your partner, but Doctor

Mira has something interesting to say to me, and I never listen to him without profit."

Reinhold rose to his feet and bowed graciously as he left Madame de Laurens and Doctor Mira alone at the table. Placing her white hand on the doctor's arm, which trembled at her touch, she whispered, "Are you still fearful about the coming clearance?"

"Very fearful!" replied the doctor, who seemed under a spell whilst questioned by Sarah.

"Has Van Praet written?"

"Twice since yesterday."

"And the London house?"

"Yanos Georgyi will be reduced to the lowest ebb if he is not paid by the tenth."

"How much is there owing to him?"

"Nine hundred thousand francs."

"And to Van Praet?"

"Almost twice as much."

"And how much have we in the safe?"

"Some hundred louis."

These words were exchanged rapidly, and as if they had been talking on some unimportant subject or other. Still maintaining her careless and almost indifferent manner, she said, after a brief silence, "I must have the few hundred louis you have in hand!"

"You shall have them to-morrow."

Sarah accepted the promise as a matter of course, and did not thank the doctor. Replying to an anxious look from Monsieur de Laurens, she softly said, "I'll be with you directly, my dear!" But, instead of quitting the doctor, she leaned forward confidentially, and questioned Mira searchingly, "Don't you think Monsieur de Laurens is better?"

"No," answered Mira.

"Look at him well," she continued. "You are a skilful physician: can you tell me how long he will live?"

The doctor turned his sinister gaze towards Monsieur de Laurens, whose face was at that moment painfully contracted from a fresh attack of neuralgia. He replied in a low whisper, "Perhaps a year; perhaps a month!"

The clock struck nine. The old Jew rose and kissed each of his daughters before retiring to bed.

The Chevalier de Reinhold could not suppress a smile at the ardent gaze with which Dr. Mira ever regarded Madame de Laurens; whilst she, bidding them "Good night!" whispered quickly to the impassive Esther, "Are you going to-night?"

"Yes," answered Esther.

The two sisters separated with a secret look of understanding, and Madame de Laurens accompanied her husband to the carriage.

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE HUSBAND'S APPEAL.

MADAME DE LAURENS sat at her husband's side, but said not a word during the drive home to the Rue de Provence.

"You're not going out anywhere else to-night, Sarah?" inquired Monsieur de Laurens, as they alighted from the carriage.

"I have not made up my mind yet," replied the wife.

A few minutes later they sat facing each other in Madame de Lauren's bedroom. Monsieur de Laurens regarded his wife wistfully and lovingly as she threw a dressing-gown over her graceful shoulders. They had been married eighteen years. For ten years it was matter of common report in Parisian saloons that he was the happiest of husbands; and as each of those ten years flew by he saw some fresh charm in his wife's beauty. Every day she appeared to him more lovely; every day younger. He loved her alone, and passionately. The rapt look of devotion in her eyes was the index of his boundless affection: the look betokened limitless love and submission to the enslaver of his heart.

All this wealth of devotion seemed thrown away on the graceful beauty negligently lounging back in her chair. She completely ignored his presence. Her eyes glistened at some inner thought as she gazed at the ceiling, and her small feet impatiently beat the carpet in a kind of dance-measure. A little before eleven o'clock she glanced at the clock, and then let her look fall on Monsieur de Laurens, content as ever to bask in the sunshine of her presence. It was a kind glance that Madame de Laurens happened to throw at her husband; and it descended like balm to his heart of hearts. "What are you thinking of, Leon?" asked she caressingly.

"I am thinking of you."

"Always of me!" murmured the wife, heaving a sentimental sigh.

Monsieur de Laurens drew nearer to his wife, gallantly raised her hand to his lips and kissed it fervently.

"Ever of you!" he repeated. "Ever! You would not prevent me from loving you, Sarah!"

The wife regarded her husband more and more tenderly. "Poor Leon!" she exclaimed. "You are so good. How I wish I could make you happy!"

"That would be easy enough, my dear! A word, a glance, a smile—anything from you would be perfect happiness to me!" Her graceful head drooped upon his shoulder. Her soft black hair rested on his cheek. This unwonted tenderness made him tremble with joy.

"You are so kind!" Sarah continued. "You are so noble and generous," and here she paused as if in mercy to her husband, whose poor heart was throbbing delightedly. "You are everything to make one love you, but yet I do not love you."

Monsieur de Laurens shivered at this cold stab. All joy left his heart; he was pale and chilled. "Why are you so cruel, Sarah?" he groaned "Have pity on my love, or you will kill me!"

"I am so frank, you see!" she replied, with a smile. "I am too frank. But let us drop the subject, as it wounds you! How do you like this head-dress?" she continued, rising to arrange her coiffure before the glass.

"It is charming."

"Without flattery?"

"Am I a flatterer?"

Sarah shot a coquettish glance at him, and put the finishing touches to her head-dress. She then took a black satin domino with a velvet mask from the cupboard. "Madame! Madame!" stammered Monsieur de Laurens, at sight of the insignia of folly, "What are those things for?"

"What are they used for generally?" answered Sarah, lightly. "That carriage you see on the other side of the street there is waiting for me."

"My wife!" exclaimed the despairing husband, in one last appeal, "hear me. I know you have a passion for play which the world judges harshly. I have not restrained you. I have even helped you to indulge your passion in secret. What did it matter to me? I loved you. But to-night! Ah, heaven! it is not for the gambling-table you would leave me now."

"Well, have you finished?" was the wife's sneering reply.

"Madame!" said the husband, stung to indignation at last, "madame! it is my wish that you should not go out to-night."

"It is *your* wish!" she repeated, with all the disdain she could command.

For a second or two Monsieur de Laurens sustained the piercing glance of the enraged woman with firmness. It was a short struggle between his infirm will and his well-schooled submission. The victory rested, as it ever did, with Sarah's stronger resolution. Madame de Laurens smiled as her husband's head again bent to the yoke. Putting on her domino, she took a light from the chimneypiece and placed it in his hand. "Light me down!" she said in triumph.

Instead of proceeding in the direction of the principal staircase, she gathered up her dress with a coquettish air, and hurried lightheartedly to her husband's room. There she touched a spring in the wall, and the secret door of a private staircase flew open. Lighted by Monsieur de Laurens (whose icy hand she had pressed in saying "Good-bye"), the wife stole quietly down stairs in her black domino and mask. He soon heard the carriage-door slammed after her. A mortal faintness seemed to seize him as he felt a fresh attack of his intermittent agony. "She has robbed me of all!" he gasped; "fortune, honour, life! Still I love her! God knows how I love her!"

A siren truly, whose spell had been felt by more than Franz!

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE LESSON IN DUELLING.

FRANZ'S heart was full of joy. His love for Mademoiselle d'Audemer, and the proud consciousness that he was beloved by her in return, buoyed him up with so much hope that he thought of his coming duel without a tremor. There was yet much for him to do before the morning's encounter; but he felt that the rare elation which sent the life-blood coursing through his veins with inspiriting vigour would nerve his arm and quicken his eye to seize every trick in fence which the master-of-arms might teach him; and the same exaltation of spirit bade him not despair of success in the more delicate task he had set himself of putting Julien on his guard against the blandishments of the soulless woman who had ensnared his heart.

He had by this time joined the gay stream of pleasure-seekers flowing along the brilliant boulevards. But the flashing lights of the cafés, the many-hued costumes of the maskers, the brightest glances of the most piquant Parisiennes, had no distraction for Franz. In all the self-reliance of youth, in the full flood of his love, he kept ever before him the duty he owed to the brother of his beloved, whose low, sweet voice and first blissful kiss still thrilled through him. The loving light which filled the limpid depths of her azure eyes seemed yet reflected in his as he entered a restaurant and strengthened himself by a modest repast; while the pleasurable remembrance of the fond embrace which the fair Denise had permitted him to enjoy was intensified as he pledged his love in a frothing glass of Cupid's own wine, sweet champagne.

On leaving the restaurant Franz made his way to a costumier's in the Rue Vivienne. There was an embarrassment of choice in the shape of costumes designed according to the traditional fashion of Parisian carnivals or invented by the inexhaustible imagination of Moreau. Franz chose a page's suit, which had doubtless adorned the figure of many a pretty lorette. It was a graceful dress, in which velvet, silk, and gold were intermingled without much regard to historical consistency, but with marvellously good taste. It was a suit that would only have become a pretty woman or Franz; and the shopwoman, for one, plainly thought it became Franz to a nicety, as she smilingly handed him a lady's ticket for the bal masqué, saying at the same time, "You ought to buy a mask as well, mademoiselle; and then you can go in for nothing."

Franz gave a laughing reply as he doffed the page's suit and resumed his own attire. He bought the mask, and added as he was leaving, "I shall return to dress, mind, at twelve!"

Franz quickly crossed the Place de la Bourse and regained the boulevards. He stopped at a long passage at the corner of the Boulevard Montmartre, and asked a question of the concierge, who directed him

to No. 3 in the court. He knocked; but, as the porter appeared rather tardy in answering, Franz pushed the door open and entered. He found himself in a spacious saloon, the centre occupied by three couples of fencers, while there was a ring of spectators around them, applauding their most skilful passes.

Franz was in the saloon of Grisier, the literary master-at-arms, whose pupils were poets and princes—the cunning teacher, who almost endowed the foil with life, and who made fencing one of the fine arts. There was a deafening noise, the clatter of many tongues, mingling with the clashing of the foils, the stamping of feet in the heat of combat, and the exclamations of triumph from the victors. The combatants, clad in leather to their chins and wearing masks of iron wire, seemed thoroughly in earnest. Thrust they never so vigorously, however, their blows were harmless. The slender foils either bent in two, like the fine whalebone of a lady's corset, or were snapped in twain like glass.

Franz asked for Grisier. There was pointed out to him a man clad in blue, watching the assaults of his pupils with approving eyes from his corner. The young man crossed over to this redoubtable master-at-arms, and stated the object of his visit in a low but earnest voice. Grisier threw a searching glance at him from head to foot, then said, "I am at your service, monsieur."

He buckled on his leather waistcoat and donned a mask. Franz did likewise. After waiting a few minutes for their turn, Grisier placed him in position and handed him a foil. "You can tell me what you have to say later," he whispered to Franz. "There are too many persons present now. Attention!"

Paying cute heed to the practical instructions of the deft master-at-arms, Franz learnt in the twinkling of an eye the first passes in the art of fencing. The lesson lasted a quarter of an hour. "Are you tired?" inquired Grisier.

"No," replied Franz.

Grisier smiled behind his mask as he said, "You have plenty of coolness, and I did not believe you were so strong. Certes, your adversary will not be able to hold you too cheap!"

"I should think not," answered Franz. "I intend to do my best. Shall we begin again?"

Grisier thereupon once more placed him *en garde*, and soon called forth all his quickness and strength of hand in parrying. Franz was naturally a little awkward at first, but he very soon acquired a certain readiness in fence. When he had resisted a dozen assaults Grisier encouraged him with a word of praise.

"Then teach me how to attack," said Franz.

"Patience! patience!" exclaimed Grisier. "We shall arrive at that all in good time!"

As the bals masqués drew away one after another of Grisier's patrons and pupils, the saloon became emptier. When a good half had left there was a new arrival in the person of a cavalier, the upturned collar of whose cloak made it difficult to recognise his features. He appeared quite familiar with the saloon. Passing behind Franz to

avoid attracting his attention, he gained the corner set apart for dressing unobserved, and, drawing the curtains slightly aside, closely watched the young man as he continued his lesson. The heat was very oppressive behind the curtains, and the new-comer allowed the collar of his cloak to fall on his neck, so that he might breathe more freely. An habitué, who was donning his coat at the moment, held out his hand to the stranger like an old acquaintance, and exclaimed, in a tone of pleasant surprise, "Baron de Rodach! It is an age since I saw you last!"

"I have been travelling," was the baron's reply, as he turned to regard young Franz again.

The young man began to be fatigued at last. He dropped his foil to give his arm a little rest. "You will tire me out before I know how to attack," murmured Franz.

"Patience!" answered Grisier. "We have till to-morrow morning to spare."

"Not I!" warmly replied Franz, bethinking himself of his appointment with Julien, "I have many other things to do to-night!"

There were now very few left in the saloon. A certain curiosity had been aroused by the sight of the veteran master-at-arms commencing a lesson at so late an hour. Every one divined that it was the preparation for a duel, but that was no rarity, and any wonder at the youth of the fair, slim duellist was but fleeting.

Grisier, glancing round to see that they could not be overheard, bade Franz sit down beside him on the lounge beside the wall. "Now, then," he said, "let us have a little chat while your arm and legs are resting. Do you particularly wish to kill your adversary? You were not insulted by him, were you?"

"Yes. But I suppose I offended him also. He accused me of cheating at cards. I threw the contents of my glass into his face!"

"At a café?"

"Yes. At a café."

Grisier shrugged his shoulders. The frank and open face of Franz had led him to think the cause of the quarrel was some slight dispute; and Grisier was as well practised in arranging these affairs of honour amicably, as he was perfect in the art of fencing.

"And your opponent," he continued, still hoping for an opportunity of mediating, "is doubtless one of your comrades?"

"No," said Franz. "He is one of those fellows you always see hanging about the most frequented cafés. I did not even know his name until the moment he gave me his card."

"May I ask his name?"

"Verdier."

Grisier started; and the baron, who had drawn sufficiently near to overhear the conversation, appeared even more startled by the name. "Verdier!" the baron said to himself. "Why, that is surely the man of the Rue des Fontaines! Something told me that his words were pregnant with meaning to me. It is well I have his image graven on my mind."

"Verdier!" repeated Grisier, his voice rising in angry protest.

"He is an expert! Monsieur, in my opinion a duel with him would be assassination on his part; and I, for one, cannot countenance it."

"Monsieur," answered Franz, calmly, "this duel *must* take place. My honour is in question. To refuse me your help would be to deprive me of my one chance of safety."

Grisier could not help bestowing a look of admiration upon the young man who thus dauntlessly spoke of braving almost certain death. He could not see the Baron de Rodach, concealed behind the curtains; and he was seemingly satisfied that they now had the saloon all to themselves. Grisier rose and unhooked two fresh swords from the wall. The one he gave Franz had the button affixed to the point; the one he kept had none. Franz was about to put his thick glove on again, but was stopped by the authoritative command of his master.

"No glove! No mask, either! To-morrow you will have nothing of the kind, and the naked point of a sword will dazzle your eyes. I know you are brave, monsieur; but those first flashes of a naked blade unnerve the bravest. So accustom yourself to the cold steel while you can without danger!"

Franz fell into position once more, and the lesson was resumed. Grisier purposely allowed the point of his sword to play before his face; But Franz advanced and parried with astonishing precision. Springing to the attack with renewed vigour, for his blood was up, Franz dealt such lusty blows that Grisier had to use all his skill to keep him from wounding him.

"If you attack like that," said Grisier, breathlessly, "you will be killed in no time."

But Franz could not restrain his eagerness. He strained every nerve, and used all his tact to get the better of his mentor. He attacked with lightning-like rapidity. One swift pass Grisier in vain attempted to parry. The button struck the master's breast, and his frail sword bent in twain and was shivered into pieces.

"Bravely done! He is a true son of Bluthaupt!" exclaimed their sole eye-witness to himself, with delight, while Grisier stood for a moment mute with astonishment at the sudden blow he had received. A smile soon stole over his face at the success of his pupil, in whom he found himself taking more and more interest. "Take another sword," he said, admiringly, to Franz.

"I don't know half enough yet, that's certain," said Franz, after glancing at the clock; "but my time is up; and, besides, I am very tired, and if we continue I shall have no strength left in the morning. I have devoted enough time to myself. A dear friend may need my help now!" Franz thereupon resumed his waistcoat and overcoat, despite the earnest expostulations of his anxious mentor, the baron all the while making a mental note of every word that fell from the young man's lips.

"Remember," broke in Grisier, when Franz persisted in departing, "remember you keep *en garde* at such a distance that the point of your sword would scarcely touch your adversary's; march, parry, and thrust!"

"I shall remember all your instructions, thank you," interrupted

Franz, sighing involuntarily, as he conjured up for the hundredth time that night the fair face of Denise, which he now feared he might have seen for the last time. He brightened again as he grasped Grisier's hand in a farewell shake, and said, "Adieu, monsieur! My best thanks! If I am lucky to-morrow I'll come and tell you all about it. If not—" He finished the sentence with a gesture more expressive than words could be, and rapidly made for the door, followed by the last injunctions of Grisier.

The master-at-arms, was so pre-occupied with thoughts of the coming duel that he did not observe the baron standing in the middle of the saloon. "I' faith!" said Grisier. "I may be mistaken, but I believe I shall see him again safe and sound!"

"*I promise you that you will, upon my honour!*" was the confident reply of the Baron de Rodach. Grisier looked up in time to see the cloaked figure disappear in the doorway.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE BAL MASQUE.

IT was three o'clock in the morning! The floor of the Opéra Comique was trembling under the feet of the seemingly delirious maskers, dancing a wild carnival polka! All the Parisian world of folly was there. Clerks and grisettes, students and cadets, lorettes and mothers of families danced as though their last hour were nigh and they could tread never a measure again after this last wild carnival fling. Young men of wealth, dandies of the boulevards, journalists, and confidential servants possessing the keys of their masters' wardrobes, all clad in sombre black, walked gravely in the lobbies and corridors. In the memory of the oldest sergent de ville there had never been so popular a bal masqué. The crush-room well deserved its name. One could scarcely move in it. The compact crowd swayed this way and that. A confused murmur spread through the thick atmosphere. There rose above the hum now and again the hoarse shouts of men, the shrill cries of women, and loud bursts of laughter.

In the very midst of this masked throng were a couple doing their utmost to force a passage, apparently in quest of some lost companions. One, a tall, fine young fellow, wore the coat of a naval officer and the pantaloons of a hussar. Five or six-and-twenty was his age. His face, beaming with pleasure, would have been seen to wear a frank but weak look had his mask been removed. He was handsome, and there was a rare charm and nobility in his smile. His heart, quick to love, sincere, but too easily moved, gave warmth to his glance. He was the young Viscount Julien d'Audemer, lieutenant in the navy on leave; and, following the impulse of his pleasure loving nature, there he was spending the first night of his leave at the bal masqué, where his most intimate friend, Franz, bound to him now almost by a fraternal tie, had joined him for a far deeper reason than that of pleasure.

Franz, disguised as a page—and a well-made page too—was arm-in-arm with Julien. The subject of their conversation at this moment was the coming duel. "Oh! consider that settled, Franz!" said Julien, peering over the shoulders of those in front of him. "I'll be your second, of course, since you'll not allow me to bring that wretched coward to reason myself. But where the deuce have our sweet witches flown to?"

"I saw them only a little while ago, Julien, when that tall gallant in a German uniform placed himself between them and us. Did you notice how curiously he looked at me?"

"I noticed he kept very near my blue domino," answered the lieutenant. "Bah! that German costume fills your head with theatrical nonsense. While I think of it, Franz, have you observed that my mother seems to become more and more intimate with the Geldbergs? And I have some credit with one member of the family!"

"Do you still think of the Countess Esther as a wife, then, Julien?"

"We are constant, if not faithful, we sailors. Esther is the most beautiful woman in Paris! But that's not all. I want to use my influence in that quarter to make the Geldbergs friendly to you again, Franz."

"I don't wish for their friendship."

"But you are without fortune."

"I have nothing; but yet I don't want their aid."

"As you like, Franz. You must remember, however, it was my fancy in that quarter which first brought us together—"

Franz interrupted his friend by pointing to the end of the saloon. "Look!" he said.

"'Tis your German!" exclaimed Julien. "But he has actually changed his costume."

"And he is speaking to them," said Franz.

The man indicated by Franz was talking to two ladies, one in a blue satin domino, the other in black. He was young, and by his lively gestures he was evidently entertaining his companions to his own satisfaction. He wore the brilliant uniform of a major. The ladies with whom he was conversing differed in person, as well as in domino. The one in the black domino was graceful, petite, seductive. The blue domino had a more imposing figure, ripe and fully developed, as the wanton folds of her rich satin dress revealed.

"Yes, they are the very same witches!" said Julien. "Let us rejoin them, Franz!"

But they advanced with difficulty. When they had reached half way, Julien was chagrined to see the major disappear with both ladies, each moving off arm-in-arm with him. "Gone again!" the young officer muttered. "And she is the Queen of the Ball!"

"Do you know I am seriously in love, too?" asked Franz, to divert Julien's attention.

"With the black domino?"

"No, no! With a young girl, pure as she is pretty."

"As good as she is beautiful?" repeated Julien, incredulously.

"Yes; you have said the truth, Julien. She *is* as good as she is beautiful."

"Is she at the bal masqué to-night?"

"Fie, Julien! I tell you she is a sweet young girl, with just such a pure heart as your sister has, Julien, or your mother had when she was a young girl!" The little of Franz's face visible under his velvet mask had suddenly turned scarlet. He paused, and had the embarrassed look of one who feared he had said too much.

Julien d'Audemer could not see the drift of his remarks, however, and did not observe the momentary confusion. "Now you have filled my heart with remorse," said Julien. "The moment I arrived in Paris I saw the bills announcing this confounded bal masqué. My evil genius —my self of selfs, if you like—tempted me to go. I had just time to send you a message to meet me. Behold the result! I have become infatuated with a lovely figure to which you have given the hard name of siren! But tell me, Franz, is Denise still pretty?"

"Adorable!" answered Franz in a low voice.

"And does my mother still think of wedding her to the Chevalier de Reinhold?"

Franz could scarcely command his voice sufficiently to reply, "I have heard so; but I could never believe it. Mademoiselle Denise (how his heart beat as he but repeated her dear name!) is so young and charming, and the chevalier is so old!"

"Not so very old! He has still some hair left," was Julien's answer.

"It's a wig!" said Franz.

"His teeth are yet good then."

"But they're a false set."

"You must allow he has a good figure."

"Padding!"

"He is a millionaire."

"I cannot gainsay that, Julien. And with regard to yourself—have you seriously resolved to marry the countess?"

"Not exactly! She has a magnificent fortune though; and sometimes I even fancy I'm in love with her."

"You are a nobleman," answered Franz in a serious voice, which sounded strange in the midst of so much folly; "and you ought to know what is right in such matters better than I. If you loved a lady rich and noble like yourself, and if you chanced to meet her in one of those public places of doubtful virtue which no lady could attend without some slur being attached to her fair fame, would you willingly give your name and trust your honour and happiness to that woman?"

"What place do you allude to?"

"A bal masqué, for instance."

"I have never loved but one woman in my life," answered Julien with a sudden gravity and earnestness which called up a strange look of satisfaction in the face of Franz. "That woman is Esther de Geldberg, whom I knew before her marriage, when my family was poor, and I was your fellow-clerk in her father's bank. It is an old and deep-seated affection, which I ever treasure in my heart of hearts,

Franz, but of which I rarely speak. If I were to see Esther at this bal masqué, I would quit Paris directly, and return on board ship, leaving behind me all my hopes of happiness. If some one were to tell me he had seen her here, I would give him the lie to his face, and would kill him!"

The voice of the young Viscount d'Audemer was grave, and an unwonted resolution gleamed from his eyes. His reckless, pleasure-loving nature seemed suddenly changed to a firmness of character that was remarkable in him. Julien's earnest avowal of the course he would at once follow were he to see the woman he loved at the bal masqué—his almost passionate assertion that in that case he would immediately resign her hand and quit Paris—made Franz's heart involuntarily bound with delight. He had it on the tip of his tongue to give expression to his satisfaction at his friend's keen sense of honour. But the moment for opening Julien's eyes to the true character of the Countess Esther had not yet arrived. Franz was not quite sure of the lasting nature of Julien's quickly-formed resolve.

"What if the man who told you of her presence were your friend?" inquired Franz.

The young lieutenant was silent for a moment, as he endeavoured to elicit Franz's meaning from his eyes. "Can you have seen her, that you ask me this?" Julien demanded, with bated breath.

The mask veiled the expression in the young page's face. An instant's hesitation suggested to him a burst of laughter as the best answer. "What a question!" Franz gaily exclaimed. "The countess is, of course, sleeping tranquilly in her palatial mansion; and you need not kill me, my dear viscount!"

Julien was re-assured, for he wished only to believe in Esther's constancy. "You frightened me a little," he said; and then added smilingly, with true French fickleness, "to punish you, I command you to tell me all you know of those two enticing dominoes; for I'm pretty certain you know them both."

"Perhaps I may know them," replied Franz; "but I can tell you nothing about them."

"Bravo! you are a pearl of discretion!"

"They are two grand ladies."

"That's evident! but go on."

"That's all. The secret of the black domino belongs to me, and I must keep it. The secret of the blue domino does not concern me; why should I unveil her?"

"Is she pretty?"

"Charmingly!"

"That's all I want to know," answered the young lieutenant, who had recovered all his former gaiety, with the characteristic changefulness of his Gallic nature.

A figure that now met his eyes made him start with surprise. In the very same place occupied but a minute or so before by the two alluring dominoes and the major, now stood the German cavalier who had attracted the attention of Julien and Franz a little while previously. He was calmly scrutinising the maskers in the lively throng around

him. In face he seemed the very image of the major. He must have changed his costume!" exclaimed Julien.

"No; he can scarcely have had time for that," said Franz, similarly surprised, however. "Besides, he looks as sad as he was gay just now. Still, he must be the same man. Impossible to mistake him!"

"I'm certain 'tis the same!" added Julien.

"I would wager there's some strange plot or intrigue in all this mystery," murmured Franz to himself. "But what does it matter to me? I shall have all my work to do to keep Julien out of danger till the hour for the duel! Ah, Denise, would the hour were over!"

A mad carnival rush of maskers bore both Julien and Franz out of sight of the German stranger, who was so great a mystery to them; and they presently found themselves regarding from the boxes the delirious votaries of folly dancing with the most extravagant gestures in the pit below.

The dancers had burst into the irrepressible can-can. Salacious strains of music filled them with frenzy. Their every limb moved with vinous volition. Swaying, bounding, undulating, masked humanity seemed to have lost all command over itself, and, stimulated by wine and the mad ecstacy of the dance, threw all decency to the winds until license had its fill—and the nerveless dancers drooped, exhausted.

"By Venus!" exclaimed the Viscount d'Audemer, pointing to a secluded corner of the stage. "Isn't that one of our charmers down there, Franz?"

"The blue domino!" answered Franz. "She is still arm-in-arm with the major!"

"And the black domino is on the other arm!" continued the lieutenant; "or else my eyes are strangely mistaken. Let us make a strategic manœuvre, Franz. You approach them from the left, while I steal round to the right, so that they cannot escape us."

Franz acted on his friend's suggestion. He still hoped that something might happen to enable him to open Julien's eyes without losing his friendship. They were soon lost in the seething throng of maskers. As Franz was pushing his way in the direction of the two dominoes he felt a strong arm pass suddenly through his, while a jovial voice demanded of him, "Well, sweet page, how are you enjoying the bal masqué?" Franz tried to shake the gay intruder off, but he was not thus easily to be disposed of. "Sweet page," pursued the stranger, "I have been at your heels for an hour. That young lieutenant is surely a fool to leave you unprotected. Besides, look at me, and see if I'm not a better looking fellow than he?"

Franz could not restrain a burst of laughter at the mistake the stranger had made; but when his love-making grew stronger, and he ventured to snatch a kiss at Franz's smooth cheek, then the young page felt the hot blood rush to his face, and he dealt his rough wooer a blow which would have felled him directly, had there been room for him to fall.

The stranger did but hold his sides and laugh at this assault. "Heigh ho!" said he, jocosely, swaying to and fro as if he had drunk too much wine. "What a pity you're a young man, monsieur! I

would give a hundred ducats to see a woman capable of dealing such a blow as you roughly dealt me just now."

Puzzled in the extreme by the non-resentment of the attack, Franz turned, lifted his mask, and regarded the stranger with great curiosity. To his astonishment, he found him to be the German cavalier; but he had made yet another change in his costume. He now wore an Armenian robe. Franz closely scrutinised the features of the Armenian to see whether there was any difference between him, the major, and the German cavalier. It was surely one and the same man: calm and grave in his German garb; light, gay, and brilliant as the major; and now simulating the heaviness of intoxication, as he laughed with the thickness peculiar to one overcome with drink.

Completely mystified by these Protean changes, Franz forgot for a moment the bal masqué, the siren who had enchanted his friend, and even the duel, the hour for which was fast approaching. Was it some strange adventure being enacted before him? or were the disguises merely the result of a wager? A piercing noise—seemingly some signal—rose above the din and babble of the theatre at this juncture. There was instantly a remarkable change in the face of the Armenian. The heavy smile left his face, his eyes brightened, and the difference of manner 'twixt the Armenian, the major, and the German disappeared. If Franz still had any doubt as to their identity, it vanished with this fresh transformation. What could be the meaning of the mystery?

The Armenian, sobered in an instant, appeared to be listening attentively. The same strange cry was repeated above the tumult of the maskers a few seconds later. The Armenian thereupon started in the direction both cries came from, and soon buffeted a way for himself through the crowd.

"A signal," thought Franz; and the young page involuntarily endeavoured to follow the Armenian, in order to penetrate the mystery. But Franz could make no headway. The ranks of the maskers had closed, and could not be again parted. Resigning his vain pursuit, Franz now made for the spot where he expected to meet the black and blue dominoes and Julien. He caught one more glimpse of the two ladies ere he descended to the pit. They were still together, but the major had left them, and they had no other companion.

Strangely enough, it was of Franz and Julien the two ladies were talking "What an imprudence!" whispered the blue domino in the ear of her companion. "Suppose Julien were to recognise me!"

"Bah!" answered the black domino, with a nonchalant shrug of her pretty shoulders. "The Viscount d'Audemer is not a wizard, my dear girl. He will be too much taken up with the adventure to look for his faithful countess under your mask, Esther. The smack of danger only adds to the piquancy of our escapade!"

This plausible argument did not appear to have much weight with the blue domino, who shook her head as she replied, "It is easy for you to be brave, Sarah. Franz only knows you under the name of Madame Louise de Ligny, which it pleased you to assume. But Julien knows me as Countess de Lampion. One indiscreet word or look, and I am lost!"

"Do you love him?" asked Madame de Laurens.

"He is a fine fellow!" answered the countess.

"*Do* you love him?"

"He is of good family, and has a title."

"Do you *love* him?"

"He has a fortune, and his naval uniform becomes him well."

Madame de Laurens threw a mocking glance at her sister, and said, "I will not ask you again whether you love him, Esther. You are in love with his figure, his title, his fortune, and his uniform. Surely these are sufficient reasons for loving the man! As for my little folly, I must confess I had a great fancy for that young gallant Franz."

"But if Monsieur de Laurens—" Her sister interrupted her with a gesture of disdain. "Franz only knows Madame de Ligny," said Sarah; "and Madame de Ligny is a widow."

Madame de Laurens was mistaken here. Franz, having been a clerk in the bank of the Geldbergs, could scarcely help being familiar with the faces of the old banker's daughters. She, on the other hand, not unnaturally, had no recollection of the humble clerk who had been occasionally honoured with an invitation to the brilliant soirées of the Geldbergs, and had admired her dazzling beauty from some obscure corner of the thronged saloon. It was elsewhere—in some Parisian haunt of pleasure—that Madame de Laurens had become captivated with the dashing young Franz; and she had not the faintest idea that the hero of her caprice (for it was but a fleeting caprice) was merely a clerk in her father's bank.

A caprice on the part of the handsome Sarah, it was but a caprice also with Franz. Animated now with a true and pure love for Denise, he was but too delighted to tear himself from the toils this Delilah had woven around him; and his delight was heightened by the opportunity afforded by the presence of the two intriguing Jewesses at the bal masqué to let Julien see the Countess Esther in her true character—not that of a modest widow, as the young lieutenant believed her to be, but as a voluptuous pleasure seeker.

There was a moment's silence between the two sisters. It was broken by the countess in that light tone affected by women when they want to say the thing nearest their hearts. "Monsieur Franz doubtless has a more favoured rival?" she inquired of Madame de Laurens.

"Perhaps."

"Are you well acquainted with this Baron de Rodach, Sarah?"

"Pretty well. Are you?"

"Ye-es. May I ask where you met him?"

"At Homburg, two seasons ago. And you?"

"At Baden, the season before last, also."

Jealous looks flashed from the masks of the two sisters. "One thing is clear, then," continued Esther, "is it not the Baron de Rodach who makes you so cruel to poor Franz all at once?"

Madame de Laurens never knew her sister to be so penetrating before. "Is it not Baron de Rodach who makes you so curious all at once, Esther!"

The lovely widow blushed at this counter-question. She was about

to reply, when she perceived the young Viscount d'Audemer a few paces from her. He was closely scrutinising every domino. "Ah! ah!" exclaimed Julien, who was not long in discovering them. "I have found you at last, ladies! Be sure, you shall not escape me again!"

The custom is to laugh on such occasions, the bal masqué being the home of gaiety! So Julien, the blue domino, and the black domino accordingly laughed in unison.

"What have you done with the major, ladies?" inquired Julien. "He must be a harlequin. He changes his dress from head to foot in the same time it takes me to tie my cravat!"

"What can be the reason for it?" asked the black domino.

"What, indeed! Since you left us Franz and I have seen him now as a German, then as a Spaniard, and I don't despair to see him as a Turk before the end of the bal masqué."

"You are right," broke in Franz, joining them at this moment, and taking up the thread of the conversation in as natural a tone as he could command. "I have just seen him in the garb of an Armenian, drunk as a Pole!"

"Enough! Let us finish the story at supper," said Julien, bending amorously over the blue domino, and drawing her plump arm within his own. "Ladies, we are so much afraid to lose you that we must secure your charming company while we have the chance." So saying, the young lieutenant led off his charmer in the blue domino, leaving Franz no alternative but to offer his arm to the little beauty in the black domino and to follow. Fearing she might be recognised, Esther trembled slightly. The nervous tremor did but send a pleasant vibration through the enamoured lieutenant, who was too much taken up with the idea that his new siren was a stranger to him to suspect for a moment that she could be the Countess Esther.

The music and dance had ceased for a while. The party made their way with difficulty through the dense crowd of maskers, Franz and Julien looked in every direction, but they could see neither the major, nor the German, nor the Armenian. A crowd has its currents, like the sea. They were caught in the living tide, and swept irresistibly from the pit of the theatre to the corridor, and thence to the staircase, thronged, even thus late, with new comers. Borne along by the human flood, Julien and Franz piloted the blue and black dominoes in safety to the entrance-lobby.

Franz had removed his mask, the better to fill his office as escort. Behind him and his companion walked three men with ample cloaks thrown round them. At the end of the passage, close by the stage door, Franz overheard some words uttered by the three men in a low voice. "He will not turn round," murmured one. "I have not seen his face yet."

"Hush!" was the reply, in a yet lower tone. "He will hear you. Be on the alert; and when he passes under the gas bend forward, and you will see him well enough."

Franz had no idea these words had any reference to himself. Nevertheless, he thought the first voice was not altogether strange to him.

He looked back to see whether he could recognise the speakers. The three men stopped at that moment. An exclamation of surprise escaped from two of them. "It is a living portrait," they said.

"Why, it's my buxom young page!" then added one.

"And he is with my two charmers!" exclaimed the other.

Franz could only see their brilliant dark eyes above the raised collars of their cloaks. There could be no doubt now that they were talking of him. Franz dropped the arm of Madame de Laurens, and turned to demand an explanation of the strangers. But they moved aside at the same instant, and were lost in the throng.

"What is the matter?" asked Madame de Laurens. "We shall lose our friends if we don't make haste," and there was a gentle pressure on his arm from a soft hand, which no longer thrilled him by its touch. Franz had not a word to say in excuse. His brain was in a whirl. All that night a mysterious comedy had been enacted around him; and he could not guess what the last scene of the last act would be.

The three strangers followed Franz out into the boulevard, where he rejoined Julien and the blue domino, whom he felt bound not to leave. As Julien stopped to hail a cab, the three strangers paused, and resumed the conversation as to their recent recognition of Franz. "It seemed to me like his mother's face," murmured one. "Like his poor mother when she was the gayest and happiest of girls!"

"Yes, he is the very image of our sweet sister," said the second; "and the sight of his face moved my heart strangely, I must confess, notwithstanding the blow I received from his fist!"

"How much longer, brother, before we can restore him to his rights? How long before we wreak vengeance on all who have wronged him?"

These questions were addressed to the only one of the trio who remained silent. He now seized his brothers' arms and hurriedly said, "We must save him first from the danger which threatens him. His enemies are powerful. His existence is a continual menace to them. Thank heaven! we have arrived in time! To-morrow would have been too late!"

Then, speaking to the one at his right hand, he added in a quick commanding voice, "Follow him. Enter the restaurant with them. Order supper in the next room to theirs; and mind you don't leave them for a moment! You," he continued, addressing the other, "must remain as sentinel at the door of the restaurant. The rendezvous is fixed for seven o'clock at the Bois de Boulogne. It will take me half-an-hour to complete my task. Mind you fulfil your duties!"

They silently gave each other a hearty grasp of the hand, and separated.

CHAPTER XXVI.

THE SUPPER IN THE CAFÉ ANGLAIS.

IT was about half-past five in the morning. In a little supper-room of the Café Anglais sat a man, with three or four empty bottles facing him on the table. Laughter and merry snatches of song came from the next room. A smile spread over the man's flushed face at these sounds of gaiety. He was clad in the red dress of an Armenian. A broad-brimmed beaver hung against the wall behind him, while a large cloak was spread over a chair near him. A bell-rope, recently pulled dangled within reach of his hand. The waiter entered. "A bottle of margaux" was the order.

The waiter glanced at the four empty bottles, and then looked up admiringly at the solitary roysterer. "What a head he must have!" he said to himself. "And he's able to keep himself company! I wouldn't mind betting two francs he's an Englishman!" He was leaving to fetch the bottle of bordeaux when the cry of "Waiter!" called him back.

"Monsieur, I am at your service!"

"Are you adroit?"

"Why does monsieur ask?"

"Because I wish to gratify a mere whim, or to throw half a dozen louis out of window."

"He is a Russian," thought the waiter now.

"What's your name?"

"Pierre, monsieur."

The Armenian felt in his deep pocket, and drew forth a silk purse. Pierre thought he might be an American.

"I am quite at monsieur's service," he said, his eyes brightening at sight of the six gold pieces which the stranger spread upon the table.

"You have two joyous companions in the next room, have you not, Pierre?"

"Two messieurs with their ladies, monsieur."

"Yes, that's the party. They are acquaintances of mine, and I wish—" The Armenian hesitated.

Pierre regarded him closely, and now exclaimed to himself, "What a fool I was! He is a Frenchman, and a husband!"

"You understand me," pursued the stranger. "It is a little bit of pleasantry—a wager."

"Oh, yes!" answered Pierre, with a knowing smile. "We understand all that kind of thing."

"Very well. I'll tell you what I want of you. You have a capital clock in the next room. I hear it strike as well as if it were here at my elbow. It is just half-past five. If, in thirty minutes, I hear that clock strike five instead of six o'clock, that gold shall be yours!"

"That would not be difficult to accomplish," said Pierre, elevating

his eyebrows and scratching his ear, "if it were only possible to—but one can't put a clock back without pushing the hands right round the dial. Still, if monsieur wishes, I will make the hours strike one after the other."

"No! no! no! The thing must be done without its being noticed."

"The best way would be, then, to stop the pendulum."

"Pierre, you are a rascal full of resources. Stop the pendulum, and if the clock does not strike for the next hour you shall have your six louis. Don't forget my bottle of margaux." The waiter disappeared.

The Armenian rose and opened the window. On the pavement below was a man, wearing a large cloak, walking vigorously up and down to keep himself warm. The Armenian bent forward on the window-sill, and looked down upon him with an air of sincere pity. "Firm at his post!" he murmured. "If one could only hand him a glass of bordeaux!"

"He hastily shut the window, as the cold morning air chilled him, consoling himself with the reflection, "Each according to his taste. He has sung serenades under so many fair one's balconies that this walk must be quite a pleasure to him."

The waiter re-entered with the bottle of margaux. He approached the Armenian on tiptoe, and whispered in his ear, with an accent of mystery acquired at the Porte St. Martin. "It is done!"

The Armenian raised a finger to his mouth, in imitation of Pierre's theatrical air, and poured himself out a glass of wine. "It is well," he answered. "You can go now, Pierre; but be as discreet as the grave." The waiter threw a longing look at the gold as he quitted the room.

The Armenian seemed quite satisfied as he was left alone with his fifth bottle.

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In the next cabinet, sure enough, were Franz and Julien, seated at table with the black and blue dominoes. Franz alone appeared not to have lost his head. The champagne had mounted to the brains of the others, and words flowed fast. Julien sat beside the blue domino. Their long, slender glasses, crowned with foaming wine, were clinked together. They would have made a fascinating picture: the lively lieutenant, incessant in his warm praises of his inamorato, whom he would fain embrace, did she not elude his grasp at every fresh attempt; the lady's beauty enhanced by the roseate flush of the champagne, and by the provoking piquancy of the black velvet mask, which doubled the brilliancy of her diamond-like glances.

Each lady still wore her mask; and nothing is so charming to a woman as that sombre veil, which allows every brilliant glance to escape from flashing eyes, and adds to the attractions of the hidden features. All that is visible of the face seems fairer, the chin more velvety, the white throat more dazling, while the imagination endows the concealed cheeks with a rarer freshness.

"For half-an-hour Julien d'Audemer had been teazing the blue domino to reveal her face. Esther dared not consent. The supper, or

breakfast, had been sumptuous and ample, and the handsome countess bore signs of the feast. She was flushed; her eyes sparkled, her bosom heaved. You could not have recognised in her the almost lifeless figure we saw last night in the home circle of Moses de Geldberg. Her sensual nature was now palpable. She had given herself up entirely to the folly of the moment. Not wisely, but too well had she indulged in the pleasures of the table; and her heavy brain was exalted by repeated draughts of wine. She yet maintained an instinctive prudence, and was careful not to let Julien see she was the Countess Esther. Her one fear was that her identity might be discovered. Her own inconsistency alone troubled her; and she had no thought for the unfaithfulness of her admirer, excusing him, mayhap, in that he was but saying soft nothings unwittingly to one whom he had made love to before in her proper character.

Julien d'Audemer was as excited as the masked lady who had bewitched him. Fruitless was each attempt of his unsteady hand to pluck the velvet mask from her face. As for Franz, he made no effort in that direction. He had evidently no need to lift the mask of Madame de Laurens. She was no incognita to him.

The rosy hours passed quickly. An air of voluptuous pleasure pervaded the cabinet. It only wanted the crowns of roses, which wreathed the heads of ancient convives, to make it a banquet worthy of effeminate Rome.

The first ray of daylight, thin and weak, at length gave transparency to the curtains of the window. Madame de Laurens, whose handsome page had been anything but a lively or amorous companion, was the first to betray her satiety and ennui. Her pretty mouth had great difficulty in stopping a decided yawn. At last she asked that dread question, which is like the last breath of pleasure, "What time is it?"

Franz looked quickly at the clock, for he had a greater interest than they imagined in the time. "It is half-past five," he said.

"Oh, pay no heed to that clock," said Julien, laughingly. "It is fast—like we are."

Sarah cast an inquiring look at the countess, who replied with a slight movement of her head. The charm was broken. Pleasure had taken wings. It was the morning after the bal masqué.

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In the next cabinet, the Armenian was consulting his watch, by which it was more than half-past six. His fifth bottle was empty. He seemed as happy as a king. He rang for the waiter. "Pierre," he said, "you have won your six louis. Bring me a bottle of lafitte."

Pierre took the six louis, and almost bent to the ground in acknowledgment.

"If you wish to win six more louis," continued the Armenian, "when this jovial party in the next room ask for the bill, you will be half-an-hour in making out the account."

"That's easily done," was the reply of the waiter, whose sparkling eyes showed his satisfaction at his morning's work.

At this very moment the bell of the next room was rung. "The bill!" called out Franz.

"The young rascal is punctual," muttered the Armenian to himself, adding aloud, "Pierre, bring me my lafitte, and manage the little business like the clever waiter you are!"

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"Ladies," said Franz, "I know you will excuse our leaving you when I tell you we have an important engagement."

"There's no hurry," protested Julien. He added, as he endeavoured to seize the countess round the waist, only to find his grasp again eluded, "Well, lovely Anna, when shall I see you again?"

The countess had styled herself Anna, just as Madame de Laurens went by the name of Louise. "I don't know, I am sure," answered she. "It will be best to forget this night of folly."

Franz had now what he deemed a delicate duty to perform. It was in a voice too low to be overheard by Julien and his incognita that he addressed Madame de Laurens. "Thank you for the past, Louise. I have never seen but one woman as pretty as you, and she is sweet as an angel. Thank you for the pleasure of days gone by! Thank you still more for the coldness you now show to me!"

"What do you mean?" asked Sarah, who could not understand the meaning of this farewell greeting.

"I know I ought to be proud of my friendship with so great a lady," added Franz, smiling at the look of surprise which flashed from the velvet mask. "I have the honour to know, Madame de Laurens, because I was once a clerk in your father's bank."

Sarah became pale as death under her mask. "Hush!" she said. "For pity's sake, don't betray me!"

"Don't be frightened at that," said Franz. "Your honour is safe with me. Were it not, you would not have to fear me long."

"Whatever can *you* have to fear, Franz?" demanded Madame de Laurens, the intensity of her gaze betraying the interest she felt in the question.

"Directly I leave you I shall have to hasten to the Bois de Boulogne to fight a duel."

"A duel!" exclaimed Sarah. "Through some petty dispute at the bal-masqué?"

"No, Louise. A grave insult! A duel to the death!"

A glad look of relief sprang into Sarah's eyes, while she said, in a compassionate voice, "I wish you wouldn't fight this duel, Franz!"

"It is very good of you to say so, Louise; but I must keep my engagement."

Madame de Laurens was silent for a moment or two. She had fallen into a reverie, and regarded Franz absently. "If it should be the same!" she murmured, the words escaping from her lips involuntarily.

"The same!" echoed Franz.

Madame de Laurens trembled, and then passed her confusion off with a laugh. "I didn't know what I was saying, Franz. Is your opponent a good swordsman?"

"You cannot have heard of him, Louise; but he has a good reputation among men who know anything of fencing.

"What is his name?"

"Verdier."

Madame de Laurens started from her divan on hearing the name of the man engaged by the Chevalier de Reinhold to pick a quarrel with the lost heir of Bluthaupt.

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Pierre opened the door of the next room. "Is it time to give them the bill yet?" he asked in an undertone of the Armenian, who still had his watch on the table before him.

"Not yet!"

Franz's voice was heard shouting once more for the bill. The waiter did not budge. Daylight streamed in and put the wax lights to shame in the next cabinet. The two ladies had risen, and were throwing their warm silk mantles over their bare shoulders. "Confound them!" said Franz. "They pay no attention to us here." He pulled the bell-rope so violently that the cord snapped and remained in his hand.

The waiter could not be deaf to this last summons. He entered, and Franz snatched the bill from him. He felt in his pocket for the money he obtained from Hans Dorn. It was gone. But, greater surprise still, he found a purse full of gold in his other pocket.

Julien, tickled at the loss and the discovery, plunged his hand into his empty pocket, but found nothing save a scrap of paper. On reading the half-effaced writing, he suddenly grew pale and looked confused.

"What is it?" asked the blue domino.

Lieutenant d'Audemer did not answer, but hastily replaced the scrap of paper in his pocket. He had no time to reflect on its contents. Franz, having paid the bill, earnestly appealed to him to hasten to their rendezvous.

"You needn't hurry," said Julien, making one last protest against departure. "It is only half-past five."

Franz looked in the direction indicated by Julien, and saw that the clock showed it to be half-past five, but also noticed that the pendulum had stopped. "It is not going!" he cried in alarm. "It is daylight. It is probably past the hour!" As he spoke, the silver bell of a clock in the corridor struck seven. Franz listened with bated breath. When the last hour struck, he seized Julien by the arm, and after hurriedly saying "Adieu!" hastened with him from the scene of their folly.

The two ladies were left alone, free to comment on the precipitate flight of their gallants, the reason whereof was clear to Madame de Laurens, though she did not choose to enlighten her sister. As Esther was about to ask for an explanation, the Armenian quitted his cabinet and showed his flushed face on the threshold for a moment. He made a profound salute, and then hurried after Franz and Julien.

"Baron de Rodach!" exclaimed both ladies at the same moment.

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE DUEL.

ON quitting the Café Anglais, Franz and his companion found a cab outside. It seemed to be waiting for them, but it was there by order of the man who acted as sentinel in the chilly morning air, while his comrade, the Armenian, kept watch within the café, and it is worthy of remark that this trusty sentinel slipped two louis into the driver's hand in giving him certain whispered directions.

Suspecting nothing, however, Franz entered the cab with the Viscount d'Audemer, calling out to the cabman at the same time, "Bois de Boulogne !—Porte Maillot ! Drive like lightning !"

But cabby was not to be hurried. He leisurely removed the nosebag from his mare's head, and methodically placed it under his seat ; slowly swung his huge cape over his shoulders ; and wasted another precious minute by fumbling for his ticket, which Franz impatiently threw on the pavement, angrily bidding him make up for lost time.

The Armenian, his red garb hidden beneath an ample cloak, had now rejoined his friend at the corner of the Rue Favart ; and they both looked on delightedly at the impatience of Franz and cabby's nonchalance.

At length the driver had deliberately mounted to his seat ; but it was ten minutes past seven. As the cab slowly moved off the young viscount cast one last longing look up at the window whence the curious eyes of the Countess Esther regarded them with wonderment at their hurried departure ; while Franz leant back, and strove his utmost to recall the instructions of Grisier, the skilful master-at-arms. Franz had mentally placed himself *en garde* for the twelfth time when he suddenly noticed that the cab was only proceeding at a crawling pace, despite his injunctions. "Fast ! Drive as fast as you can !" cried Franz out of the window.

In vain. Cabby was deaf to his command. He was repeating his lesson too. The Armenian and his comrade, walking arm-in-arm, followed at their ease.

In the middle of the Champs Elysées, Franz, who could endure this dilatoriness no longer, appealed to Julien. "We shall be too late ; and Verdier will have gone if we don't leave this cursed vehicle and run for it !"

"Run from here to the Bois de Boulogne, Franz ?"

"Yes, if you don't mind trying it, Julien."

Saying which, he leapt from the cab, and was quickly followed by Julien. Franz, still in his masquerade costume of a page, and the young lieutenant, also in his hybrid bal masqué uniform, ran at full speed up the Champs Elysées. They had covered a quarter of a mile when they looked back to see how far behind their sluggish cab was. It was almost close up to them. Inside the Armenian and his friend

were comfortably installed. The driver had whipped his mare with such good effect that she was now moving at a smart trot.

Franz felt a great desire to stop and thrash the venal cabman. But there was not a moment to lose. Was he not now half-an-hour behind the appointed time? This thought stung him to fresh exertion. The Porte Maillot was gained at last. Franz and Julien made at once for the thicket to the right of the road leading to the Porte d'Orléans. They were yet closely followed by the two strangers who kept guard over them at the Café Anglais.

Franz moved adroitly in and out the trees and bushes, and seemed at a loss as to the exact place fixed for the rendezvous. Suddenly Julien and he heard the clashing of swords at the same moment. "Ah! here they are at last!" said Julien. "Our man is keeping his hand in. He is fencing with one of his seconds." They both looked eagerly towards the spot whence the noise proceeded. In a little opening in the wood they saw two men seemingly engaged in deadly combat.

"It *is* Verdier?" exclaimed Franz, admiring against his will the finished ease and dexterity with which he feinted and thrust, and parried the rapid attack of his adversary.

"And his opponent is the German cavalier!" cried Julien, with astonishment.

The exclamation appeared to be heard by the latter, who started, and looked in the direction of Franz and Julien. The same instant Verdier seized his opportunity. He made a dashing thrust. The point of his weapon pierced his antagonist's breast and left a crimson stain.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

GERTRUDE'S LOVE.

AFTER a night of carnival folly, in which one half of Paris drains the cup of pleasure to the dregs, the city awakens with a shame-faced air, palid and blinking from the excesses of countless bals-masqués. Along the boulevards you meet shambling *debardéurs*, wearily slinking home on foot; here an erst deft *coryphée* of the Opéra Comique, a shawl scarce hiding her rumpled skirts, limping from a surfeit of can-can; there a briefless follower of the law, whose forty years have not brought him wisdom, hastening unsteadily to his cold bed, thinking of the conquests he might have made.

The Temple, like every other quarter of Paris, contributed its band of maskers to swell the host of dancers. But so well accustomed were the venders of the Temple to combine pleasure with business that scarcely had they taken off their masks and folded their dominoes than they were ready to take down their shutters, and you would have found it difficult to recognise in the buxom saleswomen the most daring and intrepid dancers at the Ambigu and "Waxhall" over-night.

There was one house looking on the Temple which had escaped the vortex of folly. It was the dwelling of Hans Dorn. Let us peep into his abode about the moment Franz and Julien were leaving the Café Anglais for the Bois de Boulogne. While Hans Dorn, uneasy as to the fate of Franz, had risen before daylight to brood over the unfortunate past of Bluthaupt, and to indulge in but faint hope as to the future of its luckless heir, his young daughter rose to her daily duty with a light heart.

Did she not love? Was she not beloved? Humble musician though Jean Regnault was, did he not play to Gertrude airs that seemed the sweetest in all the world to her? As for him, he blushed and his heart-strings trembled at the mere sight of her graceful form and fresh, pretty face. Their innocent love was the one idyll of the Temple.

Love—love secretly cherished, and all the dearer, too, for that—love gave nimbleness to her lithe fingers as she quickly laced her corset in the morning light, and unwittingly defined the undulating beauty of her youthful figure. Love lit her fair face with heightened beauty when her rosy lips parted in a dimpling smile, and her sparkling eyes saw the sweet image reflected in her little mirror. With what a deft sweep of her, tiny plump hand she removed a coquettish little night-cap, and let her luxuriant brown hair tumble down over her rounded shoulders! The silken locks were smoothed in another instant, grasped by the wee fingers which could scarce contain their rich abundance, and twirled with a happy knack round her shapely crown. A light morning robe was then thrown over her head; and Gertrude was ready to hie on tip-toe, as usual, to the window, to peep between the curtain, and to brighten wlth gladness ever new at sight of her young knight true to his post in the court below.

There was then a sweet prayer to offer up before the image of the Virgin, given Gertrude by her mother, and the little maiden felt at liberty to begin her daily labour. Singing at her work, she moved about her room with a grace and vivacity all her own. A gracious act of charity claimed her attention first. It was for a little protegée that Gertrude daily set the fire in the little iron stove in a blaze, and soon warmed and seasoned a basin of good, thick, savoury soup.

This done, she covered the porringer with a saucer, tied a little muslin cap of immaculate whiteness round her head, and, her rosy face looking infinitely bewitching in its crisp, snowy frame of gauffered muslin, Gertrude lightly tripped down the stairs on her errand of kindness. Bestowing a coquettish nod at a certain window on the opposite side of the court, whence Jean Regnault now watched in the hope of gladdening his sight with a glimpse of Gertrude, she fleetly made for the Rotonde. Her steps were directed to the dingy shop of an old money-lender, known as "Uncle" Araby, or the Wandering Jew—a yellow-faced, wrinkled, bent, yet still active, old man, whose goings and comings were a mystery the Temple could not solve. The shop was not opened yet. Gertrude gave one or two gentle knocks at the door.

"Who's there?" called out a feeble voice inside.

"It is I—Gertrude."

"Oh, thank you, thank you! I'll open the door in a minute."

Gertrude was almost overwhelmed with the grateful exclamations of the wretched-looking girl who now stood before her. She was Naomi, the maid-of-all-work of Araby; and she led the most miserable existence in Paris, half-starved as she was by the hard-fisted usurer, who was at once her master and gaoler. Besides Gertrude, Naomi had but one friend in the world, Madame Batailleur; and the neighbours reported a curious incident which happened to Naomi one day, when, worried by the idiot brother of Jean Regnault, she sought refuge in Madame Batailleur's shop. It was said that a lady who chanced to be buying some lace at the moment showed a marked interest in the poor girl. It was affirmed that when Naomi had sobbed herself to sleep in a corner of the shop the lady bent down over the girl, regarded her tearful face with strange intensity, and then, obeying some irresistible impulse, suddenly embraced her and passionately kissed her thin cheeks.

"You were, indeed, hungry," said Gertrude, smiling at the avidity with which she drank the soup.

"Very," answered the girl sadly. "And I think I should die if you did not take pity on me, Mademoiselle Gertrude; for master gets stingier and stingier every day."

"When you are hungry, you should come to us, my poor Naomi!"

"I can't leave the shop. Master is very old, but he is strong enough to beat me if I disobey him."

The conversation that followed enlightened Gertrude as to the misery of the Regnaults, for Naomi related how that Madame Regnault had in vain appealed to Araby for a loan the previous day, and how that the poor woman left, weeping at the prospect of being turned out of house and home from inability to pay the rent. This news called up a sudden resolution in Gertrude's heart. She bade Naomi a hurried farewell, and hastened home more quickly than she came. She had hardly reached the passage leading to her father's abode when a thin old man, enveloped in a heavy furred overcoat, and his face half concealed by the long peak of his warm skin cap, crossed the Place de la Rotonde, with the support of a stick. It was Monsieur Araby, the usurer, proceeding earlier than usual to his spider's parlour. Gertrude, who had passed the old miser without noticing him, found Jean Regnault in their courtyard, his organ on his back, ready to set out for the day. Bidding Jean stay for her a moment, she hurried up to her room, opened her little treasure-box, whence she took a purse containing six pieces of gold, each the gift of her father.

Needless to tell with what loving tenderness Gertrude pressed her savings upon her young lover; nor with what gentle censure in her sweet voice she reproved him for keeping secret from her the misery of his home. Equally needless to dwell upon Jean's unwillingness to receive his sweetheart's gift. Gertrude's eloquence pleaded powerfully to his conscience, and when he recalled the agony of his mother's adieu that morning it wanted but the last touching prayer of the young girl beside him to make him yield. "I beg of you to accept it, Jean," Gertrude implored, kneeling down before him on the threshold of her humble dwelling.

There was a joyous embrace, such as first love in its innocence only knows. The purse was accepted. Vows and kisses were exchanged. Jean, animated by the divine spark which lights up the heart of hearts with an inexpressible gladness, fancied he still clasped Gertrude to his breast, while the joyous young girl, fluttering up the stairs with the lightness of a bird, smilingly blew a last kiss down at him.

CHAPTER XXIX.

WAITING FOR THE RED KNIGHT.

THE moment Gertrude regained her room, triumphant at having vanquished the scruples of Jean Regnault, she heard the voice of her father calling her. Ah! she had forgotten his breakfast. But in the twinkling of an eye a basin of savoury soup was taken to him by Gertrude. Instead of her usual cheery morning greeting, she received but a cold kiss from Hans Dorn, who seemed curiously pale and nervous. "Has no one been this morning?" he inquired, in a voice that sounded strangely anxious to his daughter.

"No one."

"Time passes, but he does not come," muttered Hans Dorn to himself.

Gertrude, wondering as to the cause of her father's great perturbation, silently placed the basin on the desk behind which Hans Dorn received Franz the previous evening. Hans, seated in the same place, absently regarded the last few lines in his day-book, which recorded the sum he had paid Franz in exchange for his suit. Little by little the look of impatience stole from his face, which became less gloomy as he murmured to himself, "What a fool I am! This delay proves nothing. He promised to come, 'tis true; but he doubtless has other engagements. He could never fail."

The clock in the next room now began to strike. Hans listened intently. "Ten o'clock!" he exclaimed, his face again filling with anxiety. "Who knows whether they still belong to this world? Who knows whether both the heir of Bluthaupt and his guardian are not both dead?"

His every word and every movement were so many enigmas to Gertrude this morning. Hans Dorn now led her to a little crucifix near his bed, and bade her kneel and pray for the safety of those in peril of their lives. Just as the young girl had finished her humble prayer, the noise of footsteps rose from the courtyard. They were then heard ascending the stairs. "He is coming! Listen!" said Hans.

There was a bold knock at the door, which Gertrude flew to open. A vigorous kiss was her reward. Looking up, the blushing maiden saw the handsome face of Franz smiling down on her.

"Father! father! It is he!" she exclaimed, joyously. Then, turning to Franz, she said, with vivacity, "You have escaped the danger which threatened you, then! Oh! I am so glad!"

"Can't you see I have, my pretty one? I' faith. I could survive

any number of duels like this morning's. But why the deuce should anyone find it worth while to fight for me? That's what perplexes me, pretty one!"

"Let father see you're safe. He will be so delighted," answered Gertrude, conducting him to the front room.

Hans Dorn was, indeed, strangely affected at the sight of Franz. "Gunther!" he murmured. "Safe! Thank heaven!" Franz had scarce time to feel astonished at the emotion occasioned by his reappearance. Hans Dorn, recovering himself somewhat, grasped his hand warmly, and explained. "My dear sir, I know you'll excuse the interest I have unwittingly shown in you. I was struck by your frank, open face last night. The words you let fall as to the duel you were engaged in interested me naturally in the result; and I rejoice to see you safe from the encounter."

"Thanks!" answered Franz, who still thought there was more heartiness in the greeting than was called for under the circumstances. "I have too few friends in this world not to be very glad indeed to receive your sympathy. But I must disabuse your mind as to any encounter having been braved by me." Franz then recounted his adventures before and after the bal masqué. "Half-an-hour late at the rendezvous," Franz continued, "the greatest surprise of all awaited us when we at length reached the Bois de Boulogne! The first man I saw was Verdier, and he was fighting with our mysterious German cavalier!"

"Who was fighting in your place?" broke in Hans.

"Who told you that?" quickly asked Franz.

"Oh! only my imagination, travelling a little ahead of your recital. Pray continue."

"Well, you guessed right, at any rate!" said Franz laughingly. "The German cavalier had taken my place, and was crossing swords vigorously with Verdier. Ah me! how well they fought; I should have been nowhere against Verdier. Why, able as the German was, he received a wound in his breast just as we arrived. But that was our fault. We could not suppress an exclamation of surprise at seeing the duel going on. The German looked round. The same instant Verdier's sword just touched his breast, but recoiled as if it had met with a plate of armour. There was a crimson stain on his shirt and a few drops of blood. But amply did the German avenge the cowardly thrust. He seemed suddenly to attack with the strength and agility of a lion. Verdier—poor devil! could only have seen the sparks showering round him, for he thrust and defended himself at random. One thrust more vigorous than ever twisted his sword from his hand and then pierced his chest. Verdier fell senseless to the turf."

"And the German?" asked Hans, utterly unable to restrain his enthusiasm at the result.

"God knows where he is," answered Franz. "No one could be more anxious than I was to demand an explanation of him. But, alas! surprise kept me mute. All I can add is that the valiant German knight gave a farewell salute to Verdier's seconds, wiped his sword on the grass, threw a red cloak over his shoulders, and disappeared amid the trees.

CHAPTER XXX.

GERTRUDE'S MESSAGE.

HANS DORN had one all-sufficient reason to account for this mysterious intervention—a superstitious faith in the never-failing resources of the Red Knight. "He promised to save him!" he exclaimed to himself; "and he has done so!"

"And Verdier," asked a sweet voice, "was he dead, then?"

Franz suddenly turned round, and saw to his surprise that Gertrude, whom he believed to be in the next room, was seated close behind him, and had evidently been an interested listener to his story. "What! my pretty Gertrude," Franz said, laughingly; "are you concerned for the safety of Monsieur Verdier? No; the poor devil was not quite dead. We found him, Julien and I, stretched on the grass, motionless and unconscious. His two seconds had opened his shirt to examine his wounds. He gave no sign of life; and they carried him gently to the carriage. One of his seconds then came back to us. The German cavalier, he said, first accosted them near the Porte Maillot. Verdier started when he saw him, but unresistingly allowed the stranger to lead him aside. Angry words passed between them. The German at length said, taking a sword from under his cloak, 'If you will not act on my suggestion, you must fight with me, then.' 'I'm not afraid of that,' answered Verdier, pluckily enough, at the same time drawing his sword. They had just put themselves *en garde* when we arrived. Their combat did not last more than a minute. Verdier, as you know, received the *coup de grace* he had intended for me."

"A good thrust it was, too!" exclaimed Hans Dorn.

"So it was," resumed Franz. "But naturally I wanted to know how the stranger came to be fighting in my place. The second, however, could not explain the mystery. He only said that Verdier had clearly come there with the intention of killing me, for he had been practising the better part of the night, and was firm in his determination to place six inches of cold steel between my ribs. That's all I could gather from the second, who left us to join Verdier at the top of the Champs Elysées. What interest can that stranger have had in me?"

Franz, in asking himself this question, fell into one of those reveries to which he was frequently subject. The strange events of the morning, and of the preceding night, had awakened within his heart vague fears and vaguer hopes, which even his love for Denise could not drive away. A voice seemed to whisper to his soul the sacred name of father. But the man who had befriended him so mysteriously was surely too young to be the protector he had never known, the being his heart had so often hungered for—his father! The high spirits natural to youth then broke in upon his meditation. He

rallied himself, and gaily accepted Hans Dorn's suggestion that the whole affair was doubtless some carnival freak, but that if there was anything to be explained in the matter it would probably be cleared up all in good time.

"And now, Monsieur Dorn," said he, "please let me have what I came to reclaim. I have plenty of money in my pocket, thanks to my unknown benefactor of the bal masqué, and shall be happy to have my clothes back now my hours are not quite numbered yet."

Hans quitted the room to open a wardrobe in which he kept the most valuable articles of his stock. Franz was alone with Gertrude. The young girl was very busy with her needle, and her nimble fingers quickly followed the graceful design of her piece of embroidery. "Is that collar for yourself, Gertrude?" asked Franz, more for the sake of saying something than anything else.

"Oh, no! I am not rich enough to wear it."

"For whom is it, then?"

Now, Gertrude, being herself on the threshold of that brilliant fairy-land opened alone to those who love, had instinctively divined Franz's love for Denise from one or two chance words he let drop. "It is for a young lady whom you know well," said Gertrude, looking up at Franz with a delightfully sly glance. "You mentioned her name a little while ago."

"But I don't remember mentioning any lady's name," answered Franz, a little perplexed.

"Her brother's name, then."

"Is it for Denise?" asked Franz, his heart giving a great leap as the name of his beloved escaped his lips. The moment after he bit his lip as he blamed himself for the half-confession which had involuntarily escaped him. Gertrude gave a searching look at Franz. The flush on his face satisfied her as to the reality of his love for her young patroness.

"She is very, very pretty," Gertrude murmured, "and oh, so good! Mademoiselle Denise d'Audemer is known to me, monsieur, through my father's long acquaintance with her family. Though I am but a poor work-girl, she chats with me just like a friend."

Franz blushed more and more as the praises of Denise were sung with such charming simplicity (as he thought) by the young embroideress; and Gertrude's eyes sparkled as though a sudden thought had flashed across her mind. There was a saucy knowingness in her smile as she continued, "And Mademoiselle Denise even tells me her secrets. Ah! Monsieur Franz, he whom she loves will be a happy man indeed."

Gertrude made a pretence to resume her work as a deep sigh escaped from Franz; but she stole a stealthy look at him to note the effect of her artful little speech, and, seeing the joy which her words had called up in his fair face, she could not suppress a burst of laughter. "Monsieur Franz! Monsieur Franz!" she said, looking straight at him with her laughing eyes. "I made sure I had seen you somewhere. I remember now. Why, you're the same young man I have met under the windows of Mademoiselle Denise, are you not, Monsieur Franz?"

Franz, taken by surprise, would have it that Gertrude was mistaken.

"Oh, no! Monsieur Franz, it was you clearly enough. When I mounted to Mademoiselle Denise's room, there I found my young lady had lifted a corner of the curtain and was looking down at you as earnestly as you were looking up at her."

"Can it be true?" asked Franz, in a joyous tone.

The moment Gertrude was about to reply, Hans Dorn re-entered the room and handed Franz a parcel containing his redeemed suit. Franz counted out the sum lent on the clothes and a few pieces of silver in addition, then shook hands heartily with Hans Dorn, who bade him cordially adieu. In passing, Franz whispered in Gertrude's ear, "If you see her, please tell her for me, Gertrude, that no harm came to me from the duel."

Gertrude bent her head in silent assent, and Franz departed with a rare look of content beaming from his bright blue eyes.

CHAPTER XXXI.

"THE HOPE OF BLUTHAUPT."

WHEN the young man had gone, the thoughts of both Hans Dorn and Gertrude reverted to the German cavalier who had so opportunely taken the place of Franz in the duel with Verdier. Their reverie was soon interrupted by a second knock. At a sign from her father, Gertrude rose to see who was there. She had no sooner opened the door than she started back and gave a little cry o. surprise. Gertrude recognised the mysterious stranger. The new comer could be no other than the German knight who had played so strange a rôle in the recital of Franz. It was the cavalier whom Madame de Laurens had addressed as Baron de Rodach. While Gertrude regarded him with superstitious awe, Hans Dorn received him with the profoundest respect.

"The young man has just been here, heaven be praised!" Hans exclaimed, as the baron cordially returned his salute and took the seat which Franz occupied a minute or so before.

"I know it," answered the baron. "The moment he jumped into his cab, mine stopped before your house."

"Did he see you?"

"No; I immediately drew down the blind and did not move till his carriage was out of sight."

"He has told me all, my lord," continued Hans. "I divined all that he could not understand, poor fellow! You promised to save him and you did. But you received a wound?"

"The sword just pricked me," replied the baron. "There were a few drops of blood; that's all. But shut the door, Hans. I have something more serious to speak to you about."

Hans Dorn forthwith closed the door and bolted it. "You can

speak now without fear," said Hans. "No one can see or hear you, my lord."

The last part of this assertion was true enough. So thick was the door that nobody could hear what passed within the room. As to the impossibility of their being overlooked, Han Dorns reckoned without the idiot Geignolet, who, ever since he had seen the gold pieces given to his brother by Gertrude, had been seized with an uncontrollable desire to gain possession of some gold pieces from the same source. With this view he had been endeavouring to peer into Hans Dorn's room all the morning from a window on the opposite side of the courtyard; and, as Hans had incautiously left his window half open, the wind blew the curtain aside occasionally, and enabled the idiot now and then to see what was passing within.

Little imagining he was being observed by these two curious eyes, Hans Dorn sat down face to face with the Baron de Rodach. The baron took from under his cloak and placed on the table a small casket covered with leather and studded with silver nails. For the first time since he had been at his lonely post the idiot opposite saw something glitter, and his eyes sparkled at the sight. But there was a lull in the wind, and the curtain fell, hiding from him the brilliant object which he coveted.

Placing his hand on the casket, the baron said, "First, Hans, let me confess that I feel certain he is our boy. I felt sure of it the moment I saw his valiant bearing at the fencing saloon. I have no fresh proof. But I felt my heart leap with joy at the very sight of him!"

"The heart's instinct is ever true," answered Hans, in a voice as earnest as the baron's. "The very same feeling went through me directly I saw him, though none of his blood runs in my veins, my lord, as it does in yours. I have no right to say I love him as well as you do; but I would willingly give up my life for him if it were necessary."

The baron grasped Hans warmly by the hand and replied, "Bravely spoken, Hans! The poor lad greatly needs the love of his father's servants. Your devotion will be put to the proof, my friend, for he is surrounded by enemies, and he may fall into the next ambush laid for him with the blind recklessness of his age. Have you any comrades you can trust?"

"I have some friends," Hans slowly answered, "to whom, in case of need, I would implicitly confide all I have amassed for my little daughter."

"What are they?"

"Germans, like myself; and old servants of Bluthaupt, to boot. There's Hermann, who was the old falconer at the castle; Fritz, the courier; Johann——"

"And who else?"

Hans named four or five other friends whom he had met at the cabaret the previous night.

"Good!" said the baron. "Those names have an honest ring about them, Hans. Thank heaven there are so many faithful Germans still united together so far from the Fatherland. Sound each of

them separately; and find out, without committing yourself or betraying our secret, what weight the souvenirs of Bluthaupt have with them, and how far they are devoted to our house. Lose no time in doing this, for I repeat he is surrounded by dangers."

"Isn't the duel at an end yet?" inquired Hans, with a look of alarm.

"The wretch who was to have fought against him will be laid up for some time. But I have learnt that that duel was not a mere chance occurrence. It would have been but for my interference nothing better than an assassination, premeditated in cold blood."

"An assassination!" exclaimed Hans.

"Yes; an assassination! And Verdier settled, a fresh tool will be employed, Hans. The lad's enemies are rich and powerful, while he is poor and friendless. But twenty years have passed since I faced them in my sister's bed-chamber. That was a moment of terror and confusion for them; and they may not remember my features. Shall I venture to face them again before the hour of vengeance has come?" The last words the baron addressed to himself as if in a soliloquy. After a moment's silence, he asked, "Geldberg & Co.; is their house still in the Rue de l'Evêque?"

"Yes."

The baron was again lost in a reverie, during which he murmured, "And then the sword is only one means of killing a man. They may have ten other methods of ridding themselves of their enemy; and I cannot be always present to save him. I must find out their secret plans, and that without an hour's delay. The struggle must commence at once." He drew the casket towards him and regarded Hans with a piercing look. "This is *the hope of Bluthaupt*," continued the baron. "It is the only weapon I possess to wield against the men who wrongfully hold the heritage. They are strong, and hesitate at nothing; but, with the aid of this talisman, I hope to vanquish them yet."

Hans looked at the casket with becoming reverence.

"I place full trust in you, Hans Dorn," continued the baron, "and I leave in your charge *the hope of Bluthaupt*. Guard it well, I beg of you. I am about to begin a struggle the end of which it is impossible to foretell. With me the casket would be too much exposed. I trust you as I would myself. It will be safe with you until the time comes for me to reclaim it. Then the heir of Bluthaupt will not have to wait very long for his just rights."

"I accept the sacred charge," said Hans; "and I promise faithfully to return it to you the moment you call upon me to do so."

"Now I have one burden less," cried the baron, with an air of relief, at the same time rising to take his leave. "But haven't I something else to ask you, Hans! Oh, yes! Do you know Franz's address?"

Hans was opening the door as the baron put this last question. He looked perplexed, and inwardly blamed himself for not having ascertained the address. But Gertrude, through whose room they had to pass, came to her father's aid. Her quick ears had caught the question. "Perhaps I can get the address," she timidly said.

"*You* can!" exclaimed Hans with surprise.

Gertrude now felt a warm blush suffusing her face. She had been about to divulge the secret intrusted to her by Franz. Happily, a young girl, however pure and simple she may be, has generally a little of woman's tact. "Monsieur Franz mentioned Viscount Julien d'Audemer to us, as you remember, father," Gertrude said.

"So he did!" cried Hans. "If you will be good enough to wait, my lord, we will get the address for you in a quarter of an hour."

The baron consulted his watch. "I cannot wait now," he replied. "I'll return for it."

The baron gave a courteous salute to Gertrude, who returned a graceful curtsey. He was accompanied outside the room by Hans Dorn, who, obeying his last words of caution, hastened back to put the precious casket away. Hans placed it safely on the topmost shelf of his private cupboard, the key of which he kept himself. While he was lifting it a pale ray from the wintry sun shone on the silver nails and made them glisten again. This sudden flash of light made Hans look towards the window, which he then noticed for the first time to be open. The wind blew the curtain aside again as he walked quickly to the window to close it. As he was about doing so he chanced to look across at the poor dwelling of the Regnaults, and saw what seemed two large staring eyes shining from one of the panes opposite. But only for an instant. When Hans Dorn looked again his eyes were greeted with the dull grey curtain which veiled his poor neighbours' window.

CHAPTER XXXII.

JULIEN AT HOME.

THE still beautiful Viscountess d'Audemer was seated at breakfast between Julien and Denise. She was dressed somewhat youthfully for her age; and it was easy to see that, early though it was, she had spent some time before her looking-glass. Her hair, less plentiful than of yore, was made the most of. Her dress was tightened so as to counteract the too-generous development of her once perfect figure. She wore as a brooch a locket similar to the one we saw in the hands of Raymond d'Audemer. In it was a portrait of the viscount, enframed with a lock of Julien's hair.

One guessed her nature at a glance. The viscountess was an excellent woman, kind, charitable, and incapable of hatred; but she was weak, had no will of her own, and could boast of little intelligence though she passed for being clever in society. The viscountess had been in sore straits indeed after the death of the viscount. Ignorant of the cause of her husband's departure for Bluthaupt, she was suddenly informed that her father's heritage had fallen into the hands of strangers, together with the immense estate of her uncle, Count Gunther. She was plunged into the depths of poverty. She could

scarcely have supported Julien and Denise had it not been for the help of Otto, Albert, and Goetz, who contrived to spare something for their sister, however pressed for money they might be themselves. When Julien was eighteen he entered the great bank of Geldberg, Reinhold, and Co., as clerk. This gave the Chevalier de Reinhold an opportunity of becoming acquainted with the Viscountess d'Audemer. He improved the acquaintance so rapidly that he soon ventured to ask the hand of Denise in marriage. But, curiously enough, this matrimonial proposal came just as the tide of fortune turned in favour of the viscountess, and just as Julien had left the bank to become a middy on board a French man-of-war, owing his promotion to a rich inheritance left unexpectedly to the viscountess by some distant relation of her late husband.

The viscountess, thus suddenly enriched, resumed her proper station with a profound respect for wealth. Poverty had imparted a mercenary caste to her nature. She not only listened favourably to the Chevalier de Reinhold's suit (was he not immensely rich?), but also endeavoured to bring about a match between Julien and the Countess Esther, the beautiful daughter of old Monsieur de Geldberg and the widow of a peer of France. The one obstacle in the way of the viscountess and the chevalier was Denise, who had not yet been formally consulted on so immaterial a matter as the disposal of her heart, but who had observed his marked attentions, and had shrunk from them with instinctive aversion. Despite the hints of the viscountess, Denise could not reconcile herself to a union with the chevalier. She even showed her repugnance by absence from the mansion of the Geldbergs, where she had made a bosom friend of Lia, the youngest daughter.

This morning Denise appeared quieter than ever. Her heavy eyes were surrounded by blue circles. Her fair face was pale. Her slender figure drooped. She ate nothing. She did not speak, even though her brother had but just returned from a long voyage. Denise evidently strove her utmost to be gay at times. It was in vain. Some hidden trouble seemed to weigh her down. There are some mothers to whom it is quite natural to pierce the secret recesses of their daughters' hearts. There are others—and the Viscountess d'Audemer was one of them—who appear blind to that inner life of the heart common to all maidens. The viscountess would have been amazed had anyone told her, "Your daughter is in love."

Julien had only been at home an hour. Yet he had divined what had escaped his mother's observation. But Julien had his own secret troubles to think of. Now the fumes of the champagne were dissipated, his thoughts returned with strange interest to the masked lady of whom he had been so enamoured. Fascinated by her charms of person, he could not think or reason in her presence. Now he recalled each incident with a clearer vision. With peculiar force there returned to him the words of Franz, spoken by chance, mayhap, but still pregnant with meaning to him now: "What would you do if you recognised the woman you love under one of these masks?" His hand at the same moment was trifling with the scrap of paper which was slipped into his pocket at the bal masqué, and which he still preserved. Every word

scribbled on it he knew by heart. It was a warning the full force of which only now occurred to him.

The viscountess alone was undisturbed by unpleasant reminiscences. Her gallant young son was at home. For him and for Denise as well she saw in the future but a bright vista, the threshold of which was radiant with a double wedding-fête. "Julien," the viscountess said, "You have got leave of absence in the very nick of time. Had you been a month later, you would have missed the grand fête which the Geldbergs intend giving at their castle in Germany."

"What fête do you mean?" asked Julien.

"Why, the grandest fete that has ever been given—a fête which will cost an incalculable sum. Denise will take with her twelve ball dresses"—

"Does Denise care to go, mother?"

"Do you hear that, my dear? Julien asks whether you *care* to go to the Castle of Geldberg?"

Denise answered listlessly, with a faint, mechanical smile. "Oh, yes! since you wish it, mother."

The viscountess gave an elaborate description of the coming fête. Her tongue ran glibly on, as she dwelt with keen relish on the vast wealth of the Geldbergs; and she skilfully managed to hint that Julien's marriage with the Countess Esther would probably depend on the figure he made at the Castle of Geldberg, for it was certain he would have many rivals.

"My marriage!" exclaimed Julien, with surprise.

"Yes, Julien," answered the viscountess, with some chagrin; "surely you have not changed your mind. She is a splendid match!"

The door was opened at this moment, and the servant announced, "Little Gertrude wishes to speak to Mademoiselle Denise."

Denise at once rose, glad to hide the tears gathering in her eyes, glad to escape to her sympathising little confidant, but little guessing the good news awaiting her from Franz.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

THE ANONYMOUS WARNING.

THE viscountess, left alone with Julien, sang the praises of the Countess Esther, and was deeply astonished to find that the young lieutenant did not fall in so readily as of old with her rapture as to Esther's ravishing beauty and ample dowry.

While the mother was closely pressing her son with questions as to the reason of his coldness towards Esther, Julien found he was again involuntarily crumpling the piece of paper which he discovered in his pocket at the Café Anglais. He had forgotten this scrap of paper for the moment. It seemed now to supply the very answer which in the confusion of his thoughts he could not himself give the viscountess. He drew it from his pocket, and gravely said. "I hesitated to reply,

mother, because I have a strange revelation to make. It is an accusation against the Geldbergs ; and you can judge what it is worth better than I."

"An accusation against the Geldbergs!" murmured the viscountess. "Let me say at once it is an infamous calumny."

Julien silently handed her the scrap of paper, the writing on which the viscountess could scarcely read. It was as follows :—

Your sister is about to marry
your father's murderer, and
you the daughter of—

The rest of the anonymous message was illegible.

Julien expected to see his mother shrug her shoulders, and treat the warning with contempt. The viscountess, however, read the mysterious note two or three times with deep attention, and then quietly returned the paper to her son. She fell into a waking dream. Her eyelids trembled as she vainly tried to keep her tears from falling, for these terrible words had recalled the one great grief of her life. Her husband had been dead for twenty years ; but Helen, whose heart was true if her mind was weak, ever cherished the remembrance of Raymond d'Audemer, her beau ideal of manly honour and devotion.

"It is not the first time I have heard this accusation," she said sadly ; "but it is a base calumny. Your father fell a victim, like many others, to that dread gulf, the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. The Chevalier de Reinhold is an honest man ; that I will answer for, Julien. There is but a strange resemblance of name—that's all—between the Chevalier de Reinhold and the Regnault your poor father knew."

"And what of that Regnault?" interrupted Julien, whose brow was knit at the recollection of his father's sudden death.

"It is but little I can tell you of him, Julien. I never saw him. Your father had business relations with him. That's all I know of him. After the death of your father, Otto, Albert, and Goetz came to Paris, and vaguely accused Regnault ; but the story they told me sounded like a romance, and I received no confirmation of it from Germany, whence, indeed, I heard that Regnault had died in some obscure town in Austria."

There was silence for a little while, as mother and son recalled the one painful remembrance of their lives. "Mother," said Julien at length, "I cannot reproach you for not having confided all this to me before, for I was too young, maybe, to be trusted with it when I went to sea. But now I am a man I have a right to know all. Where are my uncles at this moment?"

"In prison, Julien, charged with murder."

"In Vienna?"

"No. At Frankfort."

"Is Frankfort far from the Castle of Geldberg?"

"Only a few leagues, I believe. But why, Julien?"

"Because I am determined, mother, to visit my uncles, Otto, Albert, and Goetz, in prison. Moreover, I must satisfy myself whether this Regnault is dead or alive."

CHAPTER XXXIV.

MOTHER AND SON.

THE Viscountess d'Audemer regarded her son with astonishment. "You will, of course, visit your uncles, even in the Frankfort prison, if you wish, Julien," she said. "You are old enough to judge the value of their counsel. I love them as much as you do, Julien; but, I repeat, it is a mere phantasy of the brain when they conjure up imaginary enemies in order to scheme and fight against them. It is an unworthy calumny, that which they have brought against the Chevalier de Reinhold. Come, you know him as well as I do, Julien. What is your opinion?"

Julien, yielding involuntarily to his mother's argument, answered that he could only think the same as she did.

The viscountess, following up her advantage, next inquired, "And who gave you that alarming message? Wherever can you have received it?"

"At the Opéra Comique bal-masqué," answered Julien, after a moment of embarrassment.

"Last night?"

"Yes; last night."

The viscountess gave Julien a reproving look, and then laughingly rallied him on spending the first hours of his leave of absence away from home, where he was so anxiously expected. "Don't you see," she continued, "that you have been the victim of a carnival joke? Somebody, envious of your good fortune, has played you a trick with that note. Esther is lovely, rich, and well loved. You have rivals—more than twenty, to my knowledge. Can't you see the object of this stab in the dark now?"

"But," replied Julien, "it is not I alone who am concerned in the warning. My sister and the Chevalier de Reinhold figure most prominently."

"Ah! it is easy to see you are fresh from the sea" said the viscountess, shrugging her shoulders with a gesture of pity. "If jealousy prompted some young fellow to frighten you away from the Countess Esther, may not jealousy also have prompted some fair rival of Denise to turn her against the Chevalier de Reinhold? Many a girl, I can tell you, wishes herself in Denise's shoes; and, if it were permissible to ladies to fight, Denise would have half-a-dozen duels on hand in no time."

"Still, Denise does not seem to appreciate her good fortune much," answered Julien.

"Don't you think so? Ah! you must be a woman to divine the secret of a young girl's heart. Before long you will see Denise just as

joyous as she was sad during breakfast. These fits of melancholy come one knows not whence. They go away as rapidly as they come—sometimes dispelled by a good dance, at others by a ride, and oftenest by a new dress or bonnet."

The viscountess had perceived that in mentioning Esther's name a little while previously, she had touched one of the wellsprings of Julien's heart. Reverting, therefore, to the countess, she said, "But with regard to poor Esther, Julien, tell me frankly, do you love her still?"

"Who can say whether she has not forgotten all about me?" replied Julien.

"Forgotten you!" exclaimed the viscountess. "How unjust men are! Why, each time I have met the Countess Esther in society she has asked after you in a tone of voice which at once betrayed her love for you, Julien."

"Can it be true?" murmured the young viscount, recalling his brightest remembrance of the countess. Then, pressing his mother's hands in his own, he added, "You have made me very, very happy, for I love her also."

"And you have made me very happy in saying so," answered the viscountess warmly. "I already love Esther as if she were my daughter. This marriage has ever been amongst my most cherished wishes, Julien."

While Julien recalled the sweetest recollections of his youthful fancy for Esther, and dwelt with pleasure on his mother's assurance that the countess really loved him, the doubts and suspicions which harassed him but a few minutes back entirely vanished. Suddenly the door opened. Denise, who had left them in tears, re-entered, beaming with smiles, as if to prove the truth of her mother's prediction.

"What did I tell you?" whispered the viscountess, with a smile of self-satisfaction, to Julien.

There seemed to be a load lifted from Denise's mind. Julien never remembered to have seen his sister look so animated and beautiful. The bright smile which brought the dimples into her fair cheeks and the joyful glances of her sweet blue eyes were, indeed, bewitching. She could now yield herself up to the full enjoyment of her sailor-brother's company, and show him, by a hundred sisterly attentions, how welcome his return home was to her.

"Mademoiselle Gertrude," broke in the viscountess laughingly, "must have brought you a sovereign remedy for your malady this morning, Denise."

These chance words expressed the truth so exactly that Denise blushed a rosy red. Gertrude *had* brought a sovereign remedy. She had brought the glad news that Franz was safe. Denise—fearing, at first, her secret had been discovered—stammered out a few unintelligible words in reply to her mother.

"And may one know," continued the viscountess, in a tone of raillery, "what is the nature of this miraculous balm which has worked such wonders, Denise?"

"I don't know what you mean," answered the young girl, growing

redder. "Gertrude has only brought me the embroidery which I ordered for the fêtes at the Castle of Geldberg."

The viscountess burst out laughing, as she exclaimed, "Didn't I say so, Julien? A little matter of dress or embroidery, you see, *does* change tears into smiles!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

BEARDING THE LIONS IN THEIR DEN.

ON leaving Hans Dorn's modest home, Baron de Rodach sprang into his cab, after giving the direction, "Geldberg's bank, Rue de l'Evêque."

The bank was reached before noon. The baron pushed through the throng of liveried servants awaiting their masters at the door. His business was not with the cashiers through whose deft hands gold and silver were ever passing or bank-notes rustling. He made straight for the waiting-room—the spacious apartment in which ten or a dozen persons were already awaiting their turn with the principals. There was an attendant soberly clad in black, like a notary, and to him the baron at once addressed himself. "Can I see Monsieur de Geldberg?"

The attendant, as is the custom with people who have to speak to a hundred or so strangers a day, scarcely looked at the new comer's face, but politely asked in his turn with a slight German accent, "Does monsieur wish to see M. de Geldberg, senior, or M. Abel de Geldberg?"

"Monsieur de Geldberg himself."

"But monsieur may not know that he has retired from active business for some time, and sees no one now."

"Very well," answered the baron carelessly, turning aside, as though he wished to remain unrecognised by the attendant, at sight of whose face he seemed very much surprised; "Very well. If I cannot see Monsieur de Geldberg, senior, can I see his son?"

"He is engaged."

This was the answer also returned to the baron's request that he might see the Chevalier de Reinhold or Don José Mira. He had to wait his turn, like the rest. His look of surprise had vanished, but the more he regarded the sedate official the more certain he appeared to be that his face was once familiar to him.

There was little else to occupy his attention in the ante-chamber—bare of ornament, like most waiting-rooms, but warmed by a stove, and rendered comfortable enough by means of springy seats of green morocco arranged against the walls. Besides the folding doors, which, swinging backwards and forwards, gave constant glimpses of the busy cashiers and clerks in the banking-office, there were three other doors. On the first there was printed, in letters of gold:

CERES: BANK FOR AGRICULTURISTS.

On the second the baron read, in tall, black letters:

ARGENTINE LOAN.

On the third some workmen were now placing a brilliant plate, bearing the inscription:

RAILWAY FROM PARIS TO ——

This last was plainly a bran-new scheme, only just launched; and it seemed to afford Baron de Rodach much food for reflection as he read and re-read the inscription.

One by one most of those waiting with the baron had been attended to; but their places were soon taken by fresh comers, among whom was an old woman, whose neat yet much-worn black dress betokened the long struggle against poverty she had been engaged in. She had timidly inquired on entering for the Chevalier de Reinhold. The same answer was given to her as to the baron. When half-an-hour had passed the poor woman ventured to repeat her request, saying this time, "I have a little account I wish to speak to him about. I knew him formerly, and I think he will remember me. If you would kindly say that Madame Regnault desires to see him—"

"My good woman," answered the porter lightly, "I dare not disturb the Chevalier de Reinhold yet. He is engaged on business of the utmost importance. Have a little patience!"

Some gentlemen now entered the waiting-room by the door bearing the inscription "Railway from Paris to ——" The baron seized the opportunity to ask whether it was his turn yet. "Not yet, monsieur," was the porter's answer.

A bell was then rung. The porter disappeared for a minute. On his return he said. "No more persons can be seen to-day."

The poor woman clasped her hands in anguish. The porter was about to quit the antechamber for good when he paused on hearing, "Klaus!" called in a low voice. He stood still for a moment, thinking he must have been mistaken in the name.

"Klaus!" the Baron de Rodach again called in an undertone. The porter suddenly looked towards the baron, upon whom he had not bestowed a glance before, and an exclamation of surprise escaped him. The baron placed a finger to his lips as a signal for silence, and beckoned the astonished porter to approach. "I heard that I should find you here," said the baron, "but I was not told that you had forgotten the features of your old masters, Klaus!"

"My lord," said the German, reddening at the reproof.

"Hush," interrupted the baron. "That title, which does not belong to me, is dangerous to mention here. I style myself now Baron de Rodach, and you must not know me. You have my secret. Can you keep it?"

"I will do whatever you are pleased to order," said Klaus, placing his hand on his heart as a sign of good faith. "I am poor, and I work in Paris here for whoever will pay me. But my heart still beats true to my old masters; and if you desire to have me for a servant, you have only to say the word."

"Well said, Klaus!" exclaimed the baron, shaking his hand warmly. "And now I want you to introduce me immediately to the heads of the firm."

"I shall be driven away like a dog if I do," thought Klaus, but he did not hesitate. His cool official mask had dropped, and it was with a sincere look of respect he motioned to the baron to follow him.

Madame Regnault regarded them with envy as they left the antechamber together and sank back in her seat despairingly.

. . . . . .

It was evidently in the board-room of the new railway company that the baron next found himself, for papers referring to the scheme were littered upon the table. The baron's attention was arrested, however, by the sound of voices in loud dispute. He could not see the disputants, for they were in the adjoining room, but he could listen, and listen he did.

Four men seemed to be speaking. There was first a young but heavy voice, with a slight German accent; then a grave and weighty voice; then the high, quick voice of a Frenchman; lastly, the low but earnest voice of one who might be a trusted, confidential servant.

"Messieurs," said the last voice, "it breaks my heart to think so well-established a bank as ours may fail! Ah! with what regularity and sound business method things were conducted by Monsieur de Geldberg when he was the head! Our profits came in slowly, but surely and amply; and at the end of the year there was an honest balance-sheet which might have been shown to friend and foe alike!"

"What! Are you praising the old jog-trot style?" exclaimed the high voice which the baron took to be that of a Frenchman.

The baron was all ears, and could not help a look of inquietude spreading over his face. "Can the bank be at all shaky?" he asked himself.

"The old style," resumed the warning voice, "was a good style. In the old times our safe was always full. Heaven knows it is one of the emptiest in Paris now! How can it be otherwise? I am cashier-in-chief in name only. What I place under lock and key at night is gone in the morning."

The baron heard a confused sound of protestation, and his fancy led him to distinguish which was the voice of the Chevalier de Reinhold and José Mira, and which was young Abel de Geldberg's.

"Last night," continued the voice of the cashier, "the safe contained seven thousand francs, in addition to what I reckoned would be wanted to-day. But this morning when I arrived I found all gone! Somebody must have taken it!"

"It was not I," said young Geldberg emphatically.

"Nor I," said Reinhold.

"Nor I," added Mira.

At this moment a reflection in a mirror at the other end of the board-room caught the baron's eye. There he saw reflected the figures of Reinhold, Mira, and Geldberg, with their indignant cashier gesticulating before them.

"It must be I then who have made away with the money!" ex-

claimed the old cashier wtth bitter sarcasm, flinging his account down on the table. "My poor safe is like a box with four holes. You have one key, Doctor Mira. You have a second, Monsieur Abel. You have a third, chevalier, and I hold the fourth. Do you wish to make it appear that I have embezzled the twenty-two thousand francs?"

The baron knitted his brows, as he thought. "What! is all this noise about twenty-two thousand francs, when I thought they only spoke here of millions?"

"I should fear nothing," resumed the faithful cashier, his voice growing more and more earnest, "if it were clear how we stand. But it is not clear; and this continual dipping of hands into the safe makes our position all the more obscure. Moreover, you each keep separate accounts; and I am in complete ignorance as to the state of the firm's account with the branch of Yanos Georgyi at London."

"I look after that," said the Chevalier de Reinhold lightly.

"Then there's our Amsterdam branch, under Van Praet," added the cashier.

"That falls to my lot, Moreau," said young Geldberg.

"And the account of Monsieur de Laurens?" pursued the cashier.

"Don't trouble yourself about that," answered Doctor Mira.

"Let us suppose, then," said Monsieur Moreau, "that those accounts are perfectly straight. There are the current expenses of the bank, gentlemen. You have made them very heavy. Ah! I see you say to yourselves that I am troubling myself unnecessarily; but I have served the house faithfully for twenty years, and I can't see its prosperity depart without striving to stop impending ruin!"

"Rest assured," said the chevalier, in a lofty tone, "that we fully believe you to be a trusty and worthy servant of the bank."

"Yes, monsieur, I know that well enough; and it is because I know it I speak frankly to you. I tell you once more that the bank will soon be broken; but I will not assist at the ruin, and, if you will not deliver to me the keys of the safe, I must resign my position in the bank." The baron, still looking at the mirror, thereupon saw in the glass that Monsieur Moreau bowed respectfully and quitted the room.

The three bankers regarded each other with disconcerted looks. They were silent for some moments. The first to speak was the Chevalier de Reinhold. "Gentlemen," he said, "it is true enough what Moreau has stated; and, for myself, I don't mind confessing that I took six thousand francs from the safe."

"And I helped myself to five hundred louis," broke in young Geldberg.

"And I took the rest," avowed Doctor Mira, in no pleasant humour, as he recollected into whose ever-grasping hands the money went.

"With such a system as this," laughingly exclaimed Reinhold, "no wonder poor Moreau finds our little loans foreign to his business habits. But seriously, gentlemen, we must not play with our credit; and if Moreau were to leave us he might make public many little matters that had better be kept secret."

"Surely the heads of a firm cannot be refused access to their own money-chest," observed Mira.

"That's a question," replied Reinhold. "Something can be said on both sides. What is of immediate importance, however, is to replace the twenty-two thousand francs, which may be wanted at any moment. By what means can we procure that sum at once?"

Doctor Mira and Abel de Geldberg both seemed puzzled for a moment. When the doctor was about to answer the door was observed to open. The three bankers looked to see who dared to enter unannounced, and were thunderstruck at the sight of a complete stranger.

The latter made a grave obeisance, and said, "gentlemen, chance comes to your aid. You need a friend. I am one."

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THREE AGAINST ONE.

THE three bankers looked up in mute astonishment at the sudden and unexpected appearance of the Baron de Rodach, for it was a rigorous rule of the bank that no person should enter their private room without permission. Monsieur Abel de Geldberg was the first to break the silence. While Dr. Mira regarded the baron with a piercing look, and the Chevalier de Reinhold, taken aback, cowered as he would have done in the old times when he bore the name of Jacques Regnault, their young partner adjusted his eye-glass, and, casting a haughty glance at the intruder, demanded, in his most disdainful tone, "What is the meaning of this intrusion? What can this man want with us?"

"This man wants many things of you, Monsieur Abel de Geldberg," replied the baron, calmly. "It is a long time since this man has known your firm, and he desires to enter into business relations with you."

The young banker loftily surveyed the new comer from head to foot. Perceiving that he was but a man with a very dusty cloak and very dusty boots, Geldberg shrugged his shoulders contemptuously as he turned, as if to ask "what next?" of his partners. "He must be mad," he whispered to them.

"Evidently," answered the Chevalier de Reinhold, whose perturbed looks, however, seemed to betoken that some unwelcome reminiscence had been suggested by the stranger's appearance. To test the soundness of his memory, Reinhold quickly bent down to Doctor Mira, and whispered in his ear. "Have I not seen that face before somewhere?"

"Not the same face," replied the Portuguese, whose eyes had dropped beneath the firm cold gaze of the baron; "but another one very much like it."

"It must have been a long time ago."

"A very long time."

"When and where was it, then? Do give me the benefit of your memory, doctor."

"Twenty years ago," said Doctor Mira, in his lowest whisper.

"I'm sure I can't remember now."

"Count Gunther de Bluthaupt!"

The chevalier uttered an exclamation of relief, as he thought the resuscitation of the old count was scarcely likely; and, obeying a nod from Mira, placed his hand on young Geldberg's arm to restrain him from ringing the bell.

"I have come from a great distance expressly to see you, gentlemen," said the baron; "and if I leave before speaking to you, you will regret it all your lives."

"Confound it! doctor," said Abel de Geldberg, turning his back on the baron with disdain, "my way would have been the best. If you had let me ring the bell, monsieur would have been conducted to the bottom of the staircase by this time."

"In a quarter-of-an-hour, my young gentleman," retorted the baron, "you will be thankful you obeyed Doctor Mira, and you will think I was quite in the right to take this chair and make myself at home." So saying, the Baron de Rodach wheeled an arm-chair near the fire, and seated himself with the utmost coolness, Mira whispering meanwhile to his partners to wait until they had heard the stranger's explanations before they took a step they might afterwards regret. "I was in the next room during your interview with your cashier," resumed the baron.

"And do you mean to tell us you were a listener?" broke out Abel de Geldberg, scarcely able to restrain his anger.

"I cannot deny that I was. I overheard almost every word that passed between you. But don't let that alarm you, gentlemen. If I did not know more than was revealed then, you would have little cause indeed to fear me."

"Have we cause to fear you, then?" asked the Chevalier de Reinhold, masking his anxiety with a smile.

"That depends," answered the baron. "There was one account the cashier forgot to mention."

"Which was that?" said Reinhold.

"The account of Zachæus Nesmer, of Frankfort."

The dark look in Mira's face grew more gloomy, and Abel de Geldberg betrayed how much he was interested now.

"But," replied Reinhold, preserving his smile with some difficulty, "our friend and correspondent, Zachæus Nesmer, is dead."

"That is true."

"And he has left no heir."

"But he has though: his nephew, a mere child. To return to your cashier: If you decide to send him away, I offer to replace him; if you prefer to keep him, I can at once furnish you with the twenty-two thousand francs you need to fill the void in your safe."

"Monsieur!" exclaimed the chevalier; "the firm of Geldberg never—"

"Let us play cards on the table!" interrupted the baron, impatiently. "I am as well acquainted with the doings of the firm of Geldberg as yourselves. Will you have me for a friend or enemy?"

Abel de Geldberg regarded him with amazement; but there was fear in the looks of Doctor Mira and the Chevalier de Reinhold.

The baron drew a pocket-book from his breast and took from it twenty bank-notes. "Be good enough to ring now, Monsieur de Geldberg," he said, "and then these notes can be handed to the cashier." Abel obeyed him mechanically. A clerk entered and received the notes.

The baron then produced from his pocket-book four or five packets of paper, and added, "I must confess that I did not expect to find the bank in such a low state. I came expecting to receive a hundred and twenty thousand francs in exchange for these orders on you."

"One hundred and twenty thousand francs!" exclaimed the partners.

"Yes: due last March. I also possess paper for double that amount, payable on the 1st of March next."

"But we had an account with our friend Zachæus Nesmer," cried Reinhold; "and those papers don't represent a real debt."

"A lawsuit would enlighten you on that point," answered the baron; "but let us dismiss this subject for the moment, gentlemen. The heir of Zachæus can wait. Besides it will be his interest, as well as mine, to support the firm of Geldberg."

"Your interest?" murmured Doctor Mira.

"Yes, mine. You will doubtless remember, gentlemen, a letter that you received a year ago, about six weeks after the death of Zachæus Nesmer? That letter was to prepare you for a visit from the Baron de Rodach, who was in the confidence of Zachæus Nesmer during his lifetime, and who was charged with the administration of his affairs after his death."

"Oh, yes! It was I who received that letter," said young Geldberg. "I had no knowledge of this Baron de Rodach; and the facts he advanced seemed to me open to dispute; but he never came."

"True," was the rejoinder. "He has delayed his arrival, but he has come at last. I am the Baron de Rodach, gentlemen!"

The three partners saluted the baron respectfully, Abel de Geldberg bowing lower than the others, as if to make amends for his previous hauteur and disdain.

"Let us drop ceremony," continued the baron, whom Abel de Geldberg now regarded with a deference amounting almost to awe. "As I mentioned in my letter (of which Monsieur Abel appears to have but a vague recollection, by-the-way), I conducted the business of Zachæus Nesmer for a year. He kept no secret from me. I was familiar with the events of his life; and I am not ignorant of the extremely close relations which once existed between him, Moses de Geldberg, and two of you gentlemen." Reinhold's smile faded from his face at this last remark, upon which the baron put great emphasis, and Doctor Mira knit his gloomy brow involuntarily.

"I know all," resumed the baron, not without a slight tremble in his voice—"absolutely all, from the death of Count Ulrich to the death of Count Gunther himself!" It was not without difficulty that the baron retained sufficient calmness to continue the arduous rôle he had resolutely set himself to perform. Yet so well did he enact his part

that he succeeded in gaining the full confidence of the bankers, whom, in pursuance of his deeply-planned scheme, he offered to join there and then.

Reinhold rose in a sudden accession of gratitude, and proffered his hand to the baron, who just touched it. Reinhold felt the baron's hand cold as ice, but that did not detract from the warmth of the banker's grasp.

"Gentlemen," said the chevalier to his two partners, "I think we are of one opinion: that the baron's frank offer ought to be accepted by us." Doctor Mira and Abel de Geldberg fully agreed with Reinhold. "With this unexpected aid," continued Reinhold, "we cannot fail to be speedily relieved of our liabilities. Personally, however, it does not matter to me much. I have a little fortune coming from some of the tenements in the Temple. Then I am about to contract a very rich marriage. As for the bank, it is sound enough, and the business will be extended wonderfully, what with the Argentine Loan, the Agricultural Bank, and the new railway company just projected."

"Is the railway company organised yet?" demanded the baron.

"Not yet. New companies are not floated as easily as you fancy, my dear baron. Railways are rather low in the market just now; but if the enterprise should succeed, as is most probable, our bank will have earned a European reputation, and all our sins will be forgiven. To attain this success we have spent money right and left with no niggard hand, and Paris holds the name of Geldberg as synonymous with opulence. The newspapers speak of our fêtes, and our balls are certainly unsurpassed for splendour."

"The fact is," added young Monsieur de Geldberg, complacently stroking his moustache, "we are the lions this season."

Doctor Mira seemed lost in his own reflections; but his deep-set eyes were ever fixed searchingly on the Baron de Rodach.

"I must say," interrupted the baron, "that I see no connection between these fêtes and balls and—"

"Our railway company!" broke in Reinhold. "Ah! it is easy to see baron that you are not a Parisian! Some advertise themselves under the cloak of philanthropy, and make sensational gifts to the city. We prefer to keep our name before the public by means of the most brilliant fêtes, which are trumpeted throughout the press. At this moment, for instance, we are about to crown all our former effects by inviting the great world of Paris to our castle—"

"In Spain?" ironically asked the baron.

"Ha! ha! ha! No, my dear baron, to no castle in Spain," answered Reinhold with a forced laugh, "but to a veritable, substantial castle in Germany!"

"To Bluthaupt Castle?" grimly inquired the Baron.

"No! to Geldberg Castle," answered Abel de Geldberg.

"This fête will be one means," resumed Reinhold, "of utilising the old building, which has been almost valueless to us hitherto, thanks to the bad will of the old servants of Bluthaupt. We intend our fête to extend over a fortnight, and to be the most dazzling ever given. To a

certainty, every one of the shares of the new railway company will be taken up when we return."

"I approve of the idea, and I will assist you," said the baron, after a moment's reflection.

"You are our providence," cried Reinhold, "for we are dreadfully short of funds."

"I'll aid you willingly," continued the baron, "but the words of your cashier have not inspired me with an excessive confidence in you; and if your cash-box is emptied almost as soon as I fill it—"

The three bankers looked blank at this just sarcasm; but Reinhold protested, "We will bind ourselves—"

"That will not be enough for me," interrupted the baron. "I must have better guarantees of your good faith."

"What do you wish, then?"

"I wish to have your keys of the safe. As I have come to your assistance at a critical moment with all I possess, I have some claim on you. Refuse to resign your keys to my keeping, and I leave you to your fate!" The baron took his watch from his pocket to see the time, while the three bankers regarded each other with consternation on hearing his terms. "I have still much to say to you," added the baron, "and I see it is late. Be good enough to decide this matter at once."

The bankers exchanged glances, and Doctor Mira became their spokesman. "On reflection," he said, "I think the baron's demand is only just." He rose, and, with a respectful bow, handed his key to the baron.

"I have equal trust in the baron's loyalty," said Reinhold, presenting his key with good grace. As he did so he bent low, and added, in a whisper: "I wish very much to have a few minutes' private conversation with you; and, if it is not too great a favour, I would ask you to see me in my rooms before leaving."

The baron nodded his acceptance of the invitation, and held out his hand to receive the third key from Abel de Geldberg, who also whispered a request for a private audience, which was likewise agreed to.

A knock at the door of the antechamber interrupted them at this moment. As Reinhold and Abel turned towards the servant who entered with two letters on a silver waiter, the baron felt a touch on his shoulder, and looked up to find Doctor Mira's sinister face close to his and to hear him whisper: "I shall have the honour of saying something to you privately as soon as we are alone."

Reinhold took the two letters from the servant. One bore the Paris post-mark. With a certain inquietude, which he strove to suppress, the baron recognised the post-mark of Frankfort on the other letter.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE FIRST LETTER.

THE anxiety felt by the Baron de Rodach at sight of the letter from Frankfort was but momentary, and the slight cloud which passed over his pale face was unnoticed.

"Is it from Bodin?" asked Abel de Geldberg.

"I think so," said the Chevalier de Reinhold, examining the address. "If the baron will allow me, I will soon see." So saying, Reinhold tore open the envelope and read the letter. "Yes; it is from Bodin. The baron is one of us now, and so should know all our business. Bodin is one of our clerks. We sent him to look after the preparations for our fête at Geldberg Castle; and, as he passed through Frankfort, we commissioned him to inquire how the Three Red Knights of Bluthaupt, as they are called, fared in the Frankfort prison."

"Ah!" remarked the baron, exaggerating his tone of indifference.

"Yes," said Reinhold; "we need scarcely tell you that those three adventurers were the most determined enemies of the firm of Geldberg."

"I have heard something to that effect," replied the baron; "but it was a long time ago. What does your clerk say?"

"Nothing at all!" exclaimed Reinhold with an air of disappointment. "He called at the Frankfort prison, and he says he could get no answer to his inquiries."

"Is that all?"

"Nearly. He adds, however, that the general opinion of Frankfort is that the Three Red Knights will not escape this time. You know, I suppose, that they have slipped out of almost every prison in Germany."

"I have heard so," answered the baron.

"It is a fact."

"Does your correspondent say anything further?" pursued the baron.

"Only that the gaoler of Frankfort is a clever man, who is ever true to his post, and who watches his guests night and day."

"Maître Blasius quite deserves those praises," said the baron, leaning back in his chair with a feeling of relief. "But your informant doesn't seem to have gleaned much about his prisoners."

"Do you know them, then?" asked Reinhold and young Geldberg, both at the same time, while Doctor Mira regarded the baron with fresh interest.

"Yes, I have seen them in prison. You may remember that one of the Red Knights, Otto, was a confidential clerk of Zachæus Nesmer, under the name of Urbain Klob?"

"We heard so after the death of Zachæus Nesmer, but did not put much faith in the rumour," replied Reinhold.

"It was the truth, however. The pretended Klob enjoyed the friendship of Zachæus Nesmer so long that he was more in his secrets even than I was. That was why I had occasion to visit him in the Frankfort prison from time to time, in order to obtain certain information which I needed as executor of Herr Nesmer. In seeing Otto I also had the opportunity of seeing his brothers."

It was with an interest they could not restrain that Mira and Reinhold listened to the baron; while the grave voice of their new partner also affected Abel de Geldberg strangely.

"Is it true that the Three Red Knights bear a striking resemblance to each other?" asked Reinhold.

"They have a family likeness; but you know that people exaggerate greatly in speaking of them."

"Do they resemble Count Ulrich, their father?" demanded Doctor Mira, fixing his eyes with fresh suspicion on the baron.

"No!" was the ready response.

"And what do they say?" inquired Reinhold.

"They say they killed Zachæus Nesmer, one of the assassins of their father!"

Reinhold and Mira winced at this reply, uttered in a clear, stern voice.

"What! Dare they confess it!" cried Abel de Geldberg.

"Not before justice; but they confessed it to me, and even gloried in what they had done."

"Are you a friend of theirs, then?" asked Reinhold.

"I am the Baron de Rodach," was the haughty reply. "Their father refused me the hand of his daughter Marguerite, whose love I had won; and I hate all who have a drop of Bluthaupt blood in their veins!"

"You do!" cried Reinhold, with unconcealed delight. "Then we may well be partners, for we also detest all that bear the name of Bluthaupt. But to return to those cursed Red Knights:: I am sure they have formed certain plans in the Frankfort prison."

"Many; but they must escape first."

"Well, suppose they escape; what then?"

"They make no mystery of their intentions," replied the baron, coolly. "Their work began with the death of Nesmer. Meinheer Van Praet will be the next to fall. Then the magyar Yanos Georgyi will follow. The Three Red Knights will afterwards settle the fate of Moses de Geldberg"——

"My father!" cried Abel, springing to his feet with the amazement natural to a son ignorant of his father's villany.

"My good sir," said the baron, "if you are not acqainted with your family history, it is not for me to enlighten you. But you must be surely aware that what you now call Geldberg Castle was formerly Bluthaupt Castle?"

"But my father bought it."

"As it is not I who intend to kill your father," answered the baron.

with a calm smile, "it is useless to plead his cause before me. We are speaking of the Three Red Knights, our common foes; and at your request, gentlemen, I was explaining all I knew of their intentions."

"I forgot for the moment," said Abel, apologetically, "that there were good thick walls between those assassins and my father."

"After Moses de Geldberg," calmly continued the baron, "it will probably be the turn of Don José Mira; and then there will be no one left but—"

"Enough!" stammered the Chevalier de Reinhold faintly, while Mira's face became livid. But the fact that the peril, if peril there was, might be distant soon re-assured Reinhold, who brightened as he suggested that the baron should remain in the confidence of the Three Red Knights, and so be able to warn his partners in advance of their movements in the event of their escaping. The baron hesitated.

"The proposal seems repugnant to the baron," said Reinhold; "but I would remind him that, morally speaking, any step would be fair against assassins."

A fierce light flashed from the baron's eyes. "Everything *is* fair against assassins," he said, in a trembling voice. "You are right, Monsieur de Reinhold; and you can count on my assistance."

Three o'clock struck. Young Monsieur de Geldberg, rather calmer in mind now, departed to keep some engagement. Reinhold was about to follow him, but was detained by a word from the baron "Monsieur de Reinhold," he said, "I must ask you to spare me a few more minutes. There is a question I did not like to put to you before your young friend, who appeared to be ignorant of your principal secrets."

"I am at your service, baron."

"I wish to speak to you," said the baron, "about the youth whose existence is a continual threat against your firm."

"What youth?"

"Count Bluthaupt's son."

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE SECOND LETTER.

THE Chevalier de Reinhold, filled with fresh surprise at the mention of the count's son, sought to cover his confusion by searching for the second letter. "The letter!" he exclaimed. "What can I have done with that letter?"

"What letter?" asked Mira.

"What letter! Why, surely I had two letters just now: one from Frankfort, the other from Paris; one from Bodin, the other from Verdier." At the name of Verdier the baron could scarce keep from smiling. "I was in no hurry to open that confounded letter," said Reinhold, "because I was pretty sure what its contents were. Verdier has done his work, and he wants to be paid; that's all."

"But if the work is only half done?" remarked Doctor Mira, who had joined Reinhold in the search for the letter.

"Confound it! The letter will settle that. It must be found; for it is a missive that it would not be wise to leave about."

"What has the letter to do with my question!" asked the baron.

"Everything," replied Reinhold, who had recovered his presence of mind by this time. "It would tell you better than I can the fate of the young fellow you are asking after."

"His fate!" exclaimed the baron with affected wonder.

"Yes; for his fate has been in Verdier's hands!"

The mask of coolness which the baron had assumed dropped at this confirmation of Franz's identity; and it was with real gladness that his pale face glowed for a moment. Reinhold and Mira both mistook this display of emotion for an evidence of sympathy with them in their desire to get rid of the heir of Bluthaupt. The chevalier especially rejoiced at this manifestation on the part of the baron.

"In truth," he said, "since you take so deep an interest in the young fellow, I will briefly tell you his history, baron. Zachæus Nesmer doubtless informed you how we were luckily freed from the incubus of Count Gunther and the countess. Well, to our chagrin, the Three Red Knights saved the infant heir, and made off with him. Yanos Georgyi ultimately traced him to the cottage occupied by Hans Dorn and his wife, brought him to Paris, and left the child in charge of a shopkeeper in the Temple, Madame Batailleur. Then the brat became a Paris gamin, a ragged, shoeless urchin, sharp as a needle. Such he was when I fell in with him through an act of honesty on his part. I dropped a parcel of bank-notes on leaving the Bourse one day, but could find it nowhere, until, on reaching our bank, a breathless young fellow ran up to me as I was alighting from my carriage and handed me the lost notes. So pleased was I with the act that I placed him in the bank. He rose quickly. From errand-boy he soon became a clerk, and an able one, too. But, as ill-luck would have it, he had the misfortune to fall in love with a young lady whom I had fixed upon for my own wife."

"With Mademoiselle d'Audemer?" interrupted the baron.

"Yes. Did I mention her name before? Well, his love for Mademoiselle Denise rendered his presence in Paris distasteful to me. With the view of inducing him to leave our bank to join Yanos in London, I paid a visit to his lodging one night. He was absent. Suddenly a medallion caught my attention. It contained a portrait of the Countess Margaret, and it at once occurred to me that Franz was also the very image of the countess. The next day Franz was dismissed from the bank on some pretext or other. He plunged into pleasure. I had him watched by Verdier, who had orders to provoke him to fight a duel. This was easily done. The other night Verdier, who was playing cards with Franz at some café, accused him of cheating. Franz replied by throwing a glass of beer in his face. The challenge followed the challenge, and a duel with swords was fixed for the morning. And that troublesome letter," added the chevalier, pointing to the missing letter which he at length saw half concealed behind the

timepiece, "will doubtless inform us that Verdier has given the heir of Bluthaupt his *coup-de-grâce!*"

The letter, which moved the Chevalier de Reinhold strangely, ran as follows :—

"My dear Sir,—I am down instead of Franz. At the rendezvous this morning I was met by a cursed German, who would insist on fighting to revenge himself for some petty disputes we had had some time ago. We fought, and he soon wounded me. I fell; and I am now anxiously awaiting your assistance.

"J. H. VERDIER,
"9, Rue Pierre-Lescot."

The chevalier had no sooner read the first lines aloud than his confidence vanished as if by enchantment. "The wretched bungler!" he exclaimed. "He will have to wait some time if he waits for my aid. Yet it may be important that one of us should see him."

"May I undertake the mission?" asked the baron composedly. "I know the Rue Pierre-Lescot, and will soon get from Verdier all you want to know."

The offer was accepted with many protestations of gratitude by both the Chevalier de Reinhold and Doctor Mira.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE THREE APPOINTMENTS.

"I REPEAT, baron, you are a providence to us," exclaimed the Chevalier de Reinhold, as he regained his old assurance. The stereotyped smile returned to his lips as he bent down in passing Baron de Rodach, and whispered in his ear, "Don't forget your appointment with me."

Directly the door closed behind Reinhold, Doctor Mira drew his chair near the baron, and said, with unwonted warmth for him, "Now that we are alone, baron, permit me to give you the greatest proof of my confidence in you."

The baron listened, but had become involuntarily more grave and THE C[illegible] than ever. Nevertheless the ice was broken for Mira. The of the [illegible]er had for the moment lost his gloom. From the most taciturn second became the most voluble of men. "I have the greatest wish," he donc[illegible]d, with eagerness, "to prevent the bank from being ruined; but "[illegible]ney who are unfortunately my partners will assuredly bring ruin upon "[illegible] unless you join me in checkmating them. Young Geldberg is a Frankfort, empty-headed fop who plumes himself on his genius for finance, Verdi[illegible]ply because he has quite by chance made a few lucky speculations smili[illegible] the Bourse, but who devotes his attention mainly to the turf and Rein[illegible]e houris of the corps de ballet."

Verd[illegible] "You are severe," interrupted the baron.

"I am just! The Chevalier de Reinhold would have done well enough if fate had left him in his proper station. As a vulgar adventurer, his lies and address would have served him admirably, and audacious effrontery might have sufficed for lack of real ability. But, becoming at one bound a partner in this great firm, his head has been turned. He has thrown himself into a thousand and one absurd speculations—"

"Is the bank involved in them?" inquired the baron.

"Not directly. But it is the multiplicity of his speculations which makes me fear for the future. Not that Reinhold hasn't a certain acuteness and judgment. For instance, that venture of his at the Temple has gained him a remarkable reputation for charity. Yet, between you and me, it is in reality only an affair of the most damnable usury, for, under the pretext of paying the rent of those who are unfortunate, he robs them of half their goods. Then, again, a timely gift to the city made the public loudly sing his praises a short time ago. The present—a pleasure garden or fountain or some other ornament to Paris—that was what the people saw. What the people didn't see were the thousands of gentlefolk, aye, and not a few widows and orphans, rendered penniless and homeless by his bubble companies, which burst and left some of them starving! Pray, excuse my revealing these secrets of our charnel house, baron! But I have so utter a contempt for the way in which Reinhold, ever wearing his smiling and debonnair mask, wins the favour of the public that I could not control my indignation. As I hinted before, I am not alarmed at these hypocritical gifts of a few thousands—baits to catch millions—but at the vast number of his hazardous ventures, and at the right he has to have recourse to our money-chests when any one of them fails. In fact, Reinhold is an odious excrescence, which may be mortal to the bank unless it is cut off in time."

"And as you are a doctor," asked the baron, "do you propose to perform the operation?"

"Baron," replied Mira, "I have a few important propositions to make to you. It will be for you to say whether they will have the desired effect. First, however, let me say a word or two respecting the eldest daughter of Monsieur de Geldberg."

To the baron was then recounted the story of Doctor Mira's long and passionate love for Sarah, from the time she was but a girl up to her marriage with Monsieur de Laurens. With the earnestness of one speaking on the subject nearest his heart, Mira related how her beauty and wilfulness ever had held him spellbound; how he had in vain striven to free himself times out of number from her fascination; how that siren-like she had taken advantage of his passion for her to wile thousands from him. It was the one love of his life—if illicit passion may be called love. "She owes me many millions," he exclaimed, "but all madness has its lucid intervals. And I now ardently wish to free myself from her yoke. I desire to regain the fortune I have advanced to her. I hope to save the firm of Geldberg, which she has undermined on one side, and Reinhold and Abel have sapped on the other—to save it for your benefit and for mine, Baron. Do you

accept my proposal to separate yourself (secretly of course) from my two partners, and to form an alliance wtih me alone?"

"Possibly I may; but you must explain yourself more fully first," answered the Baron de Rodach, whose self-possession never left him.

"Naturally," continued Mira. "Briefly told, my proposal is this: You have arrived from Germany with bills due from our bank to a terrible amount. They cannot be met by young Geldberg, who virtually possesses but half-a-dozen racehorses. Nor by Reinhold, who has nought but a budget of debts, in spite of his boundless audacity and crafty donations. As I said before, I confidently count on getting back the enormous sums Madame de Laurens has had from me. Those sums recovered, I alone shall be rich enough to meet your bills. Is it not clear that, if we are one, the bank will then be in our hands?"

"Clear enough," said the baron; "but you forget one thing: is not the bank already in my power?"

"Not quite," replied Mira, regaining his self-possession. "I reckon on getting my money in a few days. Your bills would then be paid in full; and you would be deprived of the only weapons that we need fear; for, though the secrets you have picked up relative to our connection with Bluthaupt Castle are grave enough, the world would call for strong proofs before—"

"Proofs!" interrupted the baron. "I have in my possession proofs enough to send you all to the scaffold!"

Doctor Mira, his self-command thoroughly restored, repressed the exclamation of terror which would have escaped him but for a powerful effort of will. He even ventured to ask what these dread proofs were.

"I did not intend to alarm you," said the baron, in a quieter tone of voice; "I simply wanted to let you know, Doctor Mira, without intending to frighten you, how I really stand with regard to the bank. The proofs are certain letters which passed between you, Van Praet, the magyar, Zachæus Nesmer, the Chevalier de Reinhold, and Moses Geld, about the time you managed to obtain possession of Bluthaupt Castle. They are deposited in a casket, which I left in the custody of a trusty friend this morning."

"How did they fall into your hands?"

"From Zachæus Nesmer, who seemed to have feared some of his co-conspirators might turn traitors to him, and who held these proofs of their villainy in case they might be needed. But let us dismiss the fears of Zachæus Nesmer, Doctor Mira. I am sure you and I understand each other perfectly now. My interest is manifest: all I want is to realise what is due to Zachæus Nesmer's heir, and then, if it be possible, to make a little fortune for myself."

The banker was alarmed to the depths of his soul by the unmasking of the baron's battery. Re-assured, however, upon finding it was but a blank volley discharged at him, and convinced, moreover, that it was the baron's interest to become his ally, Mira's confidence in his new partner returned. "Fortunes are as good as made for both of us," said Mira, secretly rejoicing that he had at length found the baron's weak point. "If you will but grant me your aid in a delicate

bit of business, baron, I am persuaded the wealth we shall each acquire will be illimitable. I have confessed to you the passion I entertain for Monsieur de Geldberg's daughter. So incurable is my insensate passion that if I were to apply to Madame de Laurens myself I am certain I could not persist in my demand for the restoration of the millions she is indebted to me. Now, if I could but be honoured by your assistance—"

"Command my services," answered the baron, without hesitation. "Tell me in what way I can plead your cause, and I will plead it to the best of my ability."

Doctor Mira heaved a deep sigh, as though his breast had been relieved of a heavy burden; and, leaning forward more confidentially than ever, explained at length to the baron how he could extricate him from the toils of Madame de Laurens. "So you see, baron," said Mira, in conclusion, "the 8th will be the very latest date to apply for payment."

"Let that be understood, then," answered the baron. "I have no engagement for that day, and am quite at your service."

"Pray accept my best thanks, baron. Don't forget that, *at mid-day on Thursday next, the 8th of February, you are to call on Madame de Laurens!*"

"You may depend on me," said the baron, who had maintained his imperturbable coolness throughout the interview, and who, on rising to take his departure, saluted the banker with unabated coolness.

. . . . . .

Was there ever a less fortuitous concourse of atoms than the partners in Geldberg's bank? Baron de Rodach, on leaving the private room of the bank, ascended to the luxurious bachelor's apartments occupied by Monsieur Abel de Geldberg; and the first words of the junior partner showed him that young Geldberg had sought the interview simply to express his loathing for Doctor Mira and the Chevalier de Reinhold, and to ask the baron to form just such another alliance with him as Mira had pleaded so hard for a few minutes before.

The welfare of the bank, he urged, demanded that the baron should co-operate with him. Meinheer Van Praet, of Amsterdam, was pressing for the payment of a million and a half. This large sum would fall due in less than a week. The bank could not meet it. The one way to prevail upon Meinheer Van Praet to postpone his claim would be to hasten to Amsterdam and have a personal interview with him. He, Abel de Geldberg, dared not leave the bank in the sole control of his partners. Would the baron honour him by being his ambassador? Evidently it would not be to Van Praet's interest to ruin the bank, and would the Baron de Rodach undertake this confidential mission, and so enable them to tide over their difficulty?

"What is the latest date Van Praet has given you?" asked the baron.

"Saturday."

"You have time to write, then?"

"Another letter will be of no use! Payment has been put off from time to time until his patience is exhausted. I know as a fact that Van Praet has placed the affair in the hands of a lawyer here in Paris,

who will be inexorable on Saturday unless Van Praet countermands his order. It is now Monday. If, baron, you will not do me the invaluable service to travel post haste to Amsterdam, it will be impossible for Van Praet's order to arrive in time to save us. Will your arrangements permit you to reach Amsterdam by next Thursday morning?"

"I have nothing to detain me," answered the baron, with a twinkle in his eye; "and I willingly accept the mission, Monsieur de Geldberg."

"Capital!" exclaimed the young banker, rubbing his hands with satisfaction. "I have your promise, baron, and I have no fear of the result now. During your absence I will mature my plans for casting adrift Doctor Mira and Reinhold, so that you and I may be masters of the bank."

"I know I may trust my interests in your hands," replied the Baron de Rodach, smiling as he rose to take his leave, "and rest assured I will do my best for you with Meinheer Van Praet. Good-bye!"

"Bon voyage! *Remember, it is absolutely necessary for you to arrive at Amsterdam before mid-day on Thursday next, the 8th of February!*"

"I shall start to-morrow morning; and you may depend on my entering Meinheer Van Praet's office in Amsterdam before the hour of twelve on Thursday next."

"By the way," added young Geldberg, who thought he might as well make sure of the baron's departure, "I will give myself the pleasure of seeing you off in the morning, and then I will hand you all the necessary papers to authorise you to act for me. Farewell!"

. . . . . .

Ten minutes after the Baron de Rodach had left the sanctuary of Monsieur Abel de Geldberg, a similar interview was being brought to a close in another part of the bank between the baron and the Chevalier de Reinhold. The two were promenading arm in arm along a balcony communicating with the chevalier's rooms. "I see we understand each other admirably," said Reinhold in his old confident and animated tone. "A man of your penetration, baron, connot fail to share my contempt for the fool of a fop and the melodramatic villain with whom fate has thrown me into partnership. Let us but satisfy the insatiable demands of the magyar, Yanos Georgyi, and it will be the easiest thing possible to get rid of young Geldberg and Mira, whose stupid infatuation for Madame de Laurens has placed him under my thumb. It is evident that Yanos Georgyi and Van Praet have come to a secret understanding to press us for payment at the same moment, the traitors! They have both fixed on Saturday next as the final day for payment. But the magyar's claim alone concerns me, and to quiet him you must be in London by next Thursday morning, the 8th, at the latest, in accordance with your gracious promise."

"Very well," answered the baron, "*I undertake to be in London at Yanos Georgyi's before twelve next Thursday morning, February the 8th.*

CHAPTER XL.

MOTHER AND SON.

THE Chevalier de Reinhold was so delighted with the success of the interview that his crafty face became creased with his full array of smiles, and he poured forth a torrent of thanks as he accompanied the Baron de Rodach down the marble staircase of the bank. Their passage through the waiting-room in which Klaus was still on duty was interrupted by the shrill cry of a woman. The baron and Reinhold looked in the corner whence the piercing cry proceeded. They saw the aged woman who had arrived shortly after the baron, and who had been patiently waiting all this time. Her trembling hands were held out towards one of them, and a strange look of wistful joy lit up her worn features.

The chevalier stopped abruptly, and seemed rooted to the spot, while his face grew deadly pale. Baron de Rodach looked from the chevalier to the poor woman, and from the poor woman to the chevalier. Supporting herself with one hand against the wall, she held her heart, as if to still some overpowering emotion. Tears coursed down the wrinkles of her withered cheeks as her lips at length moved, and she murmured a name in a broken, appealing voice.

The baron understood the situation at once as his ears caught the name. The Chevalier de Reinhold, pretending he had not heard the sobbing appeal, was moving towards the door, but the perspiration which dropped like beads from his forehead betrayed the agitation he inwardly felt. A heartrending sob escaped from the poor woman as she saw the chevalier's retreating figure, and she fell back hopelessly on the bench. The baron rushed to her side, and, supporting her weak and trembling figure, whispered in her ear, "Are you Madame Regnault?"

A feeble nod assured him that she was.

"Monsieur the Chevalier," exclaimed the baron, advancing towards Reinhold, "I cannot allow you to accompany me any further. That poor lady wishes to speak with you in private. I know her to be a poor shopkeeper from the Temple, Madame Regnault; and, if my words have any weight with you, I beg of you not to send her away before you have heard her appeal."

The chevalier stammered something, he knew not what, as the baron coldly pointed to the trembling woman regarding him with a rapt gaze, and then disappeared. When the door had closed on the baron, and Madame Regnault saw that the chevalier still remained, she murmured again, "Jacques! Jacques! my son! my son!"

The words seemed to touch the chevalier to the quick. He first glanced round to see that Klaus had quitted the room. A look of relief flashed from his eyes when he found that he alone could have heard the poor woman now. He apparently made for the door himself, but his limbs refused to obey the cowardly impulse, and he sank upon the

bench. As if his drooping eyelids were not enough to shut out some hateful thing from view, he held one hand before his eyes.

He was faint and ill. That was enough to win for him pardon and love and sympathy from the depths of the poor woman's heart. "Poor Jacques!" she murmured to herself; and there came back to her mind the sweet remembrances of long ago. The Chevalier de Reinhold faded from her vision. She saw in his place the child who had once been such a joy to her in the Temple. Her son was ill and needed a mother's help.

She rose noiselessly. Her limbs trembled under her. She yet managed, by leaning against the wall, to reach the side of the chevalier without being observed by him. She lifted her hands as if to touch him, but dared not. A wistful yearning look filled her eyes. Then the wellsprings of her nature were touched with pity, and her tears flowed fast, and she said, "Jacques! dear Jacques! thou art suffering!"

The chevalier started with a strange look of fear and anger in his livid face, for this was a situation he had no mask for. Nor could he find a word to say.

"Thank God!" continued the poor woman; "I see my son once more. Oh, Jacques! it is almost more than I can bear to be near thee again, to speak to thee, my son, just as in the old days when you called me 'mother.' Often and often, Jacques, I have looked longingly at the velvet curtains of this grand mansion, at the crowds of fine people going in and out of the bank, at the splendid carriages outside. Ah! we are very wretched and poor at home, Jacques; but I was sure thou wouldst have helped us, my son, didst thou but know of our distress. Many times have I come to tell thee; but the gay liveries of thy servants made thy mother hesitate at entering; and, besides, I was fearful I should bring shame upon my son."

Reinhold was in torture; but his only answer was an impatient sigh, which seemed to recall more sombre souvenirs to the mind of Madame Regnault:

"Thirty years hast thou left us, Jacques! Think how many days there are in thirty years, and not a single one passed without my praying for thee, my son. I will not tell thee the evil thou didst cause. Thy father pardoned thee on his death-bed, and I had done so long before. The name of Regnault is written, alas! on many humble crosses in the cemetery. And oh, Jacques!" continued the poor woman, still more sorrowfully; "tell me what is the meaning of all these calumnies I have heard spoken against thee. The Germans in the Temple say thou hast gained a fortune by criminal means. They dare to say thou hast been concerned with a band of murderers, and that thy gold is stained with blood!"

Reinhold felt his face flush; but he still kept silence, anxious to hear all that might be said against him out of doors.

"It is not true, is it, my son?" cried Madame Regnault with passionate tenderness. "Thou hast not disgraced thy father's name? Thou hast never stolen from anyone but us, and all that we had was rightly thine!"

Since the chevalier had raised his eyes to meet her yearning gaze, he

had felt some hidden spring of his being touched. The poor woman before him was his mother. He had, perhaps, not thought of her twice in his life ; but, however fallen a man may be, after a long absence he can never see without some emotion the face of her who bent fondly over his cradle and saw his first smile. A faint remembrance of his childhood thawed the icy nature of Reinhold ; and in the depths of his soul he pronounced the sacred name of "mother." But this spark of tenderness no sooner flickered in his breast than it died out. He listened with impatience to his mother's wandering remarks.

"Jacques" cried the poor woman beseechingly, "I remember now why I called. Aid me, my son, or they will put me in prison, and that will be my death, It is my life I beg of thee!" A mortal paleness spread over her face, for she saw not a jot of sympathy in the icy features of her son, and she heard the death-knell of her hopes.

"Madame," said the chevalier, starting to his feet, "I do not know who you are, and therefore cannot help you. I am the Chevalier de Reinhold, a native of Vienna." Turning a deaf ear to the agonising answer, "My son, my son! have pity on me!" the chevalier pitilessly tore himself from the poor woman's grasp, and hastily quitted the room.

CHAPTER XLI.

THE LOVES OF THE THREE SISTERS.

BARON DE RODACH, once free from the presence of Reinhold, hastened to breathe the fresh air of the street, with such loathing did he inwardly regard the miserable cowardice of the chevalier. Hurriedly opening the door which as he thought, led to the hall, the baron unwittingly re-entered the private part of the bank, and was unaware of the mistake he had made until he found himself at the end of a corridor. Further progress was barred by a glass door, veiled within by silken curtains. Pausing for a moment, he involuntarily overheard the gentle murmur of ladies' voices, plainly coming from the room beyond ; and his attention was arrested by hearing his name repeated several times.

The ladies were the Countess Esther and Madame de Laurens, the former languid from the preceding night's dissipation at the bal musqué and the Café Anglais, the latter as fresh as if she had not shared those stolen pleasures with her sister. Madame de Laurens (attired, like the countess, in a negligent morning costume) held a small jewelled opera-glass in her hand, through which she keenly looked from time to time across the garden which stood in the centre of the mansion. Her curious gaze was fixed upon her youngest sister, Lia, seated near the window of her boudoir in the opposite wing, evidently engaged in some labour of love.

"How I regret accompanying you last night, Sarah!" plaintively murmured the countess, continuing their confidential conversation about the bal masqué. "Suppose he had recognised me!"

"Good gracious! Esther," answered her sister laughingly, "what trouble I have to form you! Why, you will be afraid of your own shadow next. Are you not mistress of your own actions! What would you do were you in my place?"

"There's one thing I should strive to do," rejoined the countess.

"Surely you wouldn't be foolish enough to sacrifice your own pleasure for love of your husband!"

"If I marry Julien, I shall love him." Seeing the disdainful smile which this reply brought to her sister's lips, Esther added, "Ah! Sarah, you love only the forbidden fruit, and I see you would persuade me to share it with you."

"That is the truth," avowed Sarah, frankly; and then added, in a tone as insinuating as a caress, "Why should you not drink of the cup of pleasure also, Esther? You are young and lovely, and admirers innumerable would seek your smiles. Come, consent to follow up your successes of last night by a visit to my little Parisian Hombourg?"

Madame de Laurens used her most seductive arguments to tempt the countess, whose weak nature made her a pliable tool in her sister's hands. Fear of exposure, however, kept the pleasure-loving countess from yielding to Sarah's temptations. Piqued at Esther's hesitation, Madame de Laurens rose with a scornful smile, and again cast a curious glance through her opera-glass at Lia.

"What are you looking at?" asked Esther languidly, not sorry to change the subject of conversation.

"Nothing particular," answered Sarah carelessly. "Our dear, innocent little sister is reading love-letters, that's all."

Madame de Laurens handed the glass to the countess. This is what she saw: Lia was seated by a small table littered with papers. She was scanning an open letter, and her pretty face was pale and tears dimmed her bright eyes. Were it not for the gentle rise and fall of her bosom Lia might have been taken for a beautiful statue—a Galatea but half brought to life.

"How lovely she looks!" exclaimed Esther.

"She is only eighteen," replied Sarah, with indifference; for she was jealous of the young maiden's fresh beauty.

"Why she is weeping," added the countess in surprise.

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Tears were, indeed, falling on the open letter which Lia was reading so earnestly:—

"My own darling Lia, I ask you to love me still, and yet I dare not hope to retain thy dear love. Thou art in Paris and wilt have wooers in plenty. I am in prison, charged with the murder of one of those villains whom it is the task of my life to punish. Oh! why didst thou save me, Lia? To love thee in vain? Yet I cannot be deprived of the supreme joy of those first sweet hours of love beside thee, dearest Lia. Thou art my first and only love. I guard thy image in my heart of hearts. I dream again and again of the gentle, fearless maiden, who, when I, a proscribed felon, was hotly pursued by the Prussian cavalry led me to her aunt's farm, and gave up to me her sanctuary

for a hiding-place. Thou didst save my life then, Lia. It is thine, beloved. Would it were worthier of thy pure nature!"

Lia said to herself, as she read on through a mist of tears, "Ah! that is just his noble, unselfish way. He forgets entirely how he saved poor me from being dashed to pieces down the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. He would be the last to mention how he bravely rushed between me and destruction, and snatched me from the saddle an instant before my poor horse sprang into that deadly gulf!"

The charge her lover had brought upon himself seemed light as air to Lia. She only thought of him as the noblest and most valiant of men. It was enough for Lia that she loved him heart and soul, and it was the sweetest assurance to her that she was his first and only love.

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"Look!" cried Esther, handing the lorgnette back to her sister. "Lia is smiling now; and see, she is actually kissing the letter!"

Madame de Laurens pointed, however, to the clock, and answered, "Let the little innocent enjoy herself in peace, Esther. It is a quarter to five and the gentlemen will be here presently; so I shall only just have time to change my dress. We can resume our confidential chat after dinner, Esther."

Gliding across the room, she went out by the glass door. Scarcely had it closed upon her when the Countess Esther heard what sounded like a cry from the corridor; but, not hearing it repeated, Esther's natural nonchalance bade her trouble herself no farther, and she lazily sank into an arm-chair. Yet it was a real cry which had startled her. It came from Madame de Laurens, who could not suppress an exclamation of alarm on finding herself face to face with a stranger in the corridor. A stranger he appeared to her in the dusk. But no sooner had they drawn near a window which let some light into the passage than she recognised him as the Baron de Rodach.

"Albert!" she exclaimed, "what folly to follow me here! It was at my own house in the Rue de Provence that I wished to see you, not here. I hear footsteps approaching. Pray do not let us be discovered together. In the room I have just left you will find a lady whom you know. Adieu!"

The baron saw in the lady who had just addressed him so familiarly the veiled stranger who had mistaken him for some one else near the Temple the previous evening. Accustomed to surprise on surprise in this house of mysteries, he passed into the luxurious apartment indicated to him.

The baron's entrance roused the Countess Esther. She, like her sister, was greatly agitated at his sudden appearance. "Goetz!" she said, in alarm, "how came you here! Why couldn't you wait till this evening?"

The baron smiled at this question, and looked at first as though his questioner were utterly unknown to him.

"But how grave you look!" added the countess. "One would think you had grown wise all at once, Goetz!"

"There is a time for all things," replied the baron sententiously.

The answer only provoked a smile. The countess rose, and placed her arm coaxingly under his. "Come, I forgive you this time, Goetz," said she. "Isn't that a good proof of my love? But I hear my father coming. Find some pretext for your presence here. Adieu!"

The countess thereupon fled the same way that Madame de Laurens had gone, leaving the baron gazing with a stern look at the door by which he expected to see Moses Geld enter. The door opened quietly; but, instead of the wrinkled face and decrepit figure of the old Jew, the baron saw the sweet face and graceful form of one who had the power of bringing the colour to his pale cheeks and of kindling a warm light in his eyes.

It was Lia. Her first instinct was to retreat. A second look made her involuntarily step towards the baron and sent a hot blush to her cheeks. Her heart beat faster as she observed the agitation and joyous surprise in the baron's face, which had now lost every jot of coldness.

"Lia!" he murmured, in a voice that seem to come from the depth of his heart.

As if she only waited for his loving appeal, the young girl rushed into his arms, and, half laughing, half crying, in her joy, murmured in reply, "Otto! Otto! How happy thou hast made me!"

There was then a moment of blissful silence, during which the lovers, locked in each other's arms, let heart speak to heart, and give eloquent expression to the gladness which filled their souls at this unexpected meeting. "I feared that thou hadst forgotten me, Otto," murmured Lia, at length, her soul-lit eyes gazing up into his. "Ah! how I suffered! But, thank heaven! thou art still fond of me, Otto." The only answer was a loving look from her lover's honest eyes and a warm kiss on her brow.

Suddenly Lia freed herself from his embrace, and earnestly asked him, "Art thou still a fugitive?"

"Yes, Lia. But why do I find thee here, Lia?" Even as the question left his lips the baron grew pale and his heart sank within him as if in anticipation of the answer.

"True; it must be a surprise to thee," replied the young girl, with a happy smile. "Thou knewest me only at Esselbach as the daughter of Aunt Rachel. But my real name, Otto, is Lia de Geldberg, and I am living now with my father here."

"You are the daughter of Moses de Geldberg!" he exclaimed slowly, his coldness returning involuntarily, and his growing sternness sending a thrill of fear through Lia. Tears sprang into the maiden's eyes as she tremblingly said, "Yes, Otto; but what difference should that make to thou and me?"

Otto, with an irresistable impulse, pressed Lia warmly to his heart again, and fervently murmured, "Whatever happens, I will love thee always, Lia!"

Lia, though she could not understand the cause of Otto's sudden coolness, was all happiness once more; but, careful of her lover's safety, said, "We must quit this room at once, Otto. In a few minutes it will be filled by persons who know Germany well, and whom

it might be advisable that a fugitive should not meet. So follow me to my boudoir, Otto."

"I find I love her with all my heart and soul," communed Otto with himself as he followed Lia along the corridor; "but, come what may, the murders of Count Ulrich and Count Gunther must be avenged, and the heir of Bluthaupt reinstated."

CHAPTER XLII.

HATCHING A CONSPIRACY.

LATER in the evening the Chevalier de Reinhold caused not a little sensation by his sudden appearance in the cabaret of the Giraffe. It being *Lundi gras*, the cabaret was full to overflowing. The portly "Giraffe" herself had no rest behind her little counter. The demand for wine was incessant. The waiter had as much as he could do to serve the thirsty customers who thronged round the tables.

The chevalier's interest in the Temple made him well known in the quartier. Hats were lifted as he entered, and the Giraffe answered his salute and gallant compliments by a series of profound reverences. "You know I am delighted to see the people enjoying themselves, Gretchen," said the chevalier; "I will pay for glasses round. Ah! Johann," he added, in a low tone, to the innkeeper himself, "I want to have a few words with you privately."

While the chevalier and Johann left the cabaret together, the welcome order of "Glasses round!" won for Reinhold warm praises of his sympathy with the poor. A few only ventured to hint that that very day the goods of half-a-dozen poor fellows had been seized by the chevalier's brokers. The malcontents were duly punished by the Giraffe, who loudly protested, "Don't serve those nobodies," said she. "They're ne'er-do-wells, who never pay their rent; and they shall find the chevalier's wine sour as the grapes were to reynard when he couldn't reach them!"

Reinhold had by this time reached a quiet part of the street where he could converse with Johann without being overheard. It was Johann, be it said, whom the chevalier paid not only as his Temple factotum, but also as his informer respecting anything that transpired in the little German colony.

"I have had five put out of doors to-day," began Johann. "Madame Regnault will be the next. I fear no money can be screwed from her, nor has she anything worth seizing; but I have ordered the execution."

"Is she arrested?" asked Reinhold eagerly.

"Not yet. But she will be to-morrow."

The chevalier looked relieved; and said, "Will you undertake a matter of great importance, Johann? You shall be handsomely paid."

"Then it is a difficult business?"

"Not at all. Simply to find half-a-dozen of strong fellows who can

be depended upon. I value you too much, Johann, to ask you to take part in the affair yourself."

"Is there any danger, then? What is the object?"

"Frankly, the son of Count Gunther has come to light here in Paris, and is in our way." The chevalier explained the failure of the duel, and told Johann how he hoped to remove Franz from their path if the cabaret only yielded the aid he sought. "Is it clear to you?" he at length demanded.

"Quite clear."

"Well?"

"Well!" answered Johann, firmly. "There are judges in Germany as well as in France, and I have only one head upon my shoulders, Monsieur the Chevalier!"

CHAPTER XLIII.

PLAYING WITH EDGED TOOLS.

THE Chevalier de Reinhold could not account for the hesitation of his factotum. He endeavoured to read Johann's mind in his face; but the dull, expressionless features were a closed book to him. "Do you refuse, then?" despairingly demanded the chevalier.

"In truth, Monsieur the Chevalier!" replied Johann, "I have half a mind to. Still, you might tell one what you intend to give for the business."

"Friend Johann," answered the chevalier gaily, slapping him cheerily on the shoulder; "thank you for coming to the point. Wouldn't you like to earn fifty thousand francs?"

"Rather!"

"Very well; that sum shall be yours when you have found the men. Moreover, the rascals themselves shall be rewarded proportionately, and you shall settle with them, Johann, so that a few crowns more may stick to your fingers. Does that suit you?"

The face of the German still betrayed no signs of gladness. He only coolly said, "I accept the commission, Monsieur the Chevalier." Reinhold warmly shook the hand of the phlegmatic Johann.

There remained the more difficult task—the choice of tools for the villanous undertaking. Whom to choose was a source of much perplexity to Johann. Discussing the problem with his master in the same low voice, and with many a furtive look right and left, Johann at length found they had retraced their steps to his cabaret. Leading Reinhold to the opposite side of the street, he pointed to a group of his customers who had evidently moistened their pipes well with cheap wine.

"There are three or four Germans," Johann grumbled, "who would be just the very men we want. But only let them get an inkling of the job, and Hans Dorn would know this very night that some mischief

is on foot against the welfare of the Bluthaupts, and the police would be down upon me to-morrow morning."

"But this Hans Dorn," interrupted the chevalier; "couldn't he be bought over?"

"Buy Hans Dorn!" exclaimed Johann, "Why he's the most obstinate mule in existence! No; there's no alternative but to seek the men we want in their own haunt. Just let me transform you, Monsieur the Chevalier, into a workman for the nonce; and you can accompany me yourself to the cabaret of the Quatre Fils d'Aymon."

Recrossing the street, Johann thereupon bade Reinhold follow him through the private entrance to the Giraffe cabaret. In a few minutes they came out—Johann in the same attire as before, but the chevalier disguised in the blue blouse and flat cap of an artisan. The cabaret they were bound for was the favourite resort of every vagabond inhabitant of the Cour des Mirâcles of the Temple quarter. Thimbleriggers, pimps, three-card tricksters, pickpockets, and burglars held orgie there with women of similar vocations. As this was the night of *Lundi gras*, be sure the fun within was at its maddest.

Johann, arm-in-arm with the not over-valiant workman by his side, drew his companion up a dark alley; then across a muddy court-yard boasting a couple of arbours with worm-eaten trellis-work, and styled therefrom the garden; next down three steps and into a dingy billiard-room. The discordant strains of jerky music, with the clamour of many voices, and the tramping noise of many feet grew louder and louder as they crossed the grimy billiard-room, and became deafening when they gained a door to the left and found themselves on the threshold of the principal saloon of the Quatre Fils d'Aymon.

Reinhold, who would have retreated had he not been afraid to betray his cowardice, was not allowed many minutes to observe the strange carnival spectacle that dazzled him. He had taken in at a glance the little counter whereat presided Widow Taburot, mistress of the establishment, who always spoke of herself as the relict of a captain in the Imperial Guard; likewise the heterogeneous mob of frenzied dancers —the men clad, for the most part, as workmen, but with here and there a dashing dandy in full evening dress; while the women included grisettes and, judging by their stylish costumes, even one or two ladies of position from the Faubourg St. Honoré—all dancing with the uncurbed license peculiar to Parisians of the lowest type, their saltatory twirls and flings, stimulated by the vigorous if irregular music of the two men of repulsive aspect who formed the band, one playing the violin and the other a kind of hautbois, both dancing at the same time with half-drunken frenzy.

"Mâlou and Blaireau there will do for two," whispered Johann to Reinhold, nodding in the direction of the two musicians. "Clever dogs! They were sentenced to hard labour for life; yet, behold them back in Paris again!"

"Sentenced for murder?" murmured Reinhold, in greater trepidation than ever.

"Well; yes, if you like to use blunt language," answered Johann, with provoking coolness. This revelation, though it bade fair to yield

Mâlou and Blaireau up to him as two willing tools, did but heighten the chevalier's alarm and disgust at the riotous carnival orgie, which almost seemed to him like the vision of some fantastic nightmare.

"Polka next, Blaireau!" was the cry of the insatiable dancers, as, the quadrille at an end, the musicians paused to take breath. The violin was scraped again with unabated zest. The hautbois joined in. A very whirlwind of a polka ensued, and there arose such exclamations as these in shrill voices: "Look at Mâlou! He is swinging Bouton-d'Or round under his arm and playing the hautbois all the time."

"By jove! So he is. Carry me the same way, Loiseau."

"Swing *me* round like that, Louis." But neither Loiseau nor Louis could boast such strong arms as Mâlou. Nor were their partners as light as the gay little feather-weight of a grisette, Bouton-d'Or.

When the tumult was at its height there arose above the shouting the sonorous warning of Widow Taburot. "Less noise, if you please, ladies and gentlemen."

At this moment the windows were opened to let a little fresh air into the saloon. The smoke which curled from a hundred pipes was dissipated. The clearer atmosphere enabled some of Widow Taburot's most vociferous patrons to take notice of Reinhold for the first time. The landlord of the Giraffe was known to most of them. Their curiosity was aroused by Johann's pallid companion in the blouse, with a black handkerchief tied across one eye to make his disguise more perfect.

"Who is it?" was the lively demand.

"Who!" said the saucy Bouton-d'Or. "Why, that face—that bandage! It must be Love!"

The bon-mot was rapturously applauded. In the twinkling of an eye the chevalier found himself surrounded by the laughing dancers. In spite of all Johann's efforts, his master was hustled into the middle of the saloon, the laughing-stock of all, as Mâlou exclaimed, "Why, his pretty face has no less than seventy-five centimes' worth of powder on it!"

"Lift him on the table!" shouted the irrepressible Bouton-d'Or; and charge a sou for a close inspection of him!" The suggestion was no sooner made than it was acted on. Reinhold was lifted on high. Unfortunately for him, his wig fell off with his cap, in the ascent, displaying his bald head, which looked all the balder by reason of the black handkerchief he wore diagonally across his cranium. In joyous tumult, they formed a ring and danced round the new comer whom they regarded as a scarecrow; singing as they roared with mirth, "Vive l'Amour! vive l'Amour!"

In as great distress as the victims whom cannibals honour before eating, the chevalier felt his heart sinking within him, while his false teeth chattered with terror. His bare crown, smooth and white as a billiard ball, was especially amusing to the fair houris. Bouton-d'Or fully entered into the joke. Springing on the table beside Reinhold, she caressed his chin with one hand and held the lost wig above his head with the other, while Mâlou pointed at them with a billiard cue and explained. "Picture from the mythology—Psyche Restoring the wig of Love!"

Johann all the time had felt a secret satisfaction at the persecution of the chevalier. At length he suddenly remembered the large sum of money promised him by Reinhold, and energetically pierced his way through the throng at the very moment that Widow Taburot rose from her counter to restore order. Johann whispered a word in Mâlou's ear. It acted like magic. Mâlou made a sign to Blaireau. Bouton-d'Or leaped from the table and assisted the chevalier to terra-firma. "Enough, mates!" said Blaireau. "Madame Taburot must be obeyed! As for our new guest, Mâlou will help me to entertain him more hospitably, never fear, Madame Taburot!"

While the volatile crew, pliant enough in Blaireau's hands, withdrew to continue their revel, the Chevalier de Reinhold soon found himself seated at a little table between his former tormentors at the further end of the saloon, and his confidence was in a measure restored to him by the whispered injunction of Johann, "Never mind the horse-play: don't notice it. Be satisfied with your luck in finding two such tools ready to your hand!"

Reinhold perceived as he grew more collected that he had trusted Johann too far to draw back now from the venture. Moreover, he placed such implicit reliance on his agent that he even felt his repugnance for the two ruffians beside him lessening every moment.

"You will pardon our roughness, I know monsieur," pleaded Mâlou, placing his black hand familiarly on Reinhold's knee. "Now we know you are here on business we drop our fun, and put on our business habits. Father Johann has told us that you are in want of two dare-devils to perform a little job in Germany. If you pay well, command our services at once. But what will you pay us?"

Johann, noticing that Reinhold was scarcely composed enough to respond calmly yet, answered for him, "The master is liberal. You'll have no complaint to make against him. Name your own price!"

"First, Father Johann, it would be as well to inform us—"

"Oh! a mere trifle," replied Johann. "It is only a young fellow in our way, and—"

"And you want him put out of the way?" interrupted Mâlou.

"Precisely!"

"The deuce you do! and when is it to be done?"

"It is not quite settled yet; but it will be necessary for you to live in the neighbourhood for a little while in order to accustom the peasants to your persons; and you will be required to set out to-morrow at midday."

"Agreed," answered Mâlou, after a brief consultation with Blaireau. "We are yours for five thousand francs apiece. But we must have a little in advance in earnest of good faith."

"As I said before," replied Johann, the master is liberal, and will supply you with funds."

The chevalier, signifying his assent, drew a pocket-book from inside his blouse, and took from it a bank-note for 500 francs. Rising with a sigh of relief, Reinhold handed the note to Mâlou, whose keen eyes had caught sight of the other notes in the pocket-book which had equally attracted the attention of Blaireau. Greed for more did not

prevent them from being profuse in their thanks for the note already received. Nor did the thanks utterly drive from their memories the pocket-book, if we may judge from the little conversation which took place after Mâlou and Blaireau had escorted the chevalier safely to the door of the Quatre Fils d'Aymon.

"Good-night Father Johann!" said Mâlou. "Next time you'll not forget to give us something to drink."

"Brigands!" murmured Johann in Mâlou's ear. "Your pockets are well lined to-night, I know!"

"Only the pocket-book?" suggested Mâlou.

"You'll give me my share?"

"We shall see." With which reply Johann had to be contented as he hastened to offer his arm to the Chevalier de Reinhold, and to consult with him as to who should be the remaining two hirelings to assist Mâlou and Blaireau in settling the fate of Franz.

CHAPTER XLIV.

LOVE'S AMBASSADRESS.

GERTRUDE, the fair young daughter of Hans Dorn, never looked more like her mother than she did that same evening. Seated in her modest chamber, deep in the intricacies of embroidery, Gertrude had given herself up to one of those waking dreams which surrounded the loves of Franz and Denise with a halo of romance. Now a roguish twinkle would sparkle in her bright eyes as she remembered how completely both had betrayed their hearts' secrets to her, a poor girl. The next moment her sweet blue eyes would swim with sympathy as she bethought herself that she was the one means of communication Franz and Denise had, and what a slender thread that was!

The sound of footsteps ascending the stairs brought the most winsome of smiles to her lips. Gertrude burst into song, and continued to sing even when a knock at the outer door of their chambers had been repeated two or three times with impatience.

"Gertrude!" called out a clear young voice; "I shall be able to hear you so much better if you will only open the door!"

The young girl laughingly sped to the door and opened it. Her reward was a kiss on each cheek so hearty that her face and neck were suffused with blushes as she protested, "Fie, Monsieur Franz! What will Mademoiselle Denise say?"

"You have seen Denise, then?" joyfully exclaimed Franz, glad to have half surprised the very news his heart craved for from the lips of Gertrude. "Does she love me still?"

"I cannot say whether she loves you," naively answered Gertrude, with a smile. "I only know that when I arrived Mademoiselle Denise was sad, and her eyes were red with weeping; that when I first spoke of you she became pale as death; but that when I said you had come

out safely from the duel she embraced me, the colour came back to her cheeks, and she uttered a gentle prayer to heaven!"

Franz felt a tremor of deepest pleasure dart through him at this sweet assurance. "Tell me all!" he begged of Gertrude, with tears of joy in his eyes.

The pretty embroideress then recounted in detail all that passed between Denise and herself. Franz, in the fulness of his joy, listened in silence till Gertrude ended her story, and asked, in her turn, "And now, Monsieur Franz, tell me what has happened to you since this morning that you are so gay?"

"Gay, am I? Isn't the joyful news you have just told me enough to make the dullest fellow gay? Thank you, thank you with all my heart, Gertrude, my sister! (this latter term of endearment probably rising to his lips to excuse the shower of kisses with which he expressed his gratitude to Gertrude). But I also have a fresh budget of surprises to relate. The romance of my life marches bravely. One would think I was the son of a prince. Why, Gertrude, I had expended the money which had been dropped into my pocket so mysteriously at the bal-masqué: I had spent every sou of it in this stylish suit you see I have on, and in a set of handsome furniture to brighten up my apartments in the Rue Dauphine. Well, on reaching the hotel myself, what was my surprise to be received with the greatest reverence by the porter who had previously snubbed me, and to be conducted to the most luxurious rooms in the house—those on the first floor—there to find my handful of household goods, together with the bran-new chairs and things I had sent there, carefully arranged for my pleasure! To cap all, the concierge called my attention to a desk in which 'my friends' had left a pocket-book for me."

"'My friends,' you call them, I said to myself. 'Friends, indeed!' I added, carelessly placing the pocket-book stuffed full of bank-notes inside my coat; 'but I must not let you know that they are friends utterly unknown to me.' So I just let drop a few words of inquiry respecting the time my friends called. Happily, you need only give a concierge an inch and you will soon get back more than an ell of conversation when you are on good terms with him. Thus, I speedily learnt that it was my mystic guardian of the Bois de Boulogne who was the chief donor of all this wealth; and he appeared to have been accompanied, Gertrude, by a man whose description might have answered for your father, Hans Dorn!"

"My father!" exclaimed Gertrude, divining at the same moment that it must have been Hans Dorn and the Red Knight who had interested themselves in Franz, but yet controlling her surprise as she remembered the injunctions of secrecy imposed by her father.

"Why don't you answer, Gertrude?"

"You must not ask me any questions on the subject," said Gertrude, in a tone of quiet determination. "Once for all, let me say, I know nothing, I suppose nothing, and I have nothing more to answer!"

"Very well," replied Franz, with a smile; "since you wish it, I'll not ask you the question again, Gertrude. Let us drop the subject.

Prince or no prince, I wouldn't change my fate for that of any man living. I am young, happy, in love, and beloved; and the one thing wanting to complete my joy is to be able to clasp Denise to my heart. But, alas! till my parentage and wealth be quite assured I dare not venture to call openly upon the Countess d'Audemer, though I love Denise, and though I am Julien's friend! Gertrude, you are her confidant; can you not arrange that I should meet Denise—"

Gertrude placed her finger to her lips as a signal for silence. The cuckoo perched above the clock gave warning that it was on the point of striking nine. As the hour struck a carriage was heard to stop outside. Gertrude could not suppress a start of pleasure. Her charming face was filled with animation as she murmured, "Punctual to the moment!"

"Do you expect some one, then?"

"Yes."

"Must I leave?"

"No, Monsieur Franz; you may like to see my visitor. But for the moment you must step into my father's room."

"Who is it?" asked Franz.

A light step was heard crossing the court-yard. Franz was about to repeat his question, when Gertrude pushed him hurriedly into her father's room and turned the key in the door.

Pit-a-pat of light feet, oh! so swiftly up the stairs, a warm embrace on the landing, and the voices of Denise and Gertrude reached Franz's ears, and sent a fresh thrill of joy coursing through his veins.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE THREE RED KNIGHTS.

ABOUT the same hour three of the leading personages in this history were snatching a brief spell of rest in a spacious apartment in the Rue St. Honoré. No light relieved the sombre darkness of the room save the faint reflection from a lamp in the court-yard. By this glimmer could just be seen a heap of travelling cloaks carelessly thrown in one corner, spurred boots in another, a few swords stretching across the floor and casting fantastic shadows, and a pile of gold pieces on the chimney-piece.

Three men were asleep in the three beds jutting out from one side of the dark room. Even though the alarum of a watch whirred out nine o'clock, the heavy sleep of two of the sleepers remained unbroken. The third sprang out of bed at the sound, murmuring, "So soon! After three nights' hard work two hours of sleep are soon gone!"

His two companions, half awake now, sleepily strove to pierce the darkness. "But our hours are numbered for us," continued the third. "I must act from this very night; still, before I depart they must be warned of the journeys in store for them. Brothers," he

added, raising his voice. "The hour is nigh for us to strike the first good blow for Franz! At dawn to-morrow you will have to start on your journey to London and Amsterdam. Let me be certain, therefore, to find you here when I return to-night!"

"Otto, you know we are ever ready for our duty!"

CHAPTER XLVI.

LOVE AND JEALOUSY.

YES; it was Mademoiselle Denise d'Audemer whose anxious love-inquiries Gertrude had to satisfy now. The meeting had been arranged by those two fair daughters of Eve in this way: so pressing were their preparations for the grand fête at the castle of Geldberg that the Viscountess d'Audemer was prevailed upon to allow Denise to drive round in the carriage that evening to see how her embroideress was progressing with her part of the work. The amount of interest Denise actually felt in all this embroidery and fancy-work for the fête was shown by her very first question to Gertrude, "Have you seen him?"

"I have, mademoiselle," answered Gertrude, casting an uneasy glance towards the door of her father's room, and half fearing she had been imprudent in harbouring there the lover of her young mistress.

"Well?" continued Denise, looking in the same direction, her curiosity aroused by Gertrude's glances thither, and by the noise of someone moving impatiently in the opposite room.

Gertrude felt she could not keep Denise from Franz a moment longer. "He is in there!" said Gertrude. Seeing the flush of delight which thereupon mantled Denise's face, Gertrude skipped lightly across the passage, and, hastily opening the door which separated the lovers, felt she had done her duty as Love's ambassadress when she saw Franz raise Mademoiselle d'Audemer's hand to his lips, while he exclaimed, in a voice tremulous with delight, "Denise!"

The instant the well-loved name had escaped from him, Franz feared, with the bashfulness of young love, that he had gone too far. In what other light could Mademoiselle D'Audemer regard him now but as a braggart? He had extracted from her the secret a young girl guards most closely, on the plea that he was going to fight a duel. She had heard from Gertrude that no duel had taken place; and must she not naturally feel some resentment against one who by his valiant words only had surprised her into an avowal of love for him? This false shame and timorous self-questioning drew from Franz a stammering apology before Denise could say a word. "Mademoiselle," urged he, "nothing you can say can equal the reproaches of my conscience. It was the act of a fool to accost you, as I did, last night; but for pity's sake, don't believe me to be a coward!"

Denise simply regarded him with the look of deep devotion so precious to lovers, and answered as if she had not heard Franz's broken

words. "Franz," said she, the love-light in her blue eyes intensifying the warmth of her speech, "I rejoice to see you safe again!"

So much love was there in these simple words that the self-reproaches of Franz vanished as if by enchantment. With the well-assured confidence of an accepted lover he now gazed lovingly at Denise, and was about to embrace her, but suddenly suppressed his ardour when he bethought himself of Gertrude's presence.

Gertrude herself, blushing at the sight of the lovers' happiness, and inwardly rejoicing that she had been the means of bringing them together, was discreetly retiring, when Denise stopped her with the words, "Don't go, Gertrude, dear. *You* will not be in our way."

The pretty embroideress would fain have left them to themselves (and Franz, for one, blessed her for the intention); but, acting on Denise's wish, Gertrude forthwith occupied herself busily with her work in the further corner of the room.

"I did not expect to meet you here, Franz," resumed Denise, in her sweet, trustful voice. "But if I had known that you would be here, I should have come all the same, for I did so much want to see you—ah! how much you little know, Franz!"

"Would that I deserved such goodness!" murmured Franz.

"I wished to see you," continued Denise, "because you forced my heart's secret from me last night, Franz. For a long time I knew of your love for me; and you don't know what deep joy, and yet what dread fear, I felt, Franz, after my confession of love involuntarily escaped from me, and I had the right to feel anxious for your safety in that duel which threatened your life. But Gertrude dispelled my fears this morning; and, thanks to Gertrude also, I can now see for myself that you are unhurt. Yet—yet what can we hope for, Franz, when fortune does not favour our love!"

Franz beamed with delight, and pressed her white hand with fervour as each sweet assurance of her devotion fell upon his ears. "Yesterday, Denise," he joyfully replied, "that last question would have been difficult indeed to answer. But to-day my future is full of the brightest promise. Denise, I am rich. May be, I am of noble birth!"

"Can it be true?"

"True as I am here! The best of it all, though, is that you gave me your heart, Denise, when I was poor!"

"Yes; I loved you when you were poor, for I loved you for yourself, and I shall always love you, Franz, come what may. But I am so thankful to hear of your good fortune, as my mother's consent will be easier to gain now."

This allusion to the Viscountess d'Audemer acted as a damper on Franz, who, in less hopeful tones, explained to Denise that he would have to wait yet a few days longer before he could learn the name of his father, and venture, by virtue of his rank, to ask the viscountess for the hand of her daughter. "But do you think," added Franz, "that, after all, the viscountess will refuse to give her consent when she is informed of my title and wealth?"

"My mother is kind, and loves me," replied Denise, in a sweet whisper, "and I will tell her I love you."

Franz once more pressed her hand to his lips. His heart was too full of gratitude for speech. For a minute a mute spell of bliss was theirs. He had insensibly clasped her to his heart, and the soft contact had sent the electric thrill of love pulsing through both their beings. As one sentiment filled their souls and glowed in their azure eyes, the strange resemblance they bore to each other was increased. Yet their characters were quite diverse. Franz was quick, gay, warm, and daring; Denise calm, timid, and serious.

They might have remained much longer in the quiet enjoyment of their mutual love had not Gertrude finished the collar, which was the pretext for Denise's visit. "I have finished the piece of embroidery you were waiting for, Mademoiselle Denise," was the way Gertrude conveyed the hint.

"It is most delicate and charming," exclaimed Franz, examining the elegant work and smiling his best thanks to Gertrude.

"You are a fairy, Gertrude," said Mademoiselle d'Audemer, likewise admiring the embroidery. "Yet I detest this collar."

"Why?" asked Gertrude.

"Because it makes me think of the fête in Germany."

"Poor Monsieur Franz!" answered Gertrude. "Fifteen days' absence for you to repine at!"

This news was a surprise to Franz, who asked, "But are you absolutely obliged to go to this fête?"

"Alas! yes. The invitation has been accepted. My mother thinks of nothing else; and she has set her heart upon my marrying the Chevalier de Reinhold, who is to be one of our hosts at the Castle of Geldberg."

"Is the fête to be at the Castle of Geldberg?" asked Franz, brusquely.

"Yes; and there I shall be surrounded and persuaded on all sides. If it were only in Paris I might have your support, Franz!"

"Better there than in Paris," said Franz. "You shall see me as frequently as you wish, for I will follow you to the Castle of Geldberg."

As Denise was expressing her incredulity as to Franz's ability to obtain the necessary invitation, there was a faint knock at the outer door of Hans Dorn's apartments. No one heard it. The knock was repeated louder and louder. Gertrude at length heard the summons, and, closing the door on the two lovers, hastened to answer the knock. To her embarrassment, she discovered that her visitor was Jean Regnault, her own faithful lover, whom she would readily have welcomed on any other night.

"Pardon me for calling at so late an hour," said Jean; "but I have a great and pressing favour to ask of you."

"Tell me quickly what you want, Jean," answered Gertrude, hurriedly, "for I am busy."

Jean would have taken his departure instantly at this sign of Gertrude's impatience; but he was nerved by the memory of his mother's deep distress, and the knowledge that he was about to try the very last means of saving her from prison on the morrow. "My only hope

is in you, Gertrude," he stammered. "Will you lend me a gentleman's suit till to-morrow?"

"What for?" inquired Gertrude.

"I would rather not tell you," replied Jean; "but, if you still wish to know, I'll tell you all; for you know I conceal nothing from you, Gertrude."

The vivid light in Gertrude's eyes betrayed her curiosity. But she was recalled to her duty by the noise of chairs being moved in the room she had just left. "I can trust you perfectly well, Jean," she said. "Wait a moment, and I'll bring the suit to you here." Jean's eyes followed her light figure, and shone with love and gratitude as she disappeared within her father's room.

Gertrude thought she had closed the door after her, but it was left ajar. Through this narrow opening there came the murmur of voices to the ears of Jean Regnault. Then he could distinguish the voice of a young man. Jean experienced for the first time the pang of jealousy. He found himself listening with painful acuteness to catch some word that might wound him to the heart yet more. He heard a kiss. His self-restraint fled. In an instant he was gazing with burning eyes into the room wherein he knew Gertrude to be. He felt his blood turn icy cold as he heard a second kiss, and could just see the face of a young man bent down to kiss a white hand. Jean could not perceive the lady's figure. What need of that? For him it could only be Gertrude's.

When Gertrude handed him the parcel containing the needed suit a moment after, the darkness concealed his trembling figure. He took the parcel, and, casting a look of sorrow and reproach at her, departed with a crushed heart and a new burden to weigh down his young life.

Franz and Denise, the innocent cause of Jean's anguish, soon quitted Gertrude in their turn. "Heaven grant the realisation of our hopes!" said Denise in parting with Franz. "But whether you are rich or poor, I am your betrothed; and if fate should separate us, Franz, no other man save you shall call me wife!"

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE GAMBLING "HELL."

THE gambling "hell" of the Baroness de Saint Roch, in the Rue des Prouvaires, was scarcely a fashionable gaming-house. Yet a marquis or count or two from the Palais Royal were not wanting to add to the importance of the clerks and shopkeepers, men-about town, and commercial travellers who found their greatest pleasure in losing their cash at the gaming-tables of the Baroness de St. Roch. It was best to drop in at half-past ten, when the play was generally in full swing. The patriarchal Cerberus admitted you on receiving the pass-word. Supposing you escaped the wiles of certain fair houris in the reception

boudoir, you had to traverse a saloon in which lansquenet was being played, and then gained the room of rooms, very much like a billiard-room in appearance. Here the Baroness de St. Roch (known to the reader as Madame Batailleur, of the Temple, the creature of Madame de Laurens) presided at the trente-et-quarante table, having the banker, M. de Navarin, on one side, and a kind of private box on the other. It was impossible to see the occupant of the private box, which was guarded by thick silk curtains; and the mysterious lady who chose this secret way of indulging her passion for play had only to touch a spring, when a pigeon-hole was opened to allow her white hand to place whatever sum she might please on the table without the possibility of her being recognised.

The appearance of the white hand occasioned the usual amount of curiosity to-night. Gamesters who lavished their louis-d'or on the chances of the game, equally with the impoverished who risked but a crown-piece, and the infatuated players who played and lost on a "system," all looked round as the white hand deposited a bank-note on the green cloth, and another, and another, as if to give them confidence.

"Make your game, gentlemen!" cried the banker; and on went the play again, with the metallic ring of gold and silver and the rustle of crisp notes, until there was a fresh interruption in the arrival of a stately, handsome stranger, who strode straight to the head of the table and made room for himself beside the Baroness de St. Roch. To the surprise of the baroness, he bent forward, and touched the white hand which yet lingered on the green cloth. The hand was drawn back as if from fear; and a signal was evidently made which the baroness alone understood. The latter rose from the table. Making a sign for the stranger to follow her, she opened a secret door, and conducted him to a small room, from which access to the private box was gained. In this ante-room the lady with the white hand awaited her unceremonious visitor.

The lady was Madame de Laurens, proprietress of the gambling hell. The visitor was the Baron de Rodach. "Albert! Albert!" murmured Madame de Laurens in her most seductive voice. "Whoever conducted you here? How did you contrive to pass the Cerberus? Is it me you seek?"

The baron gallantly raised her hand to his lips, and answered with as much warmth as he could infuse into his tone, "Easy to enter, my dear madame, with the name of the Baroness de St. Roch for passport. Need I answer your other question, Sarah? Have I not come from Germany only to see you?"

Madame de Laurens' heart leaped within her. "He is still my slave!" she thought.

"Satisfy me on one point now," continued the baron. "What led you to call on that young man in the Rue Dauphine this evening?"

"What! Are you jealous?" replied Madame de Laurens, with a coquettish toss of her head.

"Have I not cause?" demanded the baron, congratulating himself on the success of his flattery in disarming Sarah's suspicions.

"You are jealous then! You followed me from the bank to Madame Batailleur's, and thence to Franz's hotel!"

"Ah!" interrupted the baron, feigning ignorance. "His name is Franz! Do you love him, Sarah?"

"If I did, what would you do, Albert?"

"*I would kill him!*"

Bending forward caressingly, and with the sweetest smile wreathing her face in alluring beauty, she answered, in a low, fervid voice, "If any man were to do that I would be his for life! Listen. This young Franz is in my way. I depend on your brave sword to rid me of him, Albert!"

"When would be the most opportune time for the deed?" asked the baron, restraining his indignation with difficulty.

"It was to secure the fitting time and place that I visited him at his hotel, you jealous man! My father is about to give a grand fête at his Castle of Geldberg, and I have invited Franz there."

"Has he accepted the invitation?"

"Yes."

Madame de Laurens, fully believing that her powers of fascination were once more triumphant, had no eyes for the ashy paleness of the baron's face. With a great effort he subdued all outward expression of the intense loathing he now entertained for this terrible temptress, and murmured back, "Thank you a thousand times for this confession, Sarah! My mind is relieved of all doubt. With your gracious permission I will also assist at this fête at the Castle of Geldberg."

. . . . . .

In the lansquenet-room of the gaming-house a young man, a complete stranger to the table, had meantime been winning time after time. It was Jean Regnault. Tempted by the acquaintance behind his chair, who promised him a certain fortune, it being the first time he had touched the cards, Jean Regnault had borrowed the suit of clothes he wore, and had come to the gambling hell for the sole purpose of amassing sufficient winnings to pay his mother's rent on the morrow. A little pile of money, about a couple of thousand francs, stood on the table before him. His eyes glittered like the gold that chinked from hand to hand around him. He was absorbed in the game. More than enough money to save his poor relatives from prison was now accumulated in his heap; yet he played on, for the fever of play, alas! had gained possession of him unawares.

"I stake a thousand francs!" cried a more fortunate player still, opposite Jean; and the daring player won the stakes. Two thousand francs was next staked, and won also. "Four thousand francs!" he now challenged the table with.

Jean, who had neither won nor lost for the last few moments, staked his all in answer to this challenge. The lucky player won again, and Jean was deprived of all his winnings at one fell swoop! A red mist seemed to swim before his eyes as he staggered from the gaming-house. Thence he wandered, not caring whither he went, to the cabaret of the Quatre Fils d'Aymon. There he fell into the hands of the chevalier's factotum, Johann, who plied the demoralised Jean with

drink, and, by promising him a purse full enough to relieve his relatives from all immediate want, and by assuring him a speedy revenge on the young gallant who had, as Jean thought, taken his place in the affections of Gertrude prevailed upon him to join Mâlou, Blaireau, and Fritz (the besotted groom of Bluthaupt) in their murderous errand to Germany.

CHAPTER XLVIII.

MAN OR GHOST.

THE incidents of every-day life even seem sometimes to have a supernatural side. Three or four chance or premeditated occurrences suffice, in the minds of the credulous, to give a fantastic power to certain men and certain things. Witness the succeeding event in the present romance. It will be remembered that, on Thursday, February the 8th, the Baron de Rodach solemnly engaged to call at mid-day on Madame de Laurens in Paris, Meinheer Van Praet in Amsterdam, and the magyar, Yanos Georgyi, in London. How the baron fared in his mission was the subject of the greatest anxiety at the bank of Geldberg on the following Saturday.

No one had been known to give currency to the rumour that the firm of Geldberg, Reinhold, and Co., would suspend payment on February 10, 1844, after fifteen years of apparently vigorous life, and on the eve of launching two most promising speculations. Still, a certain uneasiness in the bank—albeit the clerks bravely tried to look unconcerned—betrayed tbe vague fears that were afloat.

Doctor José Mira, the Chevalier de Reinhold, and Monsieur Abel de Geldberg sat all day in the private room of the bank, anxiously awaiting their fate. Suspense had to be borne in silence, for neither could hold frank communion with his partner. Each guessed the other to be a traitor. All three looked with a terrible longing for some communication from the Baron de Rodach; but the hours slipped by and nothing came. They had almost given up hope when Klaus entered the room, bearing three letters on a silver tray. There was one for each. All the letters seemed to be written in the same hand; but the postmarks were different, one being from London, another from Amsterdam, the other from Paris.

The brows of the three partners cleared directly, the trio of letters had been mastered. Abel de Geldberg, with the communicativeness of his youth, was the first to break the silence. "It is past three; see!" he said. "In less than an hour the bank will be saved, and we shall breathe freely. Don't let us fear Van Praet! The trusty envoy I sent to Amsterdam has satisfied his demand; so there will be no bills presented from him to-day."

"And I can say the same of the magyar at London, the ambassador I despatched across the Channel having arranged things with him," replied Reinhold.

"Bah!" said Mira. "Your postponement of payment will be but putting off the evil day. The fact is, we want money to carry on the bank."

"Have you hit upon some mine of wealth then?" sneeringly asked Reinhold.

"We shall have in our possession a hundred thousand crowns to-morrow," answered Mira, "from Madame de Laurens." This mention of a hundred thousand crowns almost made the partners firm friends again. "We have managed to escape," said Mira; "but this threatened catastrophe should teach us prudence in the future. How do we stand with our two new ventures?"

"The fête and the railway?" gaily exclaimed Reinhold. "All is in train for the fête, and all is *en fête* for the train!" Then leaning down until his mouth almost touched Mira's ear, he added confidentially, "I have already sent off four of our guests—gallows-birds of the Temple—for special duty to the castle." The sinister sparkle in Mira's eyes showed he perfectly understood the allusion.

"As for the railway," broke in young Geldberg, "that is going off like steam. Ten thousand applications for shares since Monday! It is marvellous!"

"Why, in a week we shall have twice the amount of the capital!" said Reinhold, rubbing his hands with relish at the splendid haul they would make.

Four o'clock commenced striking. Ere the last hour struck the door was burst open. The bankers' hopes again dropped to zero when they recognised in the violent newcomer no other than their London creditor, Yanos Georgyi, followed closely by Meinheer Van Praet, their Amsterdam creditor.

The Hungarian, who had lost none of his old fire, made straight for the Chevalier de Reinhold, whose cheeks were now livid with fear. Placing his hand roughly on the chevalier's shoulder, he exclaimed, in a tone of menace, "My bills! Return them at once, or, by heavens!—"

Van Praet, fearing the result of Yanos Georgyi's violence, interposed in his most dulcet tones, "Come, come, Yanos! old friend! Don't begin by breaking bones, there's a good fellow! Believe me, I've tried for the past sixty years to transact all my business smilingly on principle. It's the easiest way, and it pays best!"

Yanos Georgyi released Reinhold ungraciously enough, and allowed his hand to be grasped with all the well-feigned warmth the bulky Van Praet could so well call up at a moment's notice. "Let us all be as good friends as ever," continued Van Praet, unctuously. "We can be friendly, and yet do our business. Well, gentlemen, the fact is my valiant friend, the magyar Yanos here, has paid you this little amicable visit in order to get back the eleven hundred thousand francs due to him; and, strange to say, I am on the same errand. It is a great pleasure only to see you, my dear friends; but I hope also to see one million three hundred and fifty thousand francs, my bills for which were tricked out of me by one of your agents, just as Yanos Georgyi's bills were cosened out of him."

"And I," broke in a third voice, soft and gentle as a woman's, "I

also demand the restoration of the hundred thousand crowns which another of your agents has obtained possession of by infamous and illegal means!"

The eyes of all were directed towards the last speaker. It was Madame de Laurens, composed and bewitching as ever. She smiled in acknowledgment of the varying salutes she received from the members of this great banking firm, and then gracefully sank into the arm-chair proffered her by the chevalier, who looked upon her coming as a respite for himself.

Madame de Laurens' story of Feb. 8 was soon told with all the skill and all the charm of an accomplished actress, performing the rôle of a wronged woman. The sum she had mentioned had been wrung from her and her husband by an emissary from Doctor Mira—an emissary who traded on his knowledge of family secrets, the better to get the money. "Can the doctor," continued Sarah in a tone of bitter irony "pretend that he has not had the hundred thousand crowns?"

"I solemnly swear I have not," was the steady reply.

"Nor have you caught a glimpse of my cash, I'll be bound, Master Abel," said Van Praet ironically to young Geldberg.

"On my word of honour, I have not seen the Baron de Rodach since—"

Upon hearing this name, pronounced unwittingly by Abel, all eyes were directed with a common look of surprise at young Geldberg. "Baron de Rodach!" exclaimed the Hungarian with scorn. "Yes, that was the title he duped me with in London last Thursday."

"Baron de Rodach could not have been in London on Thursday," chuckled Van Praet; "for I saw him in Amsterdam, to my cost, that day."

"And I saw him in Paris here," murmured Madame de Laurens to herself.

"In Paris, in London, and in Amsterdam the very same day!" said Van Praet, laughingly, looking round incredulously.

"Impossible! It is some fresh perfidy," rejoined the magyar.

"There is no perfidy on my part, Yanos," answered Reinhold. "Look! Here is a letter from the baron, dated London."

"And I have one dated from Amsterdam," said Abel.

"Mine is dated from Paris," added Mira.

And all three produced their letters simultaneously. The letters were placed side by side and closely scrutinised. They were all in the same handwriting!

A vague terror stole through each heart as they vainly endeavoured to solve the mystery. The superstition latent in all their minds added to their fear and wonder. There was some hidden power fighting against them. Their common danger reconciled them to each other. Silence was at length broken by Klaus, who opened the door and announced, to their fresh amazement, "Monsieur the Baron de Rodach!"

CHAPTER XLIX.

THE UBIQUITOUS ENVOY.

THERE was a sombre gloom in the council-chamber of the bank that wintry evening, which increased the superstitious awe of Madame de Laurens and the bankers at the mysterious apparition on the threshold. The fitful gleams of firelight only rendered the darkness more palpable. Vague, uncertain shadows wavered on wall and ceiling; and it might well occur to the agitated minds of more than one that the silent figure in the doorway—seemingly the mere silhouette of a man—was but the creation of their fancy—a phantom form, a dark image conjured up by their troubled consciences. They held their breath, but their hearts beat faster, and silence was unbroken as the black figure of the man who was in all their thoughts drew near them. Their superstitious fancies were dispelled as the shadow grew into substance, and there stood before them the living form of the Baron de Rodach.

Meinheer Van Praet recognised the Amsterdam agent. Yanos beheld in him the London agent. Madame de Laurens was convinced he was the man who had drained her purse in Paris. Monsieur Abel de Geldberg, the Chevalier de Reinhold, and Doctor Mira were equally convinced that he was the envoy each had dispatched on his private mission to Amsterdam, London, and to Madame de Laurens in Paris.

The one change noticeable in the Baron de Rodach was the total disappearance of the air of fatigue which formerly cast a gloom over his handsome face. He now bore himself with the calm front of one sure of victory in his secret undertaking, and there was a freshness in his bold, dauntless gaze which bespoke a strength capable of grappling with any lion in his path.

The baron saluted the company in silence, and then threw a rapid glance at each member of the anxious circle. He judged, from the presence of the Hungarian, Van Praet, and Madame de Laurens, that a momentous consultation, of which he was the subject, had just taken place. Still, he never quailed. "I have come," the baron said, calmly seating himself in the nearest armchair, "to tell you how the three missions confided to me by the heads of the bank have been fulfilled. If I interrupt any private meeting I will retire immediately."

This frank statement remained unanswered for a moment. The first to reply was the Chevalier de Reinhold, whose self-possession returned the instant it occurred to him that the appearance of the baron would effectually divert the Hungarian's attention from himself. "Monsieur the Baron," airily said the chevalier, "should know that his presence can never be unwelcome at this bank. I would suggest that, if he will do us the honour, he should join in our consultation."

It is as frequently the first word as the first step which tells. The

few words spoken by the chevalier broke the charm which seemed to hold his associates spellbound, and each recovered by degrees his presence of mind. At a signal from Reinhold, Klaus entered and lit the wax candles in the chandelier. The sudden illumination of the room was scarcely any relief for the bankers. The baron was one against five, but all the five were against each other, and the light was of no avail for any of them : antagonistic as they were, they could come to no secret understanding by any furtive glances.

"The presence of Madame de Laurens and these two gentlemen." said the baron, "almost renders it superfluous, if I mistake not, to give a detailed account of my triple mission. You, Doctor Mira, must already be aware that I obtained from madame a small portion of the sum in question. You, Monsieur Abel de Geldberg (the baron's voice was softened as he addressed Lia's brother), must also know how I induced Meinheer van Praet to confide to me the bills that were to have been paid by this bank to-day—"

"My dear baron," murmured Van Praet, "it is, of course, understood that these bills are still my property."

"That is not my opinion," answered the baron.

The Dutchman's florid face grew purple at this calm reply. An angry retort was about to escape his lips. But the baron imposed silence by a gesture which had an immediate influence on Van Praet.

"And you, Monsieur de Reinhold," continued the baron, "doubtless have learnt from Herr Georgyi, here, that the mission with him was likewise successful." The Chevalier de Reinhold nodded assent, but looked timidly at the Hungarian, whose face was livid with rage, but who, mayhap for the first time in his life, kept his fury to himself.

Meanwhile the baron seemed to be waiting for congratulations on the success of his triple mission. "Have I given satisfaction, gentlemen?" he at length demanded.

"Certainly!" stammered Doctor Mira, studiously looking away from Madame de Laurens.

"Assuredly!" faintly added young Geldberg, avoiding the look of contempt Van Praet cast at him.

Reinhold, less explicit, allowed a timely cough to serve as his affirmative answer.

"Naturally," ironically interrupted Van Praet, "it is impossible to satisfy everyone."

"And I am astonished," added Madame de Laurens with indignation, "that Monsieur the Baron de Rodach ventures to parade his victories in the presence of those he has despoiled!"

"My dear lady," replied the imperturbable baron, "your father's banking firm is in great need of money. Consider that you have but fulfilled a filial duty and you will have the approval of your conscience."

"There is some truth in that," rejoined Van Praet; "and, besides, our dear friend Sarah will be the inheritor of most of her father's wealth. But as for us?"

"Why, are you not the natural allies of the bank?" asked the baron.

"In doing your partners a service, in maintaining the solvency of the bank, I have surely benefited you as well as them!"

The magyar, Yanos Georgyi, still remained silent, though not without difficulty. It was only now and then he furtively glanced at the baron, and when he did so a tremor stole through him, as though some weird reminiscence was brought to his mind. The subdued demeanour of the ordinarily self-assertive Hungarian was the source of no little surprise to Van Praet; while Madame de Laurens regarded his inert herculean frame with supreme disdain, for she had counted on his impetuosity to overawe the baron.

"You will remember the agreement each of you three gentlemen made with me," resumed the baron, again absorbing their attention. "You each agreed that, should I return successful, the chief direction of the bank should be given to me."

The inquietude which Reinhold, Mira, and Geldberg inwardly felt at this abrupt revelation of their common treachery was evident from their confusion. Nor was it lessened when it became plain to them that the baron was no mere cat's-paw to pull their chestnuts out of the fire. Clearly he had some secret purpose of his own to serve. While they dared not to reply, but remained embarrassed, Madame de Laurens slid her arm-chair close to Van Praet's, and held a whispered conference with him.

"But I do not accept your magnanimous offer unreservedly," continued the baron. "You are too experienced in the business affairs of the bank for me to hope to equal your management. Still, as even your skilful management has not kept the bank from being on the verge of insolvency, and, as my position as the late Zachæus Nesmer's trustee entitles me to some substantial guarantee, I must retain possession of those securities which circumstances have placed in my hands."

"I am only a woman," whispered Madame de Laurens at this moment to Van Praet. "I can do nothing. But you!"

"Well, my dear madame," was the reply. "What would you have me do against this terrible baron?"

Madame de Laurens looked at the Hungarian, and then cast a sinister glance at Van Praet.

"The magyar!" murmured Van Praet in answer to this significant look. "If it were a mere question of pistols or sabres he would be our man."

"And when one has no other means at command?" continued the Jewess under her breath.

"You are a shrewd woman, Sarah," replied Van Praet in the same undertone. "But now we must listen to the Baron de Rodach. Let us see his game before we play our trump cards." They were again all attention to the baron.

"I've placed the bills of Meinheer Van Praet," pursued the latter, "and those of Herr Yanos, with the papers of my old friend Zachæus Nesmer, in the casket I have already mentioned to you: this casket is in a place of safety, and which contains the necessary evidence to send you gentlemen where you would rather not go."

"And what about the cash from Madame de Laurens!" demanded Mira.

"That money shall be deposited with you, gentlemen, on condition that you take me as a partner. The cash, then, will be quite at the service of the bank, of which I shall constitute myself—knowing what I know—chief cashier."

"I can't see the drift of all this," broke in Van Praet. "But be sure of one thing: Messieurs Geldberg, Mira, and Reinhold don't stir a step if *we* are to lose by it!"

The baron rose without waiting for a reply. He had made his offer. It was for them to refuse or accept it. His parting salutations were interrupted by Van Praet, who neglected to assume his eternal smile, in the hurry of the moment, and anxiously exclaimed, "Baron, judging from what we have just heard, you assume the responsibility of all the actions we complain of?"

"Entirely!"

"So that, if we are driven to have recourse to law—"

"Before calling the law to your aid," interrupted the baron, "pray take council with those three gentlemen, or even with Madame de Laurens, who will be certain to dissuade you from engaging in a judicial duel against me!"

"But the justice of my claims is self-evident," protested Van Praet.

"I will not discuss that with you. I will only advise you to ask Monsieur de Reinhold what the casket I have alluded to contains."

"You take a cruel advantage of your power," said Madame de Laurens.

"My dear madame," responded the baron, unmoved by this appeal, "would it not be prudent to be silent? Certain facts of which I have knowledge are worth more even than a hundred thousand crowns—are they not?" Madame de Laurens was at once subdued by this question. "Besides," he continued, "these are not definitive losses you are so concerned about. Is it so great a misfortune for you, madame, to sustain the falling fortunes of your father's bank? Is it really a misfortune for you, Meinheer Van Praet, to come to the succour of your old friends?"

"I can see your irony, baron," retorted Van Praet; "but when so large a sum of money is in question—"

"I am a creditor as well as you," answered the baron. "You will doubtless be paid the same moment that I am."

"When will that moment arrive?"

"Soon—be sure of that! I leave to those gentlemen, my new partners, the task of explaining to you the magnificent prospects of the bank, and the pleasure of inviting you to our splendid fête at Geldberg Castle. There only remains one enemy to be done away with—an enemy of yours as well as theirs."

"Mine?"

"I have finished: and have only to add that you and all the creditors of the bank shall be paid in full after the death of the heir of Bluthaupt!"

"Does the lad still live, then?" cried Van Praet, in amazement.

"Madame and your partners will satisfy you on that point." The baron moved towards the door.

Courage returned to the heart of Madame de Laurens now that the baron's back was turned. "Oh! if I were not a woman," she said, directing her words in a despairing tone towards the magyar, "that man should not quit this room alive!"

Yanos sprang to his feet at this appeal. It was as if a spark had ignited a train of gun powder. He rushed between the baron and the door. "I am a man," he cried, responding unwittingly to the subtle words of Madame de Laurens, whose eyes were now sparkling with gratified passion. "I will not ask you for my money, Baron de Rodach! My outraged honour calls for revenge! You shall not leave this room!"

This sudden outburst brought all the bankers to their feet; but the magyar's allusion to outraged honour was a fresh enigma to them.

The baron did not flinch. He stood at his full height, arms folded across his breast, calmly fronting the enraged Hungarian. Yanos followed up his words by levelling his two pistols, one in each hand, at the baron's head. Yet the baron continued to face his opponent with unruffled courage.

A second sped by. Still no shot had been fired. The magyar's trembling hands could seemingly not be steadied to take a sure aim. There was a savage light in his eyes as he glared at the baron's pale face. A mist then appeared to swim before him. He trembled from head to foot. A phantom once more seemed to face him. His hands dropped to his sides, and he exclaimed in terror, "Count d'Ulrich!"

The baron (restraining himself by a powerful effort from doing what his heart suggested) simply seized the opportunity of disarming the now helpless Yanos. Staggering back, the magyar stammered out faintly. "Fire! since you *are* a man. Kill me, or the next moment we meet shall be your last!"

The baron flung the pistols to the other end of the room. "Is it to be a duel between us, then?" asked Yanos.

"Perhaps."

"When?"

"You must wait with the rest."

"Wait for what?"

"*The death of the heir of Bluthaupt*," answered the baron with a bitter emphasis, as he took his departure, unimpeded now by the discomfited magyar.

CHAPTER L.

ON THE WAY TO GELDBERG CASTLE.

THE festivities at Geldberg Castle were quite the rage in Paris. A Geldberg waltz, a Geldberg overcoat, Geldberg boots, Geldberg cravats, proclaimed the popularity of the fêtes. Geldberg ! Geldberg ! one heard nothing else but Geldberg throughout the city.

All the great world of Paris had been invited ; and numerous dukes, marquises, counts, generals, and state functionaries were already on the way to Geldberg Castle. Carriages and coaches of all sorts thronged the road to Geldberg. Special relays of horses for this particular service were provided by the munificent firm of Geldberg and Co., and the jingle of their bells made the road to Germany merry with their music. The heavy diligences were also well freighted with passengers bound in the same direction ; and it had even been reported in the Temple that old Araby, the miserly usurer, had been seen to drive out of Paris, nobly clad like a venerable seigneur, in a resplendent carriage, which he shared with some ladies, all handsomely wrapped in rich furs.

The Temple itself furnished a notable contingent of travellers to the same spot early one morning, when the month of February was well advanced. Hans Dorn had received his expected summons. Behold him surrounded by his trusty fellow-vassals of Bluthaupt, seated outside the diligence, while Gertrude was inside, nothing loth to accompany her father, for were not Denise and Franz at Geldberg Castle, and wasn't that also the destination of Jean Regnault ?

The Regnaults (lifted from their poverty by a timely legacy) filled the interior of another diligence, not as invited guests, of course, but drawn to Geldberg in search of Jean Regnault, who had departed before their good fortune had come to them. The idiot brother of Jean Geignolet, had a bulky parcel concealed within his vest. He guarded it closely. It was the Baron de Rodach's casket, the brilliant metal fastenings whereof excited the cupidity of Geignolet directly he saw the baron hand it over to the custody of Hans Dorn. The idiot had broken open the safe in which the precious casket had been placed ; and he now hugged his treasure to his heart with delight, little imagining that it contained " The Hope of Bluthaupt."

Other acquaintances of ours occupying the same diligence were Madame Batailleur and the trembling little Galifarde, whom she was taking to Geldberg at the urgent command of Madame de Laurens, whose heart at length yearned for the daughter she had so long abandoned.

It was with a dashing gallop inexpressibly inspiriting that the lively teams drew the two diligences through the streets of Paris, rattling over the stones in the keen morning air, and not diminishing their pace until the barriers had been left a quarter of league behind. Then

they subsided into the steady, jog-trot which was more likely to last the distance they had to traverse.

When between five and six leagues had been accomplished, and the town of Pomponne flashed white in the horizon, a post-chase swept by the rearmost of the two diligences like a whirlwind, and disappeared in a cloud of dust, leaving the passengers scarce time to note more than than that the window-blinds were down, and that the postilion was urging his horses on to their utmost rate of speed.

This speed was palpably slackened as the post-chaise gained the leading diligence. The window was lowered, and the hand that was projected made a sign which called forth a heart-stirring cheer in response from Hans Dorn, Herman, and the other Germans seated outside the diligence.

The red blind fell. The postilion plied his whip. The post-chaise almost seemed to fly past like a swallow before a storm, and was soon lost in the distance.

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Night had fallen. The post-chaise continued its rapid flight, as silent as it was fleet. It darted past the quickest vehicles, giving rise to numberless conjectures as to its wondrous speed and its occupants. Was it being accomplished for a wager? Was there a runaway couple inside?

By day and by night the same headlong speed was kept up, there being ever fresh relays of the fleetest horses awaiting the post-chaise. At each posting-house the window was lowered and liberal gifts were made to the ostlers, and a voice from within commanded the fresh postilion to get over the next stage at topmost speed.

On, on the post-chaise whirled again. Upwards of twelve leagues were covered in three hours. Saint-Jean-les-Deux-Jumeaux was left well behind. It was a dark, moonless night, so black that the grey road could scarce be distinguished from the sombre fields. No eye could see the travellers. So the windows were lowered, and the sharp night air rushing in roused the three occupants of the post-chaise to conversation. "Thanks to that enchanting Paris, as you call her, Goetz and Albert," exclaimed one of the three, "you have neglected the very duty which called us to that city! Who knows what peril may threaten him we love at this very moment?"

"It is very strange," answered Goetz in a tone of contrition; "but no sooner do I inhale the air of Paris than I make a fool of myself."

"It is the same with me," murmured Albert; "but, with Goetz, you know I would sacrifice all the bright eyes and sweet lips of Paris, Otto, to save Franz!"

"But it may be too late!" replied Otto. "And it is painful to think, brothers, that you both deserted our sister's son at the same moment, when your protection was most needed!"

There ensued a brief silence, which spoke more eloquently than words. The hands of the two culprits were stretched towards their brother in the dark. "Forgive us once more!" they appealed together.

Their hands were clasped by Otto, who answered, "God, who reads all hearts, may have more to pardon in me than you, my brothers.

For I also have been weak. One day I opened my heart to a dearly-cherished thought which was not that of duty. So we have all three failed. Let us make amends by not losing another moment of the precious time that is left us!"

Albert and Goetz answered with a hearty grip of Otto's hands. "Remember," added Otto, "we have only eight days more of freedom. Before the ninth has expired we must have fought and won our last battle for the right!"

"No immediate danger threatens Franz, then?" inquired Goetz.

"Yes; immediate danger does threaten him, alas! I have learnt from a trustworthy source that a band of ruffians have arrived at Bluthaupt, and my informant believes their mission is to kill Franz by some means or other. There is to be a grand display of fireworks. Franz is to set light to them; and one well-charged piece is to be levelled straight at the poor fellow."

"When is this to take place?" asked Goetz and Albert, shivering at the thought of the peril Franz was in.

"To-morrow!"

The post-chaise rattled over the stones of Montmirail now, the red blinds being drawn down until the open country was gained once more.

"We shall arrive in good time, with heaven's help!" said Otto, reassuringly. "We are being wafted there with the speed of the wind, you see."

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It was night again when the post-chaise left Metz and, quitting the main road, made straight for the frontier by a shorter route. The three brothers descended from the post-chaise between St. Avold and Forbach, and left the postilion to continue his journey. They walked across the fields, and were guided by a peasant over the frontier line before they were aware of the fact.

About half a league further on Otto gave the guide a few gold pieces. "Oh! oh!" cried the peasant, weighing the coins in his hand. "You must have something rather precious under your coats, masters."

"Three good pairs of arms and three good swords—nothing else," protested Albert, laughingly.

"Only a good appetite," added Goetz.

"Ah! those things don't concern the Zollverein," replied the guide, with a knowing look, as he retraced his steps towards France.

Not far from the banks of the Sarre the post-chaise was waiting for the three brothers. They quickly jumped in, and were soon across the river. The first rays of the wintry sun awoke the birds and lit up the country around. It was still dark, however, within the post-chaise, for the window-blinds were down. Otto, Goetz, and Albert, snugly wrapped in their cloaks, had fallen into a sound sleep. They needed it to give them strength for their coming struggle.

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The day flew by. It was twilight. On the road from Obernburg to Bluthaupt Castle Three Red Knights were spurring their horses at full speed.

CHAPTER LI.

"FORWARD! TO SAVE OR AVENGE HIM!"

THE road from Obernberg to Bluthaupt Castle, usually silent and deserted, was full of life. It was thronged with numberless vehicles of all kinds, from the Parisian calèche to the most ancient of German coaches; while here and there a worthy burgess of Obernberg gravely ambled along on the most substantial of steeds. All were going in the same direction—towards Bluthaupt Castle. "Geldberg! Geldberg!" was the name on every lip; and it was one of the grand features of the Geldberg fêtes—the magnificent fire display—that one and all were hastening to witness.

Our three cavaliers, who had set out from Obernberg at dusk, passed every other horseman and the fleetest carriages on the road. The clatter of their horses' hoofs arrested attention for a moment. Three splendidly mounted travellers were seen to flash by, and the next moment their stalwart forms disappeared in the darkness. A league from the town they reined in their foaming horses, and demanded of a group of villagers, "At what hour do the fireworks commence?"

"It must be very near the time, meinherr," replied the foremost peasant. "I fear we shan't arrive soon enough to see the grand sight; but you, with your strong horses—"

Before the sentence could be finished the three horsemen spurred on their steeds, which burst into a mad gallop as the riders shouted out "Thank you!" to the astonished villager. They were an hour later than they thought; and every minute might see the success of their enemies' foul plot to assassinate the heir of Bluthaupt.

"Forward!" cried Otto, rising in his stirrups and lashing his horse to fresh exertion. "Faster! faster! brothers, or Franz will be lost!" Albert and Goetz mutely followed Otto's example. There ensued a veritable race for life. The gallant steeds bounded along—their straining eyeballs, the hot breath from their quivering nostrils, the white flakes of foam which flew from their mouths, and their steaming sides seeming to show that they fully knew a life depended on their speed.

The Three Red Knights ever kept their eyes fixed on the east—the quarter where they would see the first glimmer preceding the fiery shower. As they arrived at the foot of the mountain (the place where Regnault, the magyar, and the usurer, Moses Geld, took the cross-road leading to Bluthaupt Castle, twenty years ago) a thin column of flame rushed into the heavens and shot forth a sheaf of glittering stars, which shone like meteors in the dark sky.

A deadly pallor spread over the faces of the three brothers at this brilliant sight. Their hearts almost ceased to beat. Ere the echo of the distant report, however, could reach their ears, Otto plunged his spurs more deeply into his horse's smoking flanks, and, with a wild neigh, the steed cleft the night air with an accelerated pace.

"Forward!" he again cried, this time with a vioce filled with anguish. "Forward! to save or avenge him!"

Their furious course led them past the treacherous avenue of larches, which conducted the unwary to the Hœlle of Bluthaupt—past the field in which the white ruins of the ancient village of Bluthaupt rested—but still no fresh fiery discharge from the castle greeted their anxious eyes. A few minutes later they sprang to the ground, and their exhausted steeds sank, pantingly, on the turf. They stood on a platform at the rear of the castle, with the deep moat between them and the fortifications, above which Bluthaupt reared its sombre head. So profound was the darkness, it was difficult to see across the moat; but they could not help noticing a faint, fitful glimmer of light, as from a will-o'-the-wisp, proceeding from a point of rock on the opposite side.

The three brothers had no leisure to consider how this strange light came to be suspended over the precipice, nor what the mysterious flickering meant. The belfry clock chimed a quarter to eight, impelling them to instant action. Their desire was to gain the interior of the castle, which, they thought, Franz might not yet have quitted. From where they stood the bank descended steeply to the bed of the moat. They knelt down and groped with their hands among the brambles, as if in search of something.

"It is twenty years since we were here last," said Goetz. "These cursed brambles and briars may have covered up our secret passage by this time!"

"Very likely," answered Albert. "This bush here, at any rate, is too dense to penetrate. Confound the nettles! Can you find any clue, Otto?"

"I'm trying. If there were only a little moonlight!"

They worked silently at their difficult task another minute. Then Otto rose, and exclaimed with irresistible energy: "Brothers, let us take our chance! We must traverse this moat without losing another minute, come what may!"

Albert rose promptly at the appeal, and stepped back a few paces, as if to make a spring into the water lying deep and black below them.

"Stop!" said Goetz, who had not risen. "Here's a hole large enough for me to drop through, at any rate!"

Otto and Albert flung themselves down beside him. "It is the secret passage, heaven be praised!" cried Otto. "The briars have grown; but there's still space for us, as Goetz says!"

"And the first to find shall be the first to try it!" added Goetz. So saying, he grasped the tough branches of bramble and briar which fringed the mouth of the pit, and fearlessly lowered himself. Then he let go his hold. His head and hands disappeared, and his brothers could hear the tearing of his garments as they were caught and slit by the bushes.

Otto and Albert peered down the mouth of the pit, but endeavoured in vain to pierce its darkness. They could just catch the voice of Goetz, however, calling up, encouragingly. "I don't think I have any skin left on my body. But I am stouter than either of you, and you'll be able to slip down easily enough."

Albert lost not a moment in following the example of Goetz. He was quickly succeeded by Otto. All three were now on the brink of the water, Goetz leaning down and washing the blood from his hands.

"You are not seriously hurt, are you?" demanded Otto, with concern.

"Hush!" whispered Goetz, pointing at the same time to the strange light which they had before observed, and which they could now see more clearly suspended on the rock opposite. "I heard voices up there, and a sound as if some one were working."

As they continued to gaze for a few seconds in the direction indicated by Goetz, they could at length perceive near the light three restless shadows suspended, as it were, from the castle walls by some imperceptible means. It was impossible to make out at that distance the nature of the work the three mysterious workmen were engaged on; but a sound like the moving of a rusty axle-tree, and a few broken sentences which reached Otto's sharp ears, suggested to him what their fell object was. "Steady, Blaireau!" exclaimed a bold, cheery voice. "Catch hold of that projecting stone there, and keep a little to the right!"

Blaireau's answer could not be distinguished; but the grating sound as of the rusty axle-tree was again heard. "Good heavens!" broke out a hoarse voice next. "'Tis confoundedly trying to be an artilleryman up in the air, that it is!"

Otto was between Albert and Goetz, who felt their arms convulsively pressed at this moment. "You hear?" murmured Otto.

"Yes," replied Goetz, "but I don't understand."

"Nor I," said Albert.

"We need pursue our usual route no longer," answered Otto. "There are only two or three minutes left now; and who knows whether we can arrive in time. There lies the danger!" Otto thereupon pointed to the three men whose silhouettes stood out so blackly near the lantern.

"But we are not birds to fly up there!" murmured Goetz.

"We have our poniard, though," answered Otto, with confidence. Beckoning to his brothers to follow, Otto did not hesitate another instant, but dived into the sullen, chilly waters of the moat, and swam vigorously for the opposite bank.

Albert and Goetz plunged in after him. The splash drew the attention of the men above. "Something's fallen into the water," exclaimed the one with a hoarse voice, breaking into a grating laugh; "it isn't you, is it, Father Johann!"

"No! no!" was the laughing reply; "I'm safe enough. Go on with your work, brave boys! It's only some rats enjoying an evening swim!"

In a few sturdy strokes the three brothers, whom Johann took to be rats, gained the castle side of the moat, but gave themselves no time to shiver as they emerged from the half frozen water. Just shaking their dripping clothes, they forthwith began to clamber up the steep bank. They preserved silence, and progressed noiselessly for they were approaching the three workmen suspended above them. The slope

was abrupt and slippery, and they ascended with the utmost difficulty.

"That's about the angle, isn't it, Bonnet-Vert?" demanded the harsh voice above their heads.

"When I was in the artillery," answered the cheery voice of Blaireau, "I was rather noted for my sureness of aim, you know; and if we hadn't deserted I should probably have been captain by this time. As for this old piece here, I'll answer for its being true, Pitois. The young fellow will be shattered into a thousand pieces in the twinkling of an eye."

The Three Red Knights were now not more than thirty yards beneath the speakers, each movement of whom they could easily distinguish. They stopped to take breath, and, looking up during the pause, they could plainly see that the lantern was suspended by a cord, and that immediately under the light a kind of mortar was planted on a projecting ledge of rock. The three strangers were sustained by a rope made fast to the top of the castle wall; and it was with the aid of this strong cable that they had been enabled to descend to their perilous perch. The two feeble rays from the lantern were sufficient to reveal them to the Three Red Knights, who themselves remained unperceived, as they were enshrouded in the dense darkness of the moonless night. "Do you understand now?" asked Otto, in a whisper.

No word came from Goetz or Albert in reply; but the quick glance with which they measured the distance separating them from the mortar overhead amply showed that they were now fully aware of the urgency, though apparent hopelessness, of the task before them.

"You can see the point of Gottlieb's letter now," resumed Otto, under his breath. "Franz has charge of the match, and he is probably already at his post. These villains know the exact spot where he must stand to set light to the first girandole, and the mortar is pointed to that very spot!"

Planting their poniard into the clefts of the rock, Otto and his brothers climbed some fifteen feet higher with the agility of chamois, and in yet a few seconds more found themselves on a narrow platform of rock, from which it seemed a matter of impossibility to ascend further. It was at this very spot that the Three Red Knights disappeared, as if by magic, on that dark night, twenty years back, when they arrived—too late, alas!—to the succour of their sister Margaret.

Otto stood on tiptoe and felt the rock, which sloped slightly outwards above his head. "We must mount," he said.

The arms of Goetz and Albert fell helplessly to their sides. The obstacle to further progress seemed insurmountable. "Let us enter," suggested Albert. "If Franz is on the castle walls we shall soon be able to find him."

"No, our secret way is too long," said Otto, firmly. "We *must* mount."

"Hallo, Fritz!" Mâlou was now heard to cry out. "The work is done. You can pull us up now."

The clanking noise of a windlass was next heard, and then the harsh voice of Blaireau calling out, "Be alive, Fritz! It only wants two

minutes to eight by my watch, and I shouldn't care to have the fuse lit before we're up to the top."

"Two minutes!" repeated Otto, whose courage appeared to increase at this moment of supreme peril. "With God's help, we can save him in that time." He led Goetz almost to the brink of the narrow platform on which they now were, so that he stood just under the projecting ledge of rock upon which Bonnet-Vert had fixed the mortar. "Do you think you can sustain us two, Goetz?" asked Otto.

"I'll try."

"Mount, then, Albert!" quickly replied Otto.

Goetz planted himself firmly on his feet, and bravely bore the weight of Albert as he swiftly climbed up the human ladder and stood safely on his brother's broad shoulders.

"Can you reach the ledge, Albert?" whispered Otto.

"I can just touch it," answered Albert. "The murderous mortar is only three feet above me; and to think that I cannot reach it."

"Stand firm!" said Otto to Goetz. "And you, Albert, hold fast to the ledge; but don't budge an inch."

There then ensued a feat of the greatest daring. Goetz felt his shoulders tremble beneath the weight of both his brothers, and for a moment his strong heart almost gave way as his legs shook under him, and there swam before his eyes a vision of the abyss into which a single false step might plunge Otto, Albert, and himself at one and the same moment. There was no light to reveal the superhuman firmness and steadiness of Goetz and Albert, nor the herculean strength of Otto as he slowly made his way upwards, the sweat standing in beads upon his forehead.

A death-like stillness reigned below in the black, sullen waters of the moat, more than a hundred feet beneath their frail support. Above rose the outer walls, and the sombre pile of Bluthaupt itself. The three men suspended, as it were, in mid-air had no eyes at this juncture for the stately castle or its moat. Goetz, perched on the very verge of the precipice, groaned under the terrible burden weighing down his shoulders He yet sustained Albert without staggering, and was still firm as the rock on which he stood, whilst Otto, calm and intrepid as ever in face of the almost certain death that threatened him, persevered until he had got one knee on Albert's shoulder, and could, with Albert, hold on by the slippery ledge of rock which upheld the mortar pointed at Franz.

"Quick, Otto, for God's sake!" at length cried Goetz, moved to speech as much by the fearful anxiety of the moment as by the overwhelming burden that was bearing him down.

Otto's heart at once responded to the anguish of his brother's appeal. He firmly gripped the projecting ledge, and, by pure strength of arm, raised himself free of Albert in the first instance, then managed to lift his breast level with the ledge; and, after a final effort or two, stood upon the ledge of rock itself, to the immense relief of Albert and Goetz.

Otto knew it must now be on the very stroke of eight. Without losing another precious moment, he bent over the mortar, and, applying all his strength, pushed its mouth skywards.

CHAPTER LII.

THE FIERY APPARITION.

THE faint glimmer of the lantern had attracted the attention of others besides the three valiant brothers. The fitful flicker as from a glow-worm's beacon—welcome as a promise of the fiery display to come—naturally drew the eyes of all the guests outside the sombre castle to the point of rock beneath the ramparts; and those blessed with the keenest vision could just distinguish across the moat the three human figures suspended in mid-air by no visible means. It was impossible to make out exactly what these seeming phantom forms were doing. The general opinion was that they were engaged in arranging one of the most important pieces of the firework display—of what supreme import was known only to the hosts of this gay company.

Even when the light and the shadows alike had disappeared, and the rock was left black and gloomy as the night itself, all eyes continued to be directed to the same spot. Nought could now be seen. Thence it was generally thought, however, would proceed the most startling of pyrotechnic comets.

Though the wintry wind blew cold, there was a large and brilliant assemblage of castle guests. Gathered under the trees of the avenue were the most distinguished of the company, the ladies well wrapped in the warmest turs, the gentlemen with their Parisian paletots buttoned up to their chins. The less influential guests—those who had been driven to seek accommodation in the villages and townlets near the castle—were in larger numbers. Nor were their numbers displeasing to the princely hosts, for it must not be forgotten that the main aim of the fête was to obtain subscriptions to the amount of one hundred million francs to float the new railway company, and also to float the firm of Geldberg, Reinhold, and Co. off the shoal of insolvency. The heath and every elevated point of ground were dotted with sight-seers from far and near—sober burgesses from Esselbach and Obernberg, with their families, peasants of the neighbourhood, and old tenants of Bluthaupt.

This fête of fêtes having lasted nearly a fortnight, something of the history of Bluthaupt Castle could scarcely help coming to the ears of the guests. It added the charm of romance to the novelty of their visit when these gay Parisians heard from the lips of the simple peasants the story of Count Ulrich's assassination, and of his three natural sons—the young heroes whom all the power of Germany had not been able to subdue, until, alas! the fate of every Bluthaupt overtook them, and they were cast into the Frankfort prison by their enemies.

The country-folk related the numberless adventures, the various disguises, the daring escapes of Otto, Goetz, and Albert with 'bated breath, as if some mystery surrounded their births and lives. There

were old men among them who treasured in their hearts the hope that the son of Count Gunther, born on the memorable night his father and mother expired, would yet re-appear and take his proper station as heir of Bluthaupt Castle. This hope had been kept alive in their breasts for twenty long years, and was whispered now in secret for fear their fondest wish should come to the ears of the usurpers who reigned in the castle, and who ground their tenants down with the unrelenting cruelty of Jewish usurers, albeit they were dispensing their hospitalities with lavish munificence to those whose fortunes they were angling for with gilded baits. These faithful vassals of Bluthaupt pinned their faith upon the legend of the house, which foretold the appearance of the Three Red Knights, after a rest of one-and-twenty years, to right any wrong endured by a Bluthaupt.

So dark and gloomy was the night that this mysterious legend came involuntarily into the minds of the villagers as they gazed at the sombre castle towering above them. The ancient story was told from lip to lip for the thousandth time, and the names of the Three Red Knights spread in ever widening circles until they piqued the curiosity of the select few honoured by the personal attentions of the hosts themselves. It was the very night for such a theme. The tall trees swayed as the wind soughed through them. The heavens appeared in mourning, forming a fit background to the dark castle frowning gloomily down upon host and guest alike, a grim relic of feudal times.

"Ah! you never find these grand old traditions in families of newly-acquired wealth," lisped the Marchioness de Beautravers in the ear of Monsieur Abel de Geldberg. "There are some weird legends very similar to yours attached to our castle in Picardy."

The gentle irony of the marchioness was mistaken by young Geldberg for flattery. "I should tell your ladyship," replied Abel, with the smile of one who could afford to be frank, "that all these legends do not exactly belong to us, the Geldbergs. They are connected with the history of the Bluthaupts—though, of course, we are closely related to the Bluthaupts."

"That is to say, the two families are virtually the same," answered the marchioness, with a suavity which hid her malice; "and you can tell me all about what I am dying to hear: the romantic story of the Three Red Knights."

The Duchess of Tartary (whose title dated from the glorious campaign in which her late husband immortalised himself as one of the First Napoleon's bravest horsemen) asked the same question of Doctor José Mira.

A lion of the Parisian world of fashion ventured also to inquire of Madame de Laurens who these Three Red Knights were.

"Madame la Duchesse," said Mira, in his calm, measured voice to the relic of the Empire, who, truth to tell, could scarcely write her name, "need not be told that the legend is not historical in the strict sense of the term. Yet it would seem to have some foundation, for the escutcheon of the ancient Counts of Bluthaupt bears the busts of Three Red Knights on a sable ground."

"Yes, Madame la Marquise," continued young Geldberg, answering

his fair interrogator, "it is said that these Three Red Knights were first heard of in the time of the Crusaders, whom they joined in dealing weighty blows against the Saracens. In return for their prowess in the Holy Land they were endowed with the power of re-appearing on the earth after their death."

"But has any one ever seen them?"

"Oh, yes, Madame la Marquise. You will find a hundred persons in the village ready to swear they have met them face to face. Why, there's my groom: he will tell you that one evening many years back he saw the figures of the Three Red Knights, clad in cloaks red as fire, suddenly glide along the castle walls, and then disappear in the twilight as suddenly as they came."

This weird legend of the Three Red Knights was on every tongue, and served well to occupy the time until the signal for the first shower of rockets should be given. It was this signal which engrossed the attention of the hosts. The Chevalier de Reinhold, escorting the Viscountess d'Audemer and Denise, could not restrain his anxiety when he found himself near Madame de Laurens. "What a terribly long quarter of an hour, it is!" he whispered in her ear.

"Patience!" replied Madame de Laurens, with a smile. "The end will be worth waiting for." She then poured into the ears of the young dandy, who was her present admirer, the grief and sorrow she felt at having to leave Monsieur de Laurens on his sick-bed in Paris.

The chevalier, finding he could not interest Denise in any topic he started, turned to the viscountess, and found a willing ear for his light gossip. Denise was silent. She had a vague fear that some peril threatened Franz, stationed as he was in the very midst of the fireworks.

The first stroke of eight vibrated through the air. It was the signal at last. All eyes were concentrated on the castle. Upon Reinhold, Mira, and Madame de Laurens the signal had a magic effect. An uncontrollable impulse led each to quit his or her companions, and to make with one accord for a spot whence they could best command the castle side of the moat.

For a few seconds the silence of the large multitude remained unbroken. A brilliant light burst forth from the ramparts. The chevalier, Madame de Laurens, and Mira held their breaths, and their hearts almost ceased to beat for the moment, so intense was their suspense.

The light described a rapid curve, and a dozen jets of flame started into life in different directions. From one of these jets darted a long line of fire. It rushed with a whizzing noise towards the moat. There was a deafening report when it fell on the rock below the ramparts. The report was echoed from the old walls of the castle, and re-echoed from the forest of pines. The night was light as day. Whole sheaves of rockets rushed high into the illuminated skies in graceful lines, drooped, and burst, sending down on the castle brilliant shoals of twining serpents, glowing clusters of purple and vermilion stars, and rich showers of golden rain.

The ever-changing colours, the rushing streams of molten gold, the shafts of light that darted through the sombre trees, the hum of the

dazed spectators, the luminous curtain of smoke above, and the purple canopy of the heavens over all, made up a picture whose phantasmagoria might well hold all spell-bound. And during the first few moments of this radiant, glittering spectacle one heard but the sharp detonation of the fireworks, echoed and re-echoed on all sides. Then a loud shout rose from a thousand throats. "Look! There they are!" was the general cry.

The Chevalier de Reinhold, Doctor Mira, and Madame de Laurens, who stood a little in advance of their guests, were the only exceptions. "There *he* is!" was the exclamation that rose to their lips as they looked, with a fascinated gaze, not in the direction to which every other eye was drawn, but to the spot where Franz had arranged to set fire to the train of gunpowder. That train communicated with the mortar pointed towards Franz, by Mâlou and Pitois, the creatures of Reinhold.

But as the three associates in the secret of the plot had just seen, the mortar shot forth its shell, which burst as was expected, but left Franz sound and whole amid the spluttering fireworks—not shattered into numberless fragments as Pitois and Mâlou had confidently predicted. Could he wear some magic armour that he led this charmed life?

From Franz, however, the attention of the crest-fallen hosts was now drawn to the mysterious apparition which absorbed their guests. At the cry of "*The Three Red Knights!*" the Chevalier de Reinhold, Madame de Laurens, Doctor Mira, and Van Praet and the Hungarian Yanos Georgyi, who had now joined their confederates, looked towards the ledge of rock on which the mortar stood. What they saw sent the colour from their cheeks, and filled even their hardened souls with superstitious awe.

In the midst of a flaming circle of fire three men of commanding figure, clad in long scarlet cloaks, stood erect on this frail support. There was a menacing look in each face. A tremor ran through the crowd at this veritable apparition of the Three Red Knights, whose history had occupied their minds a short time previously.

The brilliant rain of fire ceased as abruptly as it began. Forest, heath, and castle were enshrouded in a darkness deeper than before. The final shower of fireworks then once more illumined the heavens, falling with diamond-like drops into the moat. Again the radiant brightness of broad daylight lit up all the scene, leaving not a single inch of rock unilluminated by the sparkling brilliancy.

Every eye was turned to catch a parting glimpse of the Three Red Knights. But in vain. The narrow ledge of rock on which they stood could be seen as distinctly as if the sun were shining full upon it. But not a trace was left of its former occupants. Above were the inaccessible ramparts. Below were the gloomy waters of the moat. They had disappeared, no one could tell whither.

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So far, the fête had only fulfilled one of its objects: the attraction of a fabulous sum of money into the coffers of the Paris bank in subscriptions towards the new railway. But Franz yet lived! Each day

some subtle trap was laid for him; yet he avoided every danger save one. He had joined a shooting party, with all the high spirits of youth, one morning. He returned to the castle pale and weak from loss of blood. Some unskilful shot—by chance, of course—had discharged his barrel with so uncertain an aim that he had missed his bird and wounded Franz severely in the shoulder.

CHAPTER LIII.

TANGLED LOVE-SKEINS.

THE wound which he received while out shooting was deemed by Franz the luckiest thing that could have happened to him, for during the few days he was confined to his room he was nursed by Lia and Denise. The friendship of these two had become warmer than ever. The apparent hopelessness of both their loves was a common bond of sympathy between them. When chance so far favoured them, then, that Franz should require nursing at the hands of Lia de Geldberg, it became the easiest thing in the world for Lia to obtain the aid of her bosom friend; and so Denise and Franz enjoyed some moments of delight as deep as those they experienced at the stolen meeting which Gertrude arranged for them in Paris.

Lia was less happy. She had not seen Otto since that memorable chance meeting at the bank in Paris. She could not divine why he should have deserted her. In her heart of hearts she felt the wound deeply. Lia was, nevertheless, all smiles and tender sympathy when Denise confided her troubles to her willing ears. As the daughter of the house, Lia naturally had the care of Franz; and she almost forgot her own sorrow in conniving at the pleasant meetings of Franz, Denise, and herself, and in entering heartily into the hopes and fears of the lovers.

The three days of Franz's illness were happy days indeed. He would willingly have prolonged his fortunate indisposition had not the Viscountess d'Audemer—warned, very likely, by the Chevalier de Reinhold, who had found a formidable rival in Franz—abruptly forbidden Denise to help Lia any further in attending on the young convalescent. Lia, even in this emergency, was still a providence to the two lovers. The room which she occupied was only separated from Franz's apartment by a thick wall. The windows of both looked on to the lawn, which was thronged by the castle guests on the night of the pyrotechnic display. Denise, still allowed to visit Lia when she liked, naturally found herself frequently at the open window, and, upon looking out at a given hour, her eyes were brightened by the sight of Franz's fair face and glad blue eyes lit up with pleasure directly he caught a glimpse of Denise's sweet face and her musical voice.

Lia had chosen her room for the sake of the solitude it promised her. It was situated in a part of the castle almost deserted by the generality of the guests. It was immediately above the ledge of rock

on which the Three Red Knights had figured in a seeming apparition on the night of the fireworks. It was at night time that Lia gave herself up in the solitude of this chamber to her own secret grief. Cherished letters were read again and again with tearful eyes. One name escaped her trembling lips as she clasped her hands in fervent prayer for *his* safety.

Naught disturbed Lia's solitude for the first few nights. But one night, whilst consoling herself with the passionate letter in which Otto declared the overwhelming nature of his love for her, Lia started, and trembled with a strange fear. It was during the final outbursts of rockets on the night of the exhibition of fireworks. The whiz of the rockets into the air had ceased for the moment prior to their explosion. Lia was startled by hearing a strange subterranean noise under her feet. A tremor ran through her as she distinguished a dull, heavy thud which rose to her ears with strange regularity for some seconds.

The noise was then drowned for a while in the detonation of the fire-works.

On every subsequent night, however, Lia was alarmed by the same dull, heavy thuds beneath her feet. She even fancied at length that she could also hear the faint sound of voices.

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Lia was not mistaken.

The mysterious sounds came from the secret passage by which Otto, Albert, and Goetz were burrowing their way into the interior of the castle.

CHAPTER LIV.

"THE NEGRO'S HEAD."

THE castle fêtes succeeded each other with undiminished brilliancy. Comedy followed the fiery transformation scene; and the witty theatrical pieces, with the talk respecting the grand ball and the hunt by torchlight, almost drove from the minds of the gayest guests the apparition of the Three Red Knights.

It was a cold, misty morning when Franz, quite recovered from his wound, and heedless of the warning which it ought to have held out to him, descended into the garden, his gun under his arm, in case he should be tempted to bring down a bird. Mayhap, Franz hoped for a chance meeting with Denise, the more so as the Viscountess d'Audemer had now set a most vigilant watch upon her daughter's movements within the castle. With a hoar-frost blanching grass and tree, however, it was surely a vain hope to look for Denise's appearance out of doors so early that morning. So Franz seemed to think after a long, rapt gaze at Denise's window, for, consoling himself with the sweet recollection of her last fond vow and fonder kiss, he made his way out of the castle-gate and descended the abrupt side of the mountain.

From time to time Franz looked back upon the frowning castle, rising black and gloomy against the grey mist. Some other impulse besides love moved him as he regarded the sombre walls of Bluthaupt. Involuntarily, he conjured up a picture of the castle of his forefathers, and wondered whether it was like Bluthaupt, for since his departure from Paris he had by many a secret hint and message been strengthened in his conviction that he was of noble parentage. He had listened with intense interest to the history of the Counts of Bluthaupt; and had felt a world of pity for the Countess Margaret, who had died in childbirth, and who had been described to him as an angel of gentleness and beauty. A sudden turn in the pathway brought him in view of Lia's window—the window that had enframed the lovely face of Denise during those stolen casement interviews with his beloved. Adieu, dreams and legends! A ray of love's sunshine dissipated his reverie. His heart bounded with joy as he recalled the last sweet smile of Denise.

The sun now pierced the mist, and cast a rosy light on the windows of the castle, which seemed lit up by a bright smile, as it were. To Franz, at any rate, all nature appeared to smile. For he was conscious that he loved and was beloved. His light tread scarce touched the ground. He seemed to walk on air. He whistled as he went, and then gaily hummed a refrain which he had heard Gertrude sing in Paris. Suddenly, there rose a faint echo of the song. Franz stopped to listen. He was in the midst of a group of huge boulders, and to his left he saw piece after piece of moss-crowned rock, stretching in large, irregular masses down the slope to the dense wood which clung round the mountain; while to his right he could perceive the rustic roofs of the new village of Bluthaupt.

The echo came from below, and came from a fresh young voice as sweet as Gertrude's own. Could Gertrude have arrived with Hans Dorn from Paris? The thought no sooner occurred to Franz than he briskly stepped out in the direction the echo proceeded from. The pathway became more precipitous. It was with difficulty he made his way down the slope. Avoiding the threatening boulders, Franz sang his refrain more loudly as he neared the foot of the mountain. No echo now came in reply; but he presently heard the more welcome cry, "Father! father! Quick! Here's Monsieur Franz!"

Franz turned at once, and saw almost beneath a frowning boulder of huge dimensions a small house, on the threshold of which a young maiden was gesticulating with much animation. Franz leapt lightly down, and soon found himself actually beside Hans Dorn and his fair daughter, both of whom he saluted with characteristic heartiness. "What! you here?" exclaimed Franz, in a tone of pleasant surprise. "What brings you to Geldberg, then?"

"I was born at Bluthaupt," answered Hans Dorn, after an embarrassing pause; "and I am naturally anxious to see my family and the old place again."

"But see how pale Monsieur Franz is, father!" broke in Gertrude, accompanying her words with a look of concern up into the face of Franz, whose pallor was occasioned by his recent wound.

"I see," said Hans Dorn. "The air here clearly does not agree with him. Thank heaven he is no worse!"

"Ah, friend Dorn!" exclaimed Franz, in a rallying tone, "it is you, then, who sent me all those mysterious warnings!"

"What warnings?"

"What warnings, indeed? Warnings without number. Warnings against the most hospitable and, with one exception, the kindest of hosts. Warnings which would have spoilt all the fun of the fair had I taken the slightest heed of them."

"But you should remember you are alone amid your enemies."

Franz raised his shoulders with an incredulous gesture, and, looking at Gertrude, said laughingly, "Do you hear? Why, one would think I was the lost heir of Bluthaupt himself!"

Hans Dorn abruptly turned his head to hide the tell-tale flush which rose to his cheeks at this chance remark from Franz. Gertrude's quick eye saw the emotion of her father. In a moment it flashed upon her that Franz *was* the Count of Bluthaupt, and she at once divined the cause of her father's secret attachment to the young man. Franz, with the vanity of youth, attributed the blush which made Gertrude's rosy face rosier to her pleasure at seeing him again.

"In leaving Paris for Geldberg," continued Franz, "I am simply out of the frying-pan into the fire. There, I was watched night and day at my hotel in the Rue Dauphine. Here, I am persecuted not only by ceaseless messages, but also by some half-dozen good fellows who wish me to believe that I cannot put one foot before the other out of doors without running into danger!"

"But since you have been at the castle," interrupted Hans Dorn, who had now recovered his self-possession, "have not certain accidents happened to you to justify the fears of your friends?"

"You seem to be well posted up in my affairs!" replied Franz. "Or you have hit upon the truth with singular exactness. Yes, I have had my share of accidents."

"Do tell us all about them, Monsieur Franz!" begged Gertrude.

"They were mere nothings, I assure you," answered Franz, lightly. "Let me see. Oh, first, I nearly had a blade thrust through my heart by the hand of my friend, Julien d'Audemer."

"The brother of Mademoiselle Denise!" murmured Gertrude.

"Oh! you must not blame him. We are not as good friends as we were once, for a reason which I need not mention. But Julien would no more think of assassinating me than I should of killing him! No, it was quite an accident. Vain of my lesson in fencing in Paris, I had a fencing match with Julien. His first foil snapped in two. A fresh one was given him by a handy fellow attached to the castle—one Blaireau. After a few rapid passes I felt the cold steel between my ribs. Julien sprang back as he saw the blood stain my shirt. The button had dropped from the point by accident—"

"By accident!" repeated Hans Dorn, bitterly.

"Yes, truly! Next day we went out shooting, and the old fowling-piece which I had burst as I pulled the trigger! No! I hadn't a scratch," quickly added Franz, observing the sudden pallor of Hans

Dorn and Gertrude. "The wound I received was occasioned by another accident. We were out shooting again a few mornings ago, when one of the Parisian sportsman evidently took me for his bird, and hit me in the shoulder. But there was another affair I was almost forgetting," rattled on Franz, unimpeded by the deep look of concern on the faces of both his listeners. "I had previously been waylaid by brigands. It was at night. I was returning on the road from Esselbach to Heidelberg, when out of a dark ambush there burst three masked brigands; but, unfortunately for my romance, a party of German students passed by at the moment, and made the brigands rètreat in double quick time!"

Hans Dorn breathed freely, and a sigh of relief escaped from Gertrude. "Happily, we are with you now!" exclaimed Hans at the same time re-entering the cottage, while Franz remained outside with Gertrude.

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They were standing immediately under the huge boulder, which almost projected over the roof of Hans Dorn's dwelling. It was a large round fragment of rock, looking from afar like a gigantic head sculptured by the hand of Time. The Negro's Head was the name given by the peasants to the boulder. In time of tempest, when the wind rushed in violent gusts down the mountain side, the enormous head had been seen to tremble on its narrow base.

Directly Hans Dorn had left them Gertrude, looked up by chance at the Negro's Head, and an unwonted sight greeted her eyes. She saw with mute surprise the form of a man. It was but a momentary glimpse. A second glance revealed nothing. The Negro's Head alone frowned above them; and Gertrude thought her fancy might have deceived her. Dismissing the fancy from her mind, she inquired of Franz whether any further mishap had befallen him.

Franz thereupon recounted the narrow escape he had one day when a restive horse took fright and threatened to throw him; described how he had an equally narrow escape of being drowned while skating on thin ice, through which Mâlou, another skater, had broken, and had only been saved with difficulty; and, finally, related how he had been warned of some terrible danger on the night of the fireworks, but that he had set fire to the whole display, and had received no injury whatever.

Gertrude regarded him with admiration, for his fearlessness won from her the meed which every woman offers to dauntless courage. Nevertheless, she hazarded the remark, "I am so glad to see you safe out of all your dangers, for the sake of Mademoiselle Denise, Monsieur Franz. But don't all these accidents, if accidents they are, result from some deep scheme against you? Don't you think they may spring from some plot against your life?"

"No, no, no! I cannot think so. Everbody is friendly to me, save the Chevalier de Reinhold; and his coolness is only natural, for he wishes to win the hand of Denise for himself." Franz here emphasised his answer by pointing to the Negro's Head above, and adding, "I believe that if that rock were to fall and bury us under it, you would attribute it, my pretty Gertrude, to some imaginary enemy."

The smile on Franz's lips died out as he continued to look upwards, and his blue eyes filled with a dread fear, and his face became a deadly white. The Negro's Head was visibly oscillating.

Some hidden power seemed to be endeavouring to overturn the colossal boulder. Franz stood as if petrified, incapable of speech or action; while Gertrude, who had not noticed the threatened movement above, remained surprised at the sudden pallor and silence of Franz.

The Negro's Head was so situated that its fall could not fail to crush not only the two human beings directly under it, but likewise the cottage of Hans Dorn and all within. A smarter shock appeared to be given to the rock. Franz pointed upwards with a look of terror. A cry of agony escaped from Gertrude as she quickly looked above her.

The Negro's Head, thrust from its base, toppled over, fell with a crash against the mountain's side, and bounded with a dull, appalling sound towards them.

CHAPTER LV.

THE REMORSE OF JEAN REGNAULT.

THE gigantic boulder rushed with ever-increasing velocity down the slope, crushing everything in its way. Franz instinctively threw himself between Gertrude and the falling mass, as if to protect her from the dire fate which threatened her equally with himself. Had he not thus moved with the unpremeditated generosity of his chivalrous nature, he would have been literally effaced—powdered to atoms. The rock fell with a thundering crash on the very spot where he had been standing, pounding to dust the low wall of the cottage, and then rebounding with irresistible force, shattering smaller rocks in its impetuous progress, and finally plunging headlong down to the bed of the valley.

Hans Dorn, whom the terrible shock had brought to the threshold, gazed as one petrified for an instant. The cloud of dust and earth raised by the falling rock obscured momentarily the figures of Franz and his daughter. His eyes closed involuntarily and his heart almost ceased to beat. A deep sigh of relief came from him when he looked again. He saw Franz and Gertrude standing unhurt, both looking up at the crest where the rock had rested for ages, but whence some mysterious hand had precipitated it a minute ago.

"Good heavens!" exclaimed Franz. "We've had a narrow escape! Had we only stood a foot further to the left we should have been settled for this world at least, as sure as a gun!"

"Oh! I am so thankful you are not injured, Monsieur Franz!" tremblingly murmured Gertrude, releasing herself gently from the firm grasp in which her dauntless protector held her.

"The cowardly knaves!" muttered Hans Dorn, closely scanning the crest, from which the Negro's Head no longer frowned upon

them. "They have fled; and heaven has once more interposed its providential hand 'twixt you and death, Monsieur Franz!"

"You are right, there, my good friend," answered Franz, with unwonted earnestness. "We can never be nearer death than we were just now. Thank God! you were spared, Gertrude, for I was powerless to save you? But," continued Franz, in a tone of remonstrance, "why attribute to design what is evidently a mere accident? I know what you fancy. You imagine that a band of conspirators loosened the rock, and precipitated it down upon us. Whereas I have not a doubt that the rock fell simply because the hand of Time had undermined its base, and the hour for its fall had arrived."

"I see my warnings are of no use," sighed Hans Dorn. "It is useless to try to restore the sight of the wilfully blind. Only, I can still open your eyes to the future, Monsieur Franz!"

A voice called to Hans Dorn from within the cottage at this juncture. Franz turned on hearing the sound of it, and started at the sight of the figure beckoning to Hans. "What!" cried Franz, addressing Gertrude with surprise. "Do you know this mysterious peasant, then? Why, it's that honest Gottlieb, who is ever boring me with 'beware of this, and beware of that!' But now your father's gone inside," continued Franz, passing Gertrude's arm through his own, and moving a little distance from the cottage, let me talk to you on a pleasanter subject. I have many things to tell you about Denise."

Hans Dorn, meantime, followed Gottlieb through the passage and into the principal room of the cottage, where six or seven men stood uncovered before one whom they plainly regarded as lord and master. The men were the trusty band of Germans from the Temple quarter of Paris, the faithful vassals of Bluthaupt. The leader in their midst was the Baron de Rodach.

Little guessing he was to be the subject of the gravest solicitude on the part of this secret meeting under Hans Dorn's roof, Franz poured his confidence into Gertrude's willing ears. "I still hope on," said Franz to the listening maiden; "for I have the sweet assurance of Denise's love to give me courage. Yet one can't help feeling depressed with all this incertitude! Name and fortune seem indispensable to any one who would dare aspire to gain her hand. How do I know whether I have either?"

"Never despair, Monsieur Franz!" murmured back a sweet, encouraging voice. "Something tells me you will not have to endure this suspense much longer. But, for the sake of Mademoiselle Denise, let me beg of you to take heed of the warnings which your friends give you."

"Ah! Gertrude, though I did try to laugh off your father's kind words of caution, I know well enough, between you and me, that I am surrounded here by unfriendly persons, if not by enemies. Except Denise and her confidant, Mademoiselle Lia de Geldberg, everybody seems against me. The Viscountess d'Audemer is more infatuated than ever with the Chevalier de Reinhold, while he is still my bitter and determined rival, for my darling Denise does not conceal her aversion for him. Julien himself, my old friend and comrade, whom

I have in vain endeavoured to tear from the side of the soulless woman who has enthralled him—Julien has become entirely alienated from me, Gertrude, and may almost be numbered amongst my adversaries here. The Countess Lampion has completely fascinated him. Their marriage is inevitable, for they appear this very night as affianced lovers at the fancy ball to be given in their honour."

Franz could not repress an exclamation of impatience as he thought of the certain fate Julien was rushing to. "But how selfish I am!" he cried the next moment. "I'm forgetting your love affair, Gertrude. Tell me all about Jean Regnault's—." Franz did not complete the question, for he felt Gertrude's arm tremble under his, and he observed that her face was as deadly pale as when the rock threatened to crush them. Could it have been his chance question that thus affected Gertrude?

They were now about fifty paces from the cottage, which was hidden from their sight by intervening mounds. The mountain yet towered above their heads, and Gertrude was looking with a fascinated gaze at the jagged crest over which the boulder had been projected. "Is another rock about to fall upon us?" exclaimed Franz, looking up in the same direction.

Gertrude did not reply. Her limbs shook as if attacked by ague. A look of the utmost anguish and horror filled her pallid face. Franz could not divine the cause. He could only murmur a word or two of encouraging sympathy. But Gertrude still remained stricken with fear. While Franz was confiding to her his hopes and fears, Gertrude had listened with all her soul, but yet her eyes seemed drawn by some irresistible attraction to the mountain-top from which death had threatened them.

The very moment that Franz pronounced the name of Jean Regnault, Gertrude beheld a pale face projected over the crest, and observed a strange look of agony and fear impressed upon it as the eyes were directed towards the cottage. Gertrude only saw the face for a second. The next moment it disappeared. But she had time to recognise Jean Regnault.

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When Franz started from the castle that morning he believed himself to be alone. But he had an invisible companion, who had more than once followed him unseen. Johann, the innkeeper in the pay of the Chevalier de Reinhold, was dogging his footsteps. He followed at a safe distance in the rear of Franz, noted the meeting 'twixt him and Gertrude beneath the Negro's Head, hurried back to the castle, and presently returned in company with Jean Regnault, each of them armed with a stout bar of iron. They sprang from rock to rock until they reached the side of the colossal boulder.

"I spotted this little marble before," said Johann with a sinister laugh, leaning at the same time against the enormous mass, and causing it to oscillate. "Come, Jean, my boy, a little lusty work, and the money's yours!"

Jean Regnault had been induced to journey as far as Bluthaupt in the hope of gaining money enough to secure his family from want and

from prison; and in the hope of gratifying his vengeance against Franz, whom he hated for winning Gertrude's heart away from him, as he thought.

Johann placed his lever under the boulder, and bade Jean do the same. Jean complied. He did not ask the why or wherefore of the strange work. He mechanically thrust his iron bar beneath the rock, and leant with all his weight upon it.

"It moves! it moves!" whispered Johann, with unconcealed delight. It would be enough to crush thirty such fellows!"

Jean Regnault dropped his lever, and looked straight into Johann's face. "Is there a man below, then?" he asked.

"Take up your bar, my man!" answered Johann, impatiently. "We haven't a minute to spare."

"I'll have nothing to do with it," replied Jean.

"What! Are you chicken-hearted at the critical moment?"

"No," said Jean firmly; "but I believe there's some one underneath, and I shall see if there is or not."

"Look then!"

Jean bent over, and could just see one of the figures below. The sight of Franz filled his heart with jealousy once more. He sprang to his feet, seized his lever, and helped Johann with all his might now. The huge boulder was at length swayed from its base, and a last vigorous effort sent it toppling over and rolling down the precipitous descent. A cry of terror came from the valley. Then all was silence.

Jean would fain have looked again to see whether the rock had done its work effectually, but was held back by the strong hand of Johann. He remained imprisoned in this firm grasp for a few minutes. Released at last, he yielded to the horrible fascination which bade him gaze at what he thought would be the mangled body of his lifeless rival. Jean cast a look of awe at the hole which now marked the spot where Franz had stood. An icy shiver run through him as only the remains of the stone wall, greeted his eyes. He felt sure that the form which had but a short time before been full of life was now no more, but had been utterly crushed, and had left no trace behind. The fever of hate and jealousy quitted his breast. His heart was filled with dire remorse.

"Well?" demanded Johann.

"I can see nothing."

"Not a single red stain?"

"No; not a single stain of blood. May he not have escaped after all?"

A brutal burst of incredulous laughter was Johann's reply to Jean's remorseful question. Bidding Jean follow him to enjoy the breakfast he had so well earned that morning, Johann shouldered his iron bar and made off for the castle.

Jean still tarried, as if spell-bound, a prey to the deepest anguish and remorse. A quarter of an hour flew by. Then he heard a slight noise, which seemed to come from the defile by which Johann had disappeared. Suddenly a hand touched his shoulder slightly. Jean trembled from head to foot with a superstitious fear. He imagined

the man he had assassinated had risen to confront his assassin. He looked behind, and exclaimed with fresh terror, "Gertrude!" Then muttered, as if in a dream, "Oh, I am well punished. My reason has fled!"

Gertrude stood by him, so pale and wistful that he might well have imagined her to be the phantom of his disordered imagination. After a long silence she addressed him in a few words of reproach, but could not prevent the loving tenderness of her heart from finding expression in her gentle voice: "Oh! how could you have done it, Jean? I loved you so fondly, Jean; and he was our best friend. He interested himself in you and me, and he sympathised with our loves. He was the heir of a noble family; his enemies entered into a plot to kill him for the sake of his inheritance; and you, Jean, have made yourself their tool!"

"Gertrude! Gertrude!" exclaimed Jean, assured that it was the angel of his life he was listening to, and flinging himself on his knees before her, "I accepted their cursed offer to save my family from prison. My mother's sorrow drove me mad. I was ready to promise anything for a little money. But if you only knew how I have struggled and struggled for days and days until now against the temptations of that fiendish Johann! Have pity on me! You, who know the innermost depths of my heart, Gertrude—do you think I could be capable of a crime?"

"I must believe my eyes," sadly answered Gertrude.

"True! In spite of myself, I became an assassin. I cannot hope for forgiveness. But listen to me a moment. You might have saved me, Gertrude. When one loves one being only and truly, what pain it is to lose that love! The evening I last saw you, Gertrude, I heard the sound of a kiss come from your room. I looked and saw the face of a young man bent over your hand."

"*My* hand?"

"Yes."

"But there was a lady in my room at the same time," replied Gertrude. "O Jean! how could you be jealous without cause like that? Think of the result. Think of Madame Regnault's grief when she hears of your crime. She and your mother soon will, for they are all here, Jean. They followed you directly they heard of your destination, and a legacy has placed them above want."

"Thank heaven for that! Thank heaven, too, that I had not lost your love, Gertrude!"

"Heaven knows I should never have loved anyone but you," murmured Gertrude, more softly.

That phrase, "never have loved," sank like lead into Jean's heavy heart; and it was in a calm, hopeless tone that he continued, "I was led here, Gertrude. A bar of iron was placed in my hands. I would rather have died myself than have killed anyone. But I recognised him. The blood rushed to my head. I worked until the rock rolled over, and—." Jean here covered his face with his hands, as though he would shield his eyes from the terrible vision which his mind called up. "How willingly would I die at this moment to bring him to life!" he suddenly exclaimed.

The soul of Jean thus bared before her, Gertrude could not restrain the compassion that rose in her heart. Her hand gently stole into his and sent a thrill of deepest joy through his frame. A voice humming a gay, familiar song, rose to his ears. He instinctively bent down and looked once more upon the cottage below. Jean could scarcely believe his eyes at first. Soon he sprang to his feet and cast a grateful look heavenwards ; for he recognised in the singer the frank, fair face of Franz. Then his heart was further gladdened by a low, sweet voice, which murmured, "Jean, I love you still. He is safe, you see ; but the rock passed close by him, and both he and I had a terribly narrow escape!"

"Jean!" cried out the distant voice of Johann.

"Adieu! Gertrude." said Jean, in a calm and happy tone, clasping her warmly to his heart once more, and adding, with deep earnestness, "I have a new duty to fulfil. Adieu! Gertrude. I have a life to save now."

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Naturally agitated by the conflicting emotions which had disturbed her gentle breast, Gertrude paused a while before descending the mountain. Pressing her hand to her bosom to calm her troubled heart, she gazed with pity, and at the same time with fresh confidence, at the retreating figure of Jean Regnault. "I have his promise," she thought to herself ; "and I may rely on it that Monsieur Franz has now one friend the more—and a staunch one, too—on his side."

The wish to pour some of her new gladness into the hearts of Madame Regnault and Jean's mother then interrupted Gertrude's reverie. To sympathise with these poor women she now made the best of her way down the narrow winding path, wondering as she went what she could do for their comfort. Gertrude was soon on the road to the village, where the Regnaults had taken up their abode only the previous evening. Suddenly her attention was attracted by the monotonous chant of Jean's idiot brother, Geignolet. He was singing by the roadside, in a broken and scarcely intelligible voice.

Gertrude could distinguish the name of her father among the words that escaped Geignolet's lips, and she could see that the idiot's senses had been yet further obscured by the fumes of brandy from a bottle, which he flourished in one hand, while he chinked a bag of copper coins in the other. Before she could question him, the idiot had sprung to his feet and rushed away. Hugging to his breast the treasures, valued far more highly than the packets of paper which he had found in the casket he stole from Hans Dorn's room in Paris, and which he had willingly given up to the Chevalier de Reinhold in exchange for a few pieces of copper and the bottle of brandy, Geignolet left Gertrude still in ignorance of the theft of the "Soul of Bluthaupt."

CHAPTER LVI.

THE HERMIT'S SURPRISE.

THE fancy ball in the castle that night was the most brilliant of all the festivities. The hosts transcended themselves in gaiety and bountiful liberality. They had been inexpressibly cheered by the Chevalier de Reinhold's discovery. Baron de Rodach's secret casket and its contents had weighed heavily on their minds. Now that Madame de Laurens had recovered her most compromising letters, and Meinheer Van Praet and the magyar Yanos Georgyi had both been appeased by the restoration of their bills; now that, moreover, the Chevalier de Reinhold felt confident that the bank could well meet those same bills, thanks to the thousands upon thousands of francs that had poured into their coffers in subscriptions for the new railway, there were special reasons why each of the leading associates should enter into this crowning fête with all the open-heartedness and zest of which they were capable. Franz still moved amongst them, the gayest of the gay. But might not the morrow's hunt by torchlight afford ample opportunities for bringing his hitherto charmed life to a close?

The ball took place in the hall of the castle. The spectacle was truly magnificent. It presented a charming coup-d'œil the moment Madame de Laurens entered. The bizarre pilasters were brightly illuminated. Mirrors reflected the myriad lights in dazzling profusion. Garlands festooned the walls, and lent a floral beauty to the scene. Velvet curtains fell gracefully before alluring alcoves. Inspiriting dance music crashed from the balcony.

When the eyes got accustomed to the flash of the lights and the glitter of the gold, there were the brilliancy of the multi-coloured dresses and the animation of the maskers to admire. Costumes tasteful and costumes bizarre, costumes of every country and of every age, were worn by some of the most fashionable of Paris dandies. The rustle of the ladies' silks, the lustre of their satins, the sparkle of their diamonds, the melodious music of their voices, were the crowning attractions of the ball.

To begin with, there were four fancy quadrilles in which the hosts and principal guests took part. In the first the toilettes were borrowed from the fascinating pages of "The Arabian Nights;" in the second the dresses were in the mode of the Celestial Empire of China; in the third the dancers were costumed after the fashion of the Renaissance; and in the fourth they were habited in the elegant garb in vogue under Louis XIII.

It was difficult to distinguish the masked dancers. A few well-known forms, however, could be identified after a little while. Denise and Franz were partners in the Louis XIII. quadrille. The couple in honour of whose betrothal the ball was given—the Countess Esther and Julien—were in the Thousand and One Nights set as the Lady of

Beauty and Sinbad the Sailor. Doctor José Mira, wearing the long gown and tall head-dress of a magician, gave his arm to the Duchess of Tartary, attired in an ancient dress with paniers, and the Chevalier de Reinhold, as Figaro, fluttered by the side of the Viscountess d'Audemer, who looked especially bewitching in a Pompadour costume. Monsieur Abel de Geldberg, devoted as ever to the turf, wore the red cap, blue jacket, and pigskins of a jockey. He was the cavalier of the Marquise de Beautravers.

But the figures which created the most sensation were three gentlemen clad as the Three Red Knights. They walked arm-in-arm, and maintained a studious silence, recalling to mind as they passed the mysterious apparition which alarmed so many on the night of the fireworks. Attention was drawn from their scarlet costumes by the entrance of some fresh personage; there was a pause in the music; the dancing ceased. Every eye was directed towards the principal door. The venerable new comer, the only one unmasked of all the company, was Monsieur de Geldberg. His advent was a great surprise, as it was his first appearance at any of the fêtes. He looked "the very type of a patriarch—the image of an honest man!"

Such were the exclamations that escaped from many lips as Moses de Geldberg slowly walked down the centre of the ball-room, leaning on the arms of his two eldest daughters, and bending in grateful acknowledgment of the courteous salutations which greeted him. When he had reached the middle of the room, Monsieur de Geldberg gave the signal to the band to resume playing. The dancing recommenced forthwith with more vigour than ever. The bursts of dance-music were at their loudest when a fresh addition was made to the guests in the person of a tall figure, clad in the sombre cloak of a hermit, his face completely hidden by a mask and the long beard he wore.

This hermit, who deftly pierced his way through the crowd of dancers, was destined to make as much stir as Moses de Geldberg himself. The old Jew was enjoying the incense of praise rising around him, and greedily listening to the laudations of his goodness and bounty that reached him, when the hermit glided between Madame de Laurens and Doctor Mira, and stood face to face with Monsieur de Geldberg. The Jew regarded the hermit with unruffled composure, for he thought he was simply to endure a fresh ovation. The hermit bent forward and whispered a word, which reached the Jew's ear only. The one word plainly possessed some magic power. The Jew stepped back, and regarded the hermit with a look of terror. His white lips moved, but no words came. He would have fallen, had not his daughters sustained him.

The name pronounced by the hermit was simply that of the old usurer of the Temple, "*Araby!*"

CHAPTER LVII.

THE BALL OF MANY SURPRISES.

THE simple mention of the one word "Araby" by the hermit not only left Monsieur de Geldberg speechless; the effect of the stranger's mysterious communication on their father aroused the indignation of both the Countess Esther and Madame de Laurens. "Monsieur! Monsieur! what have you been saying to our father?" exclaimed the Jew's daughters, in a low voice.

The hermit scrutinized them closely through his mask. Without losing an atom of his self-possession, he coldly answered the countess in words which reached her ears only. "I say, your ladyship, that a betrothal is not always followed by marriage!" And, ere Esther could recover from this dread threat or prediction, the stranger had addressed Madame de Laurens in a yet lower tone. "I say, Madame, that you have chosen a slow but sure poison. Yet you have long to wait. Who knows that the open tomb may not be closed before it receives your victim?"

The evident agitation into which Monsieur de Geldberg and his daughters had been thrown by this seeming chance meeting caused all eyes to be directed to the central group of the ball. With more than surprise—with a vague fear—did Doctor Mira, Reinhold, and Van Praet regard the hermit. The magyar alone of all the associates betrayed no alarm. He stood erect, one of the most brilliant figures in the bal masqué. His gay Hungarian uniform, embellished for the occasion, looked more martial than ever.

The old Jew, trembling and ready to sink to the ground, leant heavily on his daughters' arms. "Let us leave the ball," he pleaded in a voice scarcely above a whisper. "Let us leave the ball. Heaven have pity on me!"

In silence, they obeyed. The countess and Madame de Laurens led Monsieur de Geldberg through the throng of dancers, which parted to let them pass, many curious glances being still thrown at the hermit, who followed the tottering chief of the house of Geldberg. Behind Esther and Sarah walked Denise and Lia, neither of whom could understand the cause of this sudden confusion.

The hermit, bending with grave courtesy, took the hand of Mademoiselle d'Audemer, and, before she could timidly withdraw it, kissed it, and murmured with a voice of rare tenderness. "Love him with all your heart, my child; and make him a happy husband!"

Denise blushed a rosy red under her mask.

The stranger clearly had the faculty of penetrating to the most secret recesses of every heart. Yet he seemed to be seized momemtarily with a strange hesitation, as he found himself face to face with Lia. As he regarded her, there were a glow in his eyes and an irrepressible flush in his cheeks, such as might be called up into a lover's

face at a chance-meeting with the darling of his soul. Withal there was a tenderness almost paternal in the hermit's bearing to Lia. He did not venture to touch her. He only whispered softly in her ear, with a world of love and devotion in his tone. "Poor child! To-morrow, you will think there is no more happinesss left for you on the face of the earth. Yet, trust in God!" Emotion prevented him from saying more to Lia, who, white as snow, mutely interrogated Denise with a look of terror, as the hermit advanced in the fulfilment of his mysterious task.

Doctor Mira was the next he accosted, and the words addressed to him had the same startling effect. He trembled like Monsieur de Geldberg. Passing his arm under the Chevalier de Reinhold's, the hermit once again showed his readiness in divining the secrets of all in the castle. He said, "Ah! you are but a poor bungler, chevalier. You have given yourself a good deal of trouble to steal what you thought were the most valuable contents of a certain casket."

The hermit opened his robe, and, had the affrighted Reinhold had his wits about him, he might have seen that the stranger wore a brilliant cavalier's costume under the sombre cloak of a hermit. The chevalier imagined that he was about to draw a poniard, and instinctively put himself on his guard. Instead of a flashing blade, it was a bundle of papers that the hermit produced from his vest. "Poor fool," he added, pointing to the papers. "You have left me enough here to ruin you! I have here all but the bills on the Paris bank."

Monsieur de Geldberg and his daughters, joined by the magyar, had by this time reached the door. The Hungarian, who had been indulging in an absorbing reverie which made him unconscious of what was happening around him, was the first to cross the threshold. Suddenly seeing the magyar, the hermit hastened past Van Praet and touched Yanos's shoulder. The Hungarian turned and regarded the stranger fearlessly. They looked equally matched. Each was robust and of commanding figure. The Jew, for one, felt his heart give a bound of relief. Wouldn't the hermit find himself checked at last?

"One word if you please," said the stranger, dauntlessly facing Yanos Georgyi.

"Well?"

"I wish to ask you whether you are not anxious to see the man who lately visited you in London, and to whom your wife was so kind—." The hermit did not finish the sentence. An angry exclamation escaped from the magyar as he seized his interlocutor in his powerful grasp.

"Finish with him now," muttered the Chevalier de Reinhold in his ear. "It is Baron de Rodach!"

"At last!" cried the Hungarian with savage joy.

But the hermit easily disengaged himself from his grasp. "The hour has *not* arrived yet!" he answered. The hermit then hurried down the corridor.

The magyar started in pursuit. At first he could follow the retreating figure readily enough. The passages were so brilliantly lighted that he could easily keep him in sight. The hermit, however, seemed to be

more familiar with the castle than the magyar, whose heart had been wounded in its tenderest part by the stranger's speech, and who hungered for revenge.

Corridor after corridor was traversed, until at length the lights became dim, and it grew quite dark as a distant part of the castle was gained. Less and less distinct seemed the sombre figure ahead. It vanished like a shadow in one passage even more obscure than the rest. The magyar heard the words, "Till to-morrow!" The hermit then disappeared as if by enchantment.

As the Hungarian stopped to regain his breath he could perceive no possible outlet save the spiral staircase, which rose at his feet, and which led to the watch-tower. He was certain no one could have ascended the staircase without being seen by him. He could only conclude that the fugitive must have vanished through the floor—a conclusion not beyond the bounds of possibility in the eyes of Yanos Georgyi, for he had been seized with a kind of moral malady ever since his arrival in Germany, and there were no bounds to his superstition. His dreams at night were full of phantoms. He was driven to believe that the vengeance of heaven was near at hand. The most sombre souvenirs recurred to his mind. A vision as of the past was before him in the shape of a corpse, extending across the corridor. He placed his hands before his eyes to shut out the spectre which his heated imagination conjured up. The name of Ulrich fell from his lips. And he turned back and fled, grasping the hilt of his sword, as if to defend himself from his invisible enemies. Arrived at the end of the corridor, he drew a deep breath, as though he had escaped a great danger. Full in the light now, he regained his presence of mind, and was almost able to meet with composure Van Praet, Reinhold, and Mira, who were advancing at the head of a group of armed servants.

Van Praet lifted his lantern level with the magyar's face, and exclaimed, "How pale you are, my valiant friend! Why, he must have treated you no better than he treated me! He had the audacity to remind me of my retort and my crucible! He must know all!"

"All!" echoed Doctor Mira.

"But whither has he fled?" demanded Reinhold, looking round with confidence. "He is but one, and we are many—"

"This way!" interrupted the Hungarian, abruptly, retracing his steps in the direction of the spiral staircase. "It was at this spot he disappeared," said Yanos Georgyi, pointing to the gloomy passage beyond the staircase.

"Curse it!" exclaimed Van Praet. "He must have mounted to the watch-tower—rather a poor dwelling for the noble baron. But *à la guerre comme à la guerre!*"

"Then we have him," said Reinhold. "We need only plant Johann, Mâlou, and Pitois here, and he cannot possibly escape!"

"If he wishes to pass," muttered the Hungarian, "be sure your armed men, determined villains though they look, will not prevent him!"

"We shall see, my intrepid friend!" replied Van Praet.

Johann and his confederates were accordingly left as sentinels at the

foot of the staircase, with strict instructions to let no one escape from it alive.

. . . . . .

The ball had been kept going with zest—the dancing had not been allowed to flag—and so the hermit's appearance and disappearance, and the momentary absence of the hosts, had simply been regarded after awhile as among the common incidents of a bal masqué.

When Van Praet, Reinhold, and Mira returned they noted with satisfaction that the diplomatic Madame de Laurens had even infused fresh vivacity into the fête, and they seconded her efforts with all their energies, and with a result all the more satisfactory inasmuch as the absent-minded magyar was no longer one of the party, but had retired to his room, together with Monsieur de Geldberg. Madame de Laurens seemed to multiply herself to add to the pleasure of the guests, while the Chevalier de Reinhold was not to be eclipsed in vivacity and gaiety as he courteously flitted in and out the lively groups of dancers.

The bal masqué was avowedly given, as already said, to celebrate the betrothal of Moses Geld's second daughter, the lovely Countess Lampion, with the young Viscount Julien d'Audemer. The marriage was fixed to take place a few weeks hence at Paris. So formal compliments were now being showered upon the happy couple, and upon the Viscountess d'Audemer, who received each fresh congratulation with a radiant smile ; for this marriage was one of her most cherished dreams, and she had done all she could to cement the match. It would have been a crowning triumph for the viscountess at that hour if she could but have received at the same time the Chevalier de Reinhold as the accepted suitor of her daughter Denise. But Denise was still obdurate.

The ball had arrived at that supreme moment when even the coldest show some warmth, and heightened animation increases the winning beauty of the fair dancers. The brilliant costumes were intermingled until the eye was dazzled with the glittering chaos. The gay hum of voices grew louder, and the music vibrated through the perfumed air with renewed spirit. The Countess Esther and Madame de Laurens were still together, Esther rousing herself from her usual apathy to pour her confidence into her sister's ear, and to seek fresh congratulations upon her forthcoming union with one she prized so much as Julien. Felicitations and raillery came alternately from Sarah's lips in reply. In reality, Sarah was jealous of the approaching happiness of her sister. So it was with pretended sympathy, but in her heart of hearts with no little pleasure, that she listened to Esther's fears at the ominous prediction of the hermit.

The allusion which the stranger made to her husband's state was too precious a secret for Madame de Laurens to divulge to Esther. It made her shiver again as she thought of the dread insight the hermit seemed to have into their hearts ; but she dared not seek consolation from the sister whom she despised for her weakness ; and with this weight causing her heart to sink within her, she yet had to wear the mask of gaiety she fain would drop. Her youngest sister, Lia, and

Denise d'Audemer were less successful in hiding the emotion which the remembrance of the hermit's words would ever and anon call up in their faces. The message which at once warned her to prepare for some terrible event and yet bade her have courage filled Lia with indefinable dread. Her spirits at length drooped, and she had to quit the side of her bosom friend, bidding Denise "Good-night," with a trembling voice.

As Denise re-entered the ball-room, Franz moved towards her, and furtively whispered a message or a request in her ear. The lover-like secrecy was called for by the Viscountess d'Audemer's careful guardianship of her daughter, whose society she was determined the gallant chevalier should enjoy, if he could not monopolise her hand. A gentle "Yes!" was all Denise replied, but it was accompanied by such a smile that Franz might well have been enraptured.

Denise then joined the viscountess; and Franz suddenly found an arm slid under his. "You look very happy, monsieur," whispered a soft, seductive voice, in a slight tone of reproach.

Franz blushed as he found Madame de Laurens beside him. He was full of joy himself—could he not well spare a little for his former friend?

"Ah! monsieur, you never spare a thought for me now. Confess that you have this moment made a rendezvous with Mademoiselle d'Audemer?"

"What an idea!"

"I am sure of it."

"I assure—"

"Why prevaricate? I know you love her."

Franz felt, as he stammered out a fresh reply, that the piercing eyes gazing intently at him from the mask could read his heart.

They were standing near one of the pillars, heedless of a masked figure on the other side, attired in the white, spectral garb of a shroud, and who appeared to be listening to the conversation between Franz and Madame de Laurens with a terrible earnestness.

"You do not love her!" exclaimed Sarah. "Prove it! I'll wager that you have a rendezvous with her to-morrow, during the hunt by torchlight!"

"But no rendezvous has been made, I tell you."

"There's one way you can satisfy me there is none."

"How?" The spectre leant forward to catch the answer.

"Listen!" said Sarah. "If I am jealous, it is because I still love you. If you cannot return my passion, at least grant me one last interview in private. I have so much to say to you. Meet *me* at the hunt by torchlight!"

"Where shall we meet?" asked Franz in good faith. A deep sigh seemed to come in response from the spectral figure.

"Behind the castle," said Sarah, smiling under her mask, "in the field among the ruins of the old village of Bluthaupt."

"At what hour?"

"Half-an-hour after the hunt has commenced."

"I will be there."

Madame de Laurens therupon gave Franz a gracious nod of thanks, and gliding off, was lost among the dancers. The spectre gave a parting glance at her vanishing form. There was a world of despair and love in his look. He then departed as silently as he came. He mounted to the room of Monsieur de Laurens, unlocked the door, entered, and threw off his shroud, revealing the features of Sarah's husband, pale as death, and lined with the traces of his mortal agony. Tears at length coursed down his wan cheeks, and there escaped from him, in a terrible wail, "I love her still!"

CHAPTER LVIII.

THE MASKERS IN RED.

THE supreme surprises of the bal masqué had still to come. In happy ignorance of what was impending, Madame de Laurens joined the Chevalier de Reinhold on quitting Franz. "To-morrow," she whispered to the chevalier, in an exultant tone, "during the hunt by torchlight, he will be in the ruins of the old village!"

"Alone?"

"With me. Take your measures accordingly!"

"Good lord!" said young Abel de Geldberg at that moment to the Marchioness de Beautravers, with whom it was his privilege to be dancing, "Am I dreaming? Or is it a fact that our Red Knights yonder have grown during the night? Don't they seem much taller?"

"They do really look much taller," answered the marchioness, after regarding the three scarlet maskers through her eye-glasses for a minute. "But I am dying, my dear Monsieur de Geldberg, to know who these three mysterious strangers really are."

"Ah! That's a great secret, Madame la Marquise," said Abel, with a sagacious air, twirling his well-waxed moustache to finer points than ever. "It has not even been confided to me. But, look, one of them has entered into conversation with the Viscountess d'Audemer!"

"And another has just taken the arm of your sister, Countess Esther," added the marchioness.

"Yes; they're getting sociable at last," responded De Geldberg. "The third has taken that young upstart Franz under his wing!"

The Three Red Knights were occupied precisely as Abel and his noble partner stated. Hitherto the guests generally thought they had played a passive and frigid rôle, scarcely in keeping with their conspicuous costumes. The time had at length arrived for them to act. The first touched Franz on his shoulder, and said, with a kindly air of raillery, "What a madcap you are, my dear fellow! You little know the trouble and anxiety you are to so many!" Franz regarded him at once with surprise and annoyance.

Meanwhile the second Red Knight murmured in the ear of Julien d'Audemer, "Monsieur d'Audemer, you belong to a pure and noble race. I knew your father well, and was one of his—"

"Whoever you may be, monsieur," interrupted Julien, "this confidence seems scarcely to come fitly from one in your extravagant costume, nor is this ball the proper place for it!"

"I had no choice either in the costume or in the place," was the response. "But what I have to say to you is undoubtedly of the gravest import."

The third Red Knight had managed to secure the attention of the Viscountess d'Audemer during one of those rare intervals when Denise had left her side to dance with some gay gallant. "Countess Helen de Bluthaupt," he exclaimed, in a deep, impressive voice, "can you have forgotten all that happened in this castle?"

The name of Bluthaupt, so suddenly recalled to her mind in the midst of the fondest reveries as to the future of Denise and Julien brought a world of recollections of the past back to the Viscountess d'Audemer. The colour left her still beauteous face. "Who are you, monsieur, that you venture to question me thus?" she demanded, in a troubled voice.

"What matters it who I am? I would remind you of the assassinations in your family as warnings for the present and the future."

The Viscountess d'Audemer trembled, as she ever did when these dark incidents were brought to her mind. Restraining all outward signs of emotion before the stranger, she haughtily replied, with a touch of scorn, "I have already been burdened with these morbid fancies. You are here on behalf of my brothers, are you not?"

"I am here on behalf of your father, madame," answered the Red Knight, with grave solemnity—"of your father, Count Ulrich de Bluthaupt; on behalf of your sister, the Countess Marguerite; and on behalf of your husband, Viscount Raymond d'Audemer—all three assassinated by the foulest of conspirators."

The viscountess replied with a disdainful gesture of disbelief, albeit she had to lean for support on the back of her chair, and her heart gave a wild throb, and there was a choking feeling in her throat. Despite her efforts to call common sense to her aid, the repetition of these terrible accusations in the castle of her ancestors insensibly filled her with dread. "Leave me, monsieur!" the viscountess murmured. "Pray don't harass me further, but leave me, I beg of you!"

"By heavens!" cried the first Red Knight, who still had his arm in Franz's, "It is not your fault that you have not been left dead before now in some corner of the forest!"

"Bah!" said Franz. "I have heard that old story till I'm tired of it. I know it by heart."

"He is a true Bluthaupt!" was the Red Knight's remark to himself. "But, my good sir," he added aloud, "fearless and reckless though you may be, and trustful of all the enemies who surround you, yet you might be a little considerate of those who watch over you."

"Who has a right to watch over me?"

"It is a great liberty, but a liberty that will be taken again, without asking your permission. Good Lord! if you were left alone you would rush into the first trap set for you."

"'Pon my word, you seem to know more about my movements

than I know myself," answered Franz, half in raillery, half in anger.

"That I do," replied the Red Knight. "One word of advice," he added, earnestly. "Don't attend the hunt by torchlight to-morrow night!" A burst of laughter was the only response from Franz. "I expected that. Very well, as you *will* go, at least promise me, I entreat, not to separate yourself from the ruck of the hunt."

"Why on earth should I promise that?"

"Because they have had time to reload the gun which sent a bullet into your shoulder."

The second Red Knight was yet face to face with Julien d'Audemer, who could not hide his impatience at being detained a moment from his betrothed.

"Believe me," the Red Knight was saying, "it is for the sake of your father, my benefactor, that I speak to you thus. I will no longer say to you, as I did before, you are about to marry the daughter of a murderer!"

"As you did before!" repeated Julien, mechanically.

"Yes. This is not the first warning I have given you. At Paris, the eve of Lundi gras—"

"At the bal Favart?"

The Red Knight nodded in the affirmative.

"It was you, then!" exclaimed Julien approaching his interlocutor in a menacing attitude.

"I don't wish to speak of the past," replied the Red Knight, unmoved. "It is the present that is of immediate importance. The lady to whom you have just been betrothed—"

"Hold, monsieur!" muttered Julien, through his clenched teeth, at the same time seizing the stranger's arm.

"The lady," continued the Red Knight, in the same firm, unruffled voice, "is a—"

Julien's hand was convulsively pressed against the Red Knight's mouth. It was removed by the latter, but without violence. The Red Knight regarded the young viscount steadfastly through his mask with evident compassion. "Do you love her so dearly, then?" he murmured gently.

"As I have never loved a woman before!"

The Red Knight, who had a deep look of sympathy in his eyes, was silent for a while.

At this moment a strange sight might have been noticed. Whilst the inspiriting music of the orchestra was sending the dancers coursing round in a mazurka, the mysterious trio of Red Knights appeared to be doubled. There were now six maskers in red present, each wearing the familiar scarlet cloak of the legend. The ball-room was spacious, and the throng compact. Each scarlet masker held himself aloof from his comrades. No one took the trouble to count them. Wherefore their multiplicity remained unnoticed.

The triple scene was, meantime, continued, and every minute found the Viscountess d'Audemer, Julien, and Franz more embarrassed in the presence of the three men who were so familiar with their histories,

and who were yet utter strangers to them. "Pray leave me!" implored the viscountess of the third Red Knight.

"When you are alone," he answered, in his calm, measured tone, "your conscience will tell you whether you were justified in dismissing me, madame. Have I not the right to say you have forgotten all? You have been in this castle, a gay and happy guest, almost a fortnight—in this castle, where Count Gunther and your sister Marguerite were murdered!"

"It is a calumny!" stammered the viscountess.

"You cannot say that from the bottom of your heart, Countess Helen! You are afraid to believe, but there is evidence before you. Without leaving this ball-room, you can see the principal actors in all these terrible dramas."

"Where?"

"You see that man whose height and haughty bearing distinguish him from the rest," replied the Red Knight, pointing to the Hungarian, Yanos Georgyi, who had restlessly re-entered the ball-room. "That man thrust his sword through the heart of Count Ulrich, your father, twenty-two years ago!"

The viscountess looked in the direction she was bidden, and seemed chained to the spot, although she would fain have escaped from the Red Knight.

"You loved your sister Marguerite fondly enough once, Countess Helen! Look at that old man (indicating Doctor José Mira). He was the doctor of the castle. Poor Marguerite was tended by him in that dread time when a woman wants all the help that human hands can give her. He was there to relieve her of pain: he poisoned her!"

"Oh, this is fearful!" cried the viscountess, trembling in every limb. "Leave me! leave me!" Her plaint was lost in the joyous dancing notes that clanged from the orchestra.

"I have not finished yet!" said the Red Knight. Pointing to the Chevalier de Reinhold, he resumed. "There stands the last. He is the man to whom you would affiance your gentle daughter, in spite of the fact that you have already been told, more than once, that it was he who, by a treacherous trick, caused the death of your husband!"

"How can I place any faith in this falsehood?"

"By seeing the eye-witness of the crime. By listening to the recital of the poor man who, half dead with fright, knelt down and said the first *De profundis* over the dead body of Viscount Raymond d'Audemer!"

"I cannot believe you," said the viscountess, but so faintly that her voice could scarce be heard.

The Red Knight put his hand underneath his scarlet cloak and drew forth a pocket-book. On it were inscribed the initials of Raymond d'Audemer. The long folds of the scarlet cloak were separated for an instant, revealing to curious eyes a brilliant costume, radiant with gold and precious stones. It was but for a moment. The cloak was drawn closely round him again ere the viscountess had perceived the glittering coat beneath.

"It is twenty years ago," said the Red Knight, in a voice filled with emotion, "since I was horrified to discover a corpse in the bed of the

chasm they call the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. This pocket-book belonged to him, madame : do you recognise it ! " At the sight of the pocket-book the viscountess turned her head away ; but her mask could not entirely conceal the look of agony which passed over her face. " I did not see the murder," continued the Red Knight, taking advantage of the impression he had made ; " nor did I learn the murderer's name till chance placed in my way one of the old servants of the castle, who happened to be present near the mouth of the Hœlle when the viscount was sent to destruction. The secret weighed so heavily on this poor man that he was glad to make the avowal to me. Thus I am able to say that the murderer of Raymond d'Audemer was the Chevalier de Reinhold yonder ! "

Profoundly moved, the viscountess felt a chord which had long been mute vibrate within her. She had loved her husband passionately and devotedly in the old happy times. There was silence, whilst a struggle seemed to be going on in the mind of the viscountess. The Red Knight waited, firm and calm.

" But," exclaimed the viscountess at length, in a broken voice that told of her intense agitation, " this man—this old servant of my uncle Gunther—where is he ? "

" You will find him at a rendezvous to-morrow, madame, awaiting you, an hour after the hunt by torchlight has commenced, in the avenue of larches leading to the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. The eye-witness will himself show you where the Viscount d'Audemer was lured down the abyss."

" I will meet him," answered the viscountess.

The next moment the dance ended. The Chevalier de Reinhold approached with his gayest smile. Who could doubt his honesty ? Not the viscountess. By one of those impulses to which she was subject, the viscountess called the chevalier to her side.

The climax was near. The Red Knight, angered that his confidence should be thus abused, hastened matters, preserving his outward calm, although he was now the centre of a group which comprised Madame de Laurens, Van Praet, and Doctor Mira, as well as the Viscountess d'Audemer and the Chevalier de Reinhold. The scarlet cloak fell from his shoulders. He removed his mask.

" Baron de Rodach ! " was the simultaneous exclamation of the astonished hosts.

" Otto, my brother ! " cried the Viscountess d'Audemer.

This last exclamation was a revelation to the chevalier and his associates. They now knew who the enemies in their midst were.

" Yes ; behold me with you at last," said the Baron de Rodach, calmly. " I could not resist the attraction any longer, and here I am, gentlemen, just in time to share some of your farewell fêtes. May I not have the pleasure of a waltz with you, Madame de Laurens ? "

Sarah bowed her gracious acceptance of his hand for the dance. Turning with a smile to Doctor Mira, before taking the baron's proffered arm, she hissed rather than whispered, " It is a duel to the death now. The Three Red Knights have escaped from the Frankfort prison, and are here. Either they or we must not leave this castle alive ! '

CHAPTER LIX.

LIA'S LOVE.

LIA DE GELDBERG was alone in her chamber. Her pure white ball-dress, her wreath, her simple jewels still adorned her. She knelt at the foot of her bed and poured out her soul in prayer for release from the suspense which was killing her. One being—Otto—occupied her thoughts, possessed all her heart. Did the hermit's prophecy mean harm to him?

Hour after hour passed, till the strange noise which had startled her nightly stole into her ears. To her overwrought mind the sound seemed to come from a corner of her room. She sprang to her feet, and flew to the door, opened it, and was soon in the corridor. The castle clock struck four in the morning. Music still came from the ball-room. Involuntarily Lia descended the staircase. She gained the passage below, and was about to traverse it, when she could dimly see the figure of a man walking quickly in the very direction she was going. Lia paused till the stranger turned to the right. The moment he turned, a lamp above him shone full in his face. The next instant he had disappeared by the door which led to the ruined chapel. It was for a moment only that Lia saw his features. But they were features that had been ineffaceably impressed upon her heart and mind.

Lia's heart gave a leap. Her love bade her follow. She soon reached the door through which the stranger had vanished. Descending some steps, Lia found herself in a small court-yard, with the moon streaming down upon the ruined arches and rugged walls of the roofless chapel. She crossed the court-yard, and entered the chapel by an ivy-clad breach in the wall. A tremor crept through her as the moonlight streamed through gaping holes and shed a seemingly unearthly light on the stone statues of the saints.

Lia trembled still more when a door behind the choir moved on its rusty hinges. An irresistible impulse yet impelled her forward. She passed through the open door, descended a few steps, and found herself in the gloomy vaults of the Counts of Bluthaupt. In the centre stood a large tomb. Resting on it were the statues of three knights. A lamp casting faint gleams of light around, enabled Lia to distinguish the figure of the man she was seeking standing silently before the tomb. He moved so that the light shone on his face. Lia suppressed the cry of joy that was about to escape her lips. A sigh of relief came from her. It was Otto before her at last.

CHAPTER LX.

A DAUGHTER'S PRAYER.

THE sombre mausoleum lost all its gloom in Lia's eyes, now that she recognised Otto in the silent figure near the central tomb. The supremest joy—the heart-gladdening elation which a girl feels at seeing her long-lost lover—filled her breast. It seemed difficult to realise that but a few brief moments ago her heart had sunk with sadness and hopeless despair at his continued absence. She involuntarily moved towards the man who held her heart and soul; but ere she had taken two steps Lia stopped abruptly, spell-bound by a fresh surprise. She passed her hand before her eyes, as if to clear her vision, thinking it might be some trick of the imagination which now alarmed her.

When Lia looked again she could no longer doubt the evidence of her senses. It was no waking dream. It was an indisputable reality that she beheld the cloaked form of a man, the very image of Otto, come from the darkest side of the vault, to be presently joined by yet another figure, also the exact counterpart of him she had taken to be her lover. Unseen herself, Lia saw before her three cloaked figures, identical in form, in height, and in features, as far as she could judge from the gloom which veiled her in darkness. The illusion was so strong that Lia could not now be certain which was really her lover. She watched their every movement with 'bated breath.

The two new-comers bent down and silently took a mattock and a spade from under the tomb. The one whom Lia first supposed to be Otto then removed the lamp and deposited it at his feet. With fear and trembling Lia leant against a pillar near her, for the pale gleams of light from the lamp revealed first one empty grave, then another and another, and yet another and another, as each was opened by the three men.

A stern voice, which thrilled Lia to the core, exclaimed, while the speaker pointed to the five graves one after the other,

"This is for Fabricius Van Praet!"

"This for Doctor José Mira!"

"This for the Chevalier de Reinhold!"

"This for the Magyar Yanos Georgyi!"

"This one is for Moses de Geldberg!"

Lia's heart almost ceased to beat at this ominous mention of her father's name. She sank on her knees, and her hands were, without will on her part, raised supplicatingly in a mute entreaty for mercy—fruitlessly, for she remained unseen and unheard. The three men rested on their spades, motionless and silent, for a minute. "Brothers!" at length exclaimed the one who seemed to be tacitly acknowledged as leader, "it is twenty years since we dug the last grave in this vault. We dug it for the man who would have dishonoured our sister Marguerite—for the corpse of the Baron de Rodach, whose title has stood

me in good stead while I have been maturing our vengeance against the murderers of Marguerite! Brothers, as we prayed here for the repose of *his* soul twenty years ago, let us now pray for those who are about to fall beneath our vengeance!"

There was a little wooden cross erected near them. They knelt before it on the cold stones of the vault, and the Latin verses of the *De profundis* presently echoed with weird solemnity through the gloomy vault, and increased the terror of the one pale and trembling listener.

"Our work is now finished for the night," said the leader, rising to his feet with his brothers. "Now for a little sleep, for we shall soon, very soon, want all our strength. To-morrow, with heaven's help, these five graves shall be occupied; Marguerite will be avenged; and the vassals of Bluthaupt shall salute their true lord and master, the rightful heir of Count Gunther!" He thereupon extinguished the lamp, and led the way out of the vault.

Lia, more dead than alive, followed them. They ascended the damp steps, and traversed the ruined chapel and the courtyard. The moment their leader, now the rearmost of the trio, was about to follow his brothers through the door leading to the corridor in which Lia had first seen him, he felt that some one was plucking his cloak. He looked round, and, seeing Lia kneeling at his feet, instantly closed the door, thus preventing her from being noticed by his brothers, who were by this time at the other end of the passage.

"Otto!" murmured the young girl, imploringly and in broken sentences, convinced at last that it was her lover whom she now held fast. "Oh, Otto! I was there—in the vault—I saw all—I heard all—Oh! I know I can henceforth be—be nothing to you!" Tears flowed down her white face as she wrung this last avowal from her heart of hearts. "But pray," she yet found voice to say, clasping her hands beseechingly, "pray spare the life of my poor father!"

There was a new beauty in the face turned so entreatingly towards Otto. Her pale features, lit up by the cold gleam of the moon, were no longer agitated by the almost mortal agony she had suffered, but wore a saint-like look of resignation and calm entreaty. To Otto this was the bitterest of trials. He gently raised Lia and drew her to his heart, murmuring, "Heaven have pity upon her and upon me!"

There was a moment of eloquent silence, during which their beating hearts alone gave expression to their mutual anguish. "Lia," murmured Otto, at length, "I have loved and must still love but you! No one but you can ever fill my heart with such deep love as that I bear for you! Yet a higher than an earthly power separates us! May God, in his own good time, make you happy, Lia, and leave me to bear my double weight of suffering! Adieu!" Otto forced himself to say, as he gently disengaged himself. "We shall see each other no more in this world, Lia!"

The poor girl, all but 'reft of her senses through the waves of emotion that had tried her so, tottered and seemed about to sink to the ground as he tore himself away from her, but saved herself by recalling the fate which threatened her father. "My father!" Lia gasped. "You have not promised to spare my father's life!"

Otto stopped, irresolute. "I promise you to spare the life of Moses Geld, Lia," he said at length; "but justice must be done, and death may be more welcome to him than—" The door closed upon him. Lia could not hear the last word that fell from his lips; and it was with a new and vague fear she asked herself what the dread evil could be that would be a worse calamity to her father than death.

CHAPTER LXI.

THE HUNT BY TORCHLIGHT.

THE dinner hour was earlier than usual at the castle of Bluthaupt the next evening, by reason of the hunt by torchlight which was to follow. Needless to say this last dinner—the crowning banquet of the fêtes—was the most luxurious of repasts. The hosts themselves appeared somewhat pre-occupied during the first course; but, as the joy-instilling Rhine wine circulated, care flew from their brows; and, if their animation had been spontaneous, they would have been the gayest of the gay company round the brilliant table.

Never had Madame de Laurens looked so charming, nor had the Chevalier de Reinhold showed more vivacity. The beautiful face of the Countess Esther alone seemed clouded with a veil of sadness. Viscount Julien d'Audemer no longer occupied the hitherto treasured place by her side. Julien was seated next his mother, and studiously avoided the reproachful glances which Esther would every now and then direct towards him; whilst the Viscountess d'Audemer was similarly cool to the flattering compliments of the Chevalier de Reinhold.

The general enjoyment was not affected by these untoward exceptions, which were unnoticed by all save those personally concerned. Franz, heedless of the fascinating smiles of Madame de Laurens, stole meaning glances at Denise, whose sweet blue eyes answered him with the eloquent language of love. That there was some secret understanding between the lovers Madame de Laurens appeared instinctively to divine, and the cold, sinister light that shone in her eyes, albeit her bewitching face lost not a whit of its captivating influence, spoke of an impending danger for Franz, of which Denise, in her happiness, had not the faintest idea.

Half an hour after dinner, the throng of guests, radiant and lively with champagne, assembled in the courtyard of the castle. Hunting costumes were worn by all. Merry bursts of laughter mingled with the cheery notes of the horn, the barking of the hounds, and the clatter of the horses' hoofs. Every one seemed animated by the excitement of the coming chase. All appeared resolved to enjoy this last night of pleasure to the full, for on the morrow they would depart for Paris.

Monsieur Abel de Geldberg was already in his saddle. As one of

the leading patrons of sport in Paris, he was chosen master of the hounds for the occasion. There he was on horseback, in the midst of a pack of stag-hounds. Elated with his proud position, he saluted the ladies on their arrival with a sonorous fanfaron from his horn.

Thereupon the best riders among the fair guests rested their feet lightly in the hands of their cavaliers and sprang neatly into their saddles, whilst the less expert equestrians suffered themselves to be mounted on palfreys ; and those who could not ride at all were content with seats in the carriages. All being ready, they sallied forth through the gateway, a joyous, light-hearted cavalcade. It was a dark night, with gloomy clouds obscuring the blue sky. The splendour of the scene before them was therefore heightened in their eyes.

The line of route marked out for the hunt by torchlight was brilliant with sparkling lights, which described fantastic curves and flourishes. The forest seemed studded with glow-worms, each tree being the centre of a fiery circle. Standing out resplendently in the dark night, the illumination had the effect of an immense arabesque, with interlacing forms that sparkled like diamonds on a ground of black velvet.

The cavalcade, headed by a number of torch-bearers and led by young Geldberg, moved slowly down the grand avenue, the horses rearing with fright at the dazzling illumination and gleaming torches around them, the hounds anxious for the signal which should bid them dart after the stag. The hunting party proper made straight for the lake. A fine stag had been turned into the copse near there during the day, and was doubtless at that moment pricking up his sensitive ears at the approaching noise. There was a momentary halt. The signal at length given, away went huntsmen after the hounds, and the hunt by torchlight began in earnest, the guests in carriages being driven to the most favourable points whence to witness the picturesque chase.

The spot at which the halt took place remained silent and deserted for some minutes. Then there might have been seen a shadow moving through the thicket until it reached a larch-tree, in the sombre shadow of which it was almost lost. It was the shadow of a man, whom it was impossible to recognise. He leant so closely to the tree that he seemed a part of the trunk itself.

From time to time the gallop of the hunters, the fanfaron of the horn, and the barking of the hounds rose in the night air. The thud-thud of a horse's hoofs was presently heard, and the silhouette of a man on horseback was obscurely seen approaching down the avenue. When he reached the spot near which the mysterious shadow still lurked the horseman paused, and the light revealed the face and form of the Chevalier de Reinhold. He looked rather anxiously in the direction of the cross-road leading to Heidelberg. His attention was drawn to another horseman, wearing, as he thought, the ample overcoat of Doctor Mira. He called out his name, but received no reply.

The chevalier was mistaken in the sex of the figure on horseback which excited his curiosity. The pretended cavalier was a woman. A thick veil covered her face. Beneath this veil were hidden the pale and agitated features of the Viscountess d'Audemer, who, haunted by the words of the Red Knight at the bal masqué, had left the hunt, in

order to learn for certain the dread story that was to be imparted to her near the Hœlle of Bluthaupt.

The blood of her race flowed healthily through her veins again. With the recognition of Otto there came to her the full consciousness of the sordid greed and frivolous vanity which had made her countenance Reinhold as the suitor for her daughter's hand—Reinhold! whose innocence or guilt she was determined to learn beyond doubt that night! She left the cross-road to Heidelberg, and entered the narrow, treacherous path leading to the Hœlle of Bluthaupt.

A minute after the passage of the viscountess, another amazon rode at a light gallop along the cross-road. Absurd to mistake her for Doctor Mira! It was unquestionably the slender figure of a young lady. "Denise!" was the name that rose to the lips of the Chevalier de Reinhold; but he soon re-assured himself with the thought that he had left Denise safe with Julien and the Viscountess d'Audemer in one of the 'vantage places for watching the chase.

Whether she was Denise d'Audemer or not, the young amazon did not follow the same route as the viscountess, but continued on her road, leaving to her right the steep path leading to the Hœlle of Bluthaupt.

"I fancy now the first one was a woman also," muttered the chevalier. "Where the deuce can they be going to?"

He had scarcely finished when a third amazon drew near, and rode past him at a smart gallop down the avenue. "For the ruins!" she cried, as she galloped by him, and the chevalier recognised the voice of Madame de Laurens.

The friends he was awaiting arrived a few minutes later. They were Doctor Mira himself, and Van Praet. "The deuce!" exclaimed Van Praet, wiping the perspiration from his face. "We should surely have Yanos Georgyi with us, shouldn't we?"

"He will have nothing to do with the affair," answered Reinhold. "Besides, he has another mission. Since the close of the bal masqué he has been watching, sword in hand, at the foot of the staircase leading to the watch-tower."

"Waiting for the baron?" asked Mira.

"Yes; and he'll wait there a fortnight for him, if necessary," replied Reinhold. "If the baron is in the tower his fate is settled beyond doubt!"

"Where else can he be?" demanded Van Praet. "The guards yo placed at the castle gates are men to be depended upon, aren't they?"

"Certainly!" answered the chevalier, with confidence. "It is clea as daylight that Rodach cannot have left the castle!"

"Good!" said Doctor Mira. "Now about *our* errand: has every precaution been taken?"

"I should think so!" replied Reinhold. "If the stag-hunt has only been organised as well as our hunt, I pity the stag! We are sure of the youngster at last. He can only rush to destruction on Scylla by avoiding Charybdis!"

"I can answer for his fate in the chase," added Mira, "for I gave our man his instructions myself."

"Pitois awaits him near the Negro's Head, in case he pays a visit to Gottlieb's cottage," said Van Praet.

"And I have posted Mâlou in the ruins of the old village," put in Reinhold, "and Madame de Laurens passed me only a few minutes back on the road to her rendezvous with Franz. So I back the ruins!"

"And I the chase!" continued the doctor. "There's a certain old willow near the border of the lake which will conceal my man admirably."

"While I trust to Pitois to settle his fate!" was the response of Van Praet, whose bulk made him the last to follow his companions, who had spurred their horses to a gallop, and were speeding down the avenue to rejoin the chase.

Silence again reigned in the spot they had left till the shadow flitted from the larch-tree, and a shrill cry pierced the still night air. Twice before in this history has the same singular cry been heard: first, when the Red Knights escaped from the Frankfort prison; the second time at the carnival ball at the Paris Opéra Comique.

It was a cry which had long served the three brothers as a signal, and had been of great use to them in many critical junctures. The cry was echoed and re-echoed, but faintly, as though from a considerable distance. The figure of the man who first gave the signal was still concealed. The first result of the cry was the appearance of a peasant holding a horse by the bridle. A few moments after, a double gallop was heard, and two horsemen abruptly reined in their steeds on the very spot where Reinhold, Mira, and Van Praet had met only a short time previously.

The faces of the new comers were obscured by the drooping brims of their beavers, and they were clad in the red cloaks so familiar to the reader. The Red Knight, who had by this time mounted the horse brought to him, wore exactly the same costume. "Hans Dorn," he said, addressing the man attired as a peasant, "you remain here, for they will return." Joining the two cavaliers who had arrived so promptly in response to his signal, he said, in a quick, firm, commanding voice, "Goetz, make haste to the border of the lake! Albert, lose no time in reaching Gottlieb's cottage. "I am off to the ruins!"

The brilliant illumination lit up their scarlet cloaks, which floated behind them as they rode off together in the centre of the avenue. The Three Red Knights then separated, each in a different direction.

CHAPTER LXII.

THE SIREN'S RENDEZVOUS.

THE field in which the ruins of the ancient village were situated did not escape the bright light, which had almost turned night into day. Otto sprang from his saddle when about two hundred paces from the field. He fastened the bridle to a jutting point of rock, and then set out to complete the remaining distance on foot. He moved as

noiselessly and kept as much in the shade as he could. He knew that Madame de Laurens was already at the rendezvous, and that Mâlou was concealed in some nook to fulfil his dastardly task. He glided softly behind part of an old wall still standing, and there reconnoitred the siren who had set this snare for Franz.

Not far from him the light shone full on the graceful figure of Madame de Laurens. She was walking slowly to and fro, and stopping occasionally to cast an impatient glance towards the roadway. Near her Otto also perceived a dark form, crouching on the ground behind a heap of stones, the tell-tale light reflected from the bright barrel of a gun he held in his hand.

Otto took a brace of pistols from his belt, and capped them afresh. No sooner had he taken this precaution than his attention was drawn to a person whose presence he did not in the least expect. He was crouching in the shelter of the same wall that concealed Otto, and seemed faint and ill. It was Monsieur de Laurens. Otto approached him and touched his shoulder. Monsieur de Laurens turned, and trembled like an aspen-leaf. Don't be afraid," whispered Otto. "Your secret is safe with me. I sympathise with you heartily, Monsieur de Laurens, and will do what I can to help you."

"You are a stranger to me," stammered De Laurens.

"But I know you; and I can feel for you as I can for all the victims of that woman." Otto pointed, as he spoke, to the figure of Madame de Laurens.

Monsieur de Laurens bent his head, as if to conceal his shame, and murmured, "I am ill and feeble. A veil seems drawn before my eyes. I cannot believe it is my wife!"

Otto's heart was filled with pity. "It is," he whispered, however. "It is the eldest daughter of Moses de Geldberg." A deep sigh was the only reply of the stricken husband. "Listen!" continued Otto. "Since your departure from Paris I have been the head of the firm of Geldberg, and have made myself master of your account with the bank. I have restored your credit. Your are now as rich as you ever were."

"Too late! too late!" feebly replied Monsieur de Laurens, cold as the stone he was leaning on for support. "But isn't that him I see there?" he asked, standing erect, with a sudden access of strength.

"Whom?"

"The young man whom she appointed to meet here." Monsieur de Laurens grasped the handle of a poniard as he spoke, and his white face was distorted with the passion of vengeance.

"No! but is it upon him you would be avenged?" Otto asked with increased pity. "Why, he has but yielded to the entreaties of that woman in coming here!"

"She loves him!"

"She loves him!" exclaimed Otto, with bitterness. "Oh! you don't know the depth of her perfidy! Hearken! for there may yet be time to cure you of your passion!" In spite of many protests of disbelief, growing weaker and weaker, however, every moment, Otto told in a few vigorous words the story of Sarah's crimes. He tore off her mask

of beauty, and laid bare the cruel nature of Madame de Laurens. His trembling listener seemed overwhelmed as his cherished idol was overthrown, and her baseness rendered evident.

Still Franz came not. The anxiety of Madame de Laurens was at its height.

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The Viscountess d'Audemer was at length to be satisfied on the point nearest her heart. She had alighted from her horse, and stood beside Fritz, the old courier of the castle, who had been won over by Otto to his side. They were near the mouth of the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. "Viscount Raymond d'Audemer had stopped at this very spot," Fritz said, to his almost breathless listener, who started back with horror. "He who is now styled the Chevalier de Reinhold stole behind the viscount. He struck his horse with his whip. The horse bounded over the precipice. I was behind that larch-tree there ; and the next sounds I heard were the retreating gallop of Jacques Regnault, as we then called him, and the last cry of the poor viscount rising from the Hœlle !"

"Good heavens! it is true, then," exclaimed the Vicountess d'Audemer in a tone of deepest anguish. She knelt down in silent prayer. Neither she nor fritz had eyes for the young couple beneath—Franz and Denise, enjoying a lovers' stolen interview.

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Hans Dorn was still watchful at his post. But there soon came an alarm that made him quit it in haste. "Herr Dorn ! Hans Dorn !" was the cry that startled him.

He left the shelter of the tree, and found it was Jean Regnault who sought his help. "Come quickly !" cried Jean Regnault, or Johann will kill Monsieur Franz !"

"Where are they ?" demanded Hans Dorn, grasping his gun.

"Monsieur Franz is with Mademoiselle Denise in the Hœlle of Bluthaupt, and Johann is climbing the mountain, and if we lose another moment he will have discovered them and then"—Ere Jean could finish Hans Dorn had set off at full speed for the pathway leading to the mouth of the Hœlle. But age had told on him. He was obliged to slacken his pace. "Lend me your gun !" cried Jean impatiently. "I can get there some minutes before you, and who knows if there's a single second to spare ?"

"Take it, Jean !" said Hans Dorn. "And if you save him you win Gertrude !" Jean flew along as if these words had given him wings.

The chasm, to which the weird name of the Hœlle of Bluthaupt had been given, opened, as will be remembered, in the midst of a long alley of larches. When Hans Dorn arrived, breathlessly at the top of this alley he was suddenly startled by the explosion of a fire-arm, and by the sight of two struggling figures at the edge of the precipice.

Franz and Denise were also alarmed by the same discharge. They looked up, and a ball whizzed between their heads. As an exclamation of terror escaped from Denise, and Franz sprang indignantly to

his feet a second shot echoed through the Hœlle of Bluthaupt. There was a rushing noise through the bushes overhead. The next instant an inert mass fell at the feet of Franz and Denise. It was the corpse of Johann.

CHAPTER LXIII.

A MOTHER'S SECRET.

It was on the stroke of midnight. The hunt by torchlight was drawing to a close, and many of the guests had already returned to Bluthaupt Castle. Madame de Laurens, tired with waiting fruitlessly for Franz in the ruins, had gained her bedroom, and was in earnest conversation with Madame Batailleur, her confidant. She still wore her riding habit; but all thoughts of the game she had been pursuing seemed to have flown from her mind. There was a new and strange light in her eyes. It was as if Madame de Laurens had at length dropped her mask, allowing her natural, womanly tenderness to replace the "nods and becks and wreathed smiles" wherewith she was wont to enchant those whom she was bent upon fascinating.

The one tender chord in this woman's hard nature had, indeed, been touched. Madame Batailleur's answer to her anxious inquiry had filled her heart with a great fear. A troubled look came over her face as she hastened into the next room, her hand to her heart, as if to still its feverish beating. There were two beds in this ante-room—one for Madame Batailleur, the other for the pale, frail, little girl who had been the slave of Araby in the Temple, and who had been brought to the castle as the child of Madame de Laurens' confidant. Madame de Laurens stopped before the smaller bed. Drawing aside the curtains with a tremulous hand, she gazed with hungry eyes at the white face of the sleeping girl—white as the pillow on which her head was resting, save for the hectic flush that burned in the centre of her cheeks. Nono's features were exquisitely delicate, and resembled somewhat vaguely the face of the woman who was watching her so earnestly.

"Must I ever keep her in concealment?" murmured Madame de Laurens, in trembling accents. "Will there be no end to my suffering?" Her confidant had followed her with noiseless steps, and overheard her mistress as she continued her soliloquy, "Ah! my little one, when I bade Batailleur bring you to the castle I thought all our troubles would be ended before you arrived. I made certain Monsieur de Laurens would have suffered his last pang; but he still lives on; and who knows that we may not die before him?"

Bending over the sleeping form she was addressing, Madame de Laurens touched the girl's brow with her lips. "She is burning!" exclaimed the mother, listening with increased anxiety for each laboured breath as it came with evident pain from the young sleeper's breast. "How she must have suffered! If I lose her, Batailleur, I shall ever accuse myself of her death, for did I not leave her to live or

die in stony-hearted Paris? But live! oh live! my darling! Let us have a little joy together here upon earth! Live, my precious treasure! Oh! how gladly would I give up all the gold I have amassed to give you strength and life!"

A feeble smile flitted across the face of the young girl as she turned and allowed her thin hand to escape from her bosom. There welled up in Sarah's heart a deep feeling of joy at sight of this smile. The mother's hands toyed with the soft coverlet. "One becomes a child again when one truly loves!" she thought. "How I should like to see and caress her poor, thin neck!"

She turned the coverlet gently down, but instantly started back with anguish, and became pale as death; for she beheld for the first time the large blue bruises left from the blows the poor girl had received from her master in the Temple. These blue bruises on the frail neck and shoulders of Nono were like so many stings to the conscience of Madame de Laurens. A shiver ran through her and tears sprang to her eyes as she realised with her mother's instinct what pain the poor girl must have suffered. The next instant an angry light flashed from her eyes, as she demanded in a fierce whisper of her confidant: "Who did this?"

Madame Batailleur muttered the name of Araby in reply.

"Araby!" exclaimed Madame de Laurens, with an accent of bitterest hate and scorn. "Araby! Araby!" she repeated, in a tone of revengeful abhorrence. "Tiger! And he is not here to know what a mother's vengeance is!"

Her eyes insensibly wandered back to her sleeping daughter, from whose parted lips the breath seemed to come with greater effort than ever. The mother hurriedly re-covered her neck with the white coverlet, and, as deepest pity took repossession of her heart, sank with a groan on her knees by the bedside murmuring, "Oh, to live my lost youth—my lost life—over again!"

There was a long silence while she communed with her dark, painful thoughts. It was broken at last by the sound of a soft kiss. The mother had again bent over her dying daughter and imprinted a kiss on her burning brow. Calmer and colder than she had ever been before, Madame de Laurens then turned abruptly away, saying to herself, with deadly determination. "Araby! Oh, I will find him; and *he* shall not escape me; nor shall this Monsieur Franz again, for Bluthaupt Castle shall be mine and my darling's!"

CHAPTER LXIV.

THE RETURN FROM THE CHASE.

MADAME de Laurens was one of those beings who appear to have the power of dealing with emotions as they do with garments—donning and doffing them at will. No grief could be greater than that which seemingly filled her soul during the secret visit to her daughter's bed-

side. No one could be calmer, more collected, colder than Madame de Laurens when she shortly after joined Reinhold, Van Praet, and Mira in the grand saloon of the castle. The chevalier interrupted himself to salute Madame de Laurens in the midst of an animated recital, accompanied by the exuberance of gestures habitual with him when excited. Meinheer van Praet and Doctor Mira also bowed, and received with Reinhold the graceful acknowledgment of Sarah.

"Madame!" cried the Chevalier de Reinhold, as he led Madame de Laurens to a seat near the fire; "I am delighted to be the first to tell you the good news"——

"Victory!" exclaimed Van Praet, unable to restrain his joy.

Madame de Laurens coldly regarded them with an air of surprise.

"Rejoice with us!" resumed Reinhold. "Our work is at length finished. Did you hear the two shots that were fired?"

An affirmative nod was the only reply Madame de Laurens deigned to give.

"Those bullets were worth more than a thousand times their weight in gold to us," continued Reinhold. "We have nothing more to fear. Franz lies dead at the bottom of the Hœlle of Bluthaupt!"

"You had better keep your triumph for a fitter occasion," broke in Sarah disdainfully. "Franz is safe in bed, without a wound, at this moment."

The three confederates looked aghast at this information. "He can't be!" answered Reinhold, with confidence. "I was almost an eyewitness of what occurred. I was riding along the road to Heidelberg, about ten o'clock, when I met Johann, who made me dismount in order to show me something which was not very pleasing to me at first sight, I assure you. In truth, there was Mademoiselle Denise d'Audemer, whose hand I aspire to win, in close converse with Monsieur Franz! I said to Johann, 'I will hurry off and you can then finish your business.' The illumination for the chase made the road as light as day. Johann had clambered up to the top of the Hœlle, so as to have a place of safety in case of danger. About ten minutes after, I heard two shots fired. I galloped back at topmost speed. Near the spot all the lights were extinguished—a token of Johann's customary prudence. I spurred my horse on to the place where I had seen Mademoiselle Denise and Franz together. A corpse was all I saw!" The Chevalier de Reinhold pronounced the last words in a decisive tone, as though it were a matter of impossibility that any doubt could now exist as to the fate of Franz.

"But did you take the trouble," asked Madame de Laurens, "to dismount and scan the face?"

"That might have been attended with danger," replied Reinhold. "I might have been seen, and suspicion would be naturally attached to my presence near the dead body."

"Who excuses himself accuses himself," answered Madame de Laurens. "Had you but looked at his face, you would have been spared the chagrin I am about to cause you. The corpse was in all probability that of your trusty friend Johann!"

"How can you think that?"

"A little while ago I met Monsieur Franz and Mademoiselle d'Audemer at the gate of the castle, returning in safety from their rendezvous."

"Is it possible?"

"I saw them distinctly," replied Madame de Laurens, coldly.

There was silence for a few moments. Reinhold, Van Praet, and Mira regarded each other with dismay; while Madame de Laurens, her thoughts seemingly far away, gazed on the flickering logs burning on the hearth. Van Praet was the first to rouse himself. "If what you say be true, madame, we are lost!" he exclaimed.

"Yes—that is, if we have played our *last* trump card!" said Sarah, looking up. "For Franz must know now the name of his father, and therefore, that he is the inheritor of Bluthaupt Castle! In brief," continued Madame de Laurens, after a glance of disdain at her crestfallen listeners, "we may as well give up the game at once unless you care to cut the gordian knot, and seek the one remaining way out of our difficulty."

"But how to cut it?" demanded Mira. "I see now how we have been the dupes of this Baron de Rodach. He seems to have the power of checking our every move. The one thing most urgent now is to prevent him from finally checkmating us!"

The natural power and keen intellect of Madame de Laurens now made her the head and chief of the confederates. "We will yet conquer!" she exclaimed, rising to her feet. "We know at last *where* our enemies are. That light which is regarded with superstitious awe by the peasants of Bluthaupt, comes from the watch-tower of the castle, and is the light which shines from the hiding-place of the Baron de Rodach. The light is shining at this moment. He must be there with those red-cloaked brothers of his. If a fire should *accidentally* break out in the room beneath theirs and destroy them in the flames, what power can save Franz from us then?"

"No earthly power!" answered Doctor Mira, gazing with admiration at the woman he loved.

Reinhold and Van Praet gave their silent acquiescence to the daring scheme, and followed the doctor and Madame de Laurens to the corridor. At the foot of the staircase leading to the watch-tower they came upon the magyar Yanos Georgyi, watching, drawn sword in hand, to see that the Baron de Rodach did not escape him.

"Herr Yanos," said Madame de Laurens, "the man you are waiting for dares not come, you see. Why not seek him?"

"A good idea. I will!"

An addition was now made to their numbers by the arrival of Pitois and Mâlou; and, seeing them, Sarah answered, "Valiant as ever, I see, Herr Yanos! But please control your valour a little while longer. Remain here at your post, while we see whether we cannot rouse your game from its lair." Motioning to Pitois and Mâlou to precede her, Sarah ascended the staircase after them, addressing Reinhold, Van Praet, and Mira as she passed, "I can do without you. While I do my part of the work, you can arm yourselves."

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A minute later Madame de Laurens and Mâlou and Pitois entered

the room immediately below the topmost chamber of the watch-tower. All was prepared for the incendiary work with alacrity, the mattress being torn from a bed, and the bedstead being set on fire in an instant by Pitois and Mâlou, whose cupidity had been inflamed by the promise of a munificent reward from Madame de Laurens.

"When you have finished," whispered Sarah as a parting injunction, "shut the door and take your stations outside on the stairs. If our friends above find it too warm, and try to descend, shoot them!"

Satisfied that she could trust the two hireling knaves to do their cruel work, Madame de Laurens quickly descended the stairs, and, placing her arm within the magyar's, drew him unresistingly with her by the flattering utterance of a simple speech, "You can be spared for a few minutes, Herr Yanos, for Mâlou and Pitois are on guard above. Please come with me now. I want you to infuse a little courage into our chicken-hearted friends yonder!"

Joined by Reinhold, Van Praet, and Mira, they proceeded in silence along the corridor, a dark smile flitting over Madame de Laurens' face, when vivid shafts of light, as if from a great conflagration, shot through the last window they passed. Still maintaining a sinister silence, they ascended the stairs leading to Franz's bedroom, and entered noiselessly the apartment wherein the Three Red Knights had confronted four of their number twenty years previously. The Hungarian had no sooner recognised the room surrounded with such weird memories than he started back, exclaiming with horror, "It was in this very room!"

"Are *you* afraid?" murmured Madame de Laurens coldly in his ear.

But Yanos Georgyi was not to be stung into action, for there arose before him the vision of that mysterious appearance which filled him with terror. Nor were his three comrades any braver. They each seemed awe-stricken by the recognition of that room of terrible memories.

Sarah snatched a poniard from Reinhold's hand. "Cowards!" she cried. "Is there not a man among you? Let me show you a woman's courage, then!" Firmly gripping the poniard, she resolutely advanced to the bed in which Franz was sleeping—the same bed on which the Countess Marguerite had expired in giving birth to him, twenty years back. But before she could gain the bed, the magyar strode in advance and pushed back the bed-curtains with his wonted fearlessness.

His sword was raised to do its dark work, but his arm dropped helplessly to his side as if palsied, while Madame de Laurens herself gave a cry of terror. There in front of the bed, between them and the sleeping form of Franz, stood the Three Red Knights. The leader advanced towards the Hungarian, and said, in a stern voice, "Yanos Georgyi, I promised you we should meet again. Defend yourself! for I am the son of Count Ulrich of Bluthaupt!"

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There was a short, decisive struggle. Then there fell lifeless to the floor Yanos Georgyi, Reinhold, Van Praet, and Mira, the first to feel the vengeance of the Three Red Knights.

CHAPTER LXV.

THE BROTHERS' VENGEANCE.

TORCHES had been placed in the candelabra, and the chamber of terrible memories was bright with an intense red light. Franz was at length awake. From his bed he gazed with horror at the scene before him—the sombre silhouette of Otto; the four corpses in the centre of the floor, surrounded by a pool of blood; Madame de Laurens in the arm-chair, pale as the Countess Esther, cowering behind her; young Abel de Geldberg standing as if thunderstruck near the door; and the old Jew, Moses de Geldberg, shrinking from the light in a corner, his cowardly heart shaking with fear, his teeth chattering in his head. It was not of their own free will that the last three personages were present. They had been conducted thither by the trusty band of Germans whom Hans Dorn had brought from Paris.

There was silence while Otto, his arms folded over his breast, stood regarding the bodies of the four conspirators who lay dead at his feet. When he spoke he was obeyed as though he were master. "All our select company are not here yet," he said. "Bid Madame the Viscountess d'Audemer and her son and daughter come." A messenger hastened to fulfil the order.

"Let those poor people of the Temple, Madame Regnault and her children, be also brought here," said Otto to another messenger, who forthwith departed also. "In Madame de Laurens' apartment," he added, "you will find a girl who passes for the daughter of Madame de Laurens' servant." Recalling the servant as he was about to quit the room, Otto whispered a message in his ear, and Sarah fancied she overheard the name of her husband, Monsieur de Laurens.

A few minutes later all those Otto wished to be present arrived one after the other. Every time the door opened a cry of terror involuntarily escaped each new comer. Then silence again reigned, as yet another and another dazed spectator stared with amazement at the scene of blood. The Audemers and all the fresh arrivals, with one exception, instinctively shrank as far away as possible from the dead bodies. The exception was Madame Regnault. Forgetting the cruel desertion of her son, forgetting how he had heartlessly repulsed her when prison stared her in the face, the poor woman threw herself down beside his lifeless body, and warm tears fell from her eyes as she kissed his white forehead with passionate tenderness.

Attention was now directed from this painful incident to Otto, whose firm, calm voice broke the silence once again. "The four men who lie dead there assassinated a noble family twenty years ago. Count Ulrich de Bluthaupt, Count Gunther de Bluthaupt, and his wife, the Countess Marguerite, all fell by their hands. There was a fifth assassin. He is listening to me at this moment. and can tell you whether I am speaking the truth or not!"

The old Jew joined his hands together as if to implore pity. "Heaven forgive me!" he murmured. "It was for my poor children."

"The assassin's knife was only stopped before the cradle in which the last heir of Bluthaupt slept," resumed Otto. "The son of Count Gunther and the Countess Marguerite was saved. Countess Helen, your brothers had to avenge three murders; but they call heaven to witness that it was not vengeance that guided their swords —"

"But," interrupted the Viscountess d'Audemer, "do you know where my sister's son is?"

"I do. For the last twenty years, my brothers and I have watched over his safety. He has braved all perils at last, heaven be praised! Rise, Gunther de Bluthaupt, and take your rightful station!" So saying, Otto beckoned Franz, who had been devouring every word of this revelation as he looked alternately from the speaker to the lovely face of Denise, whose hand bade fair to be his at last.

At this moment a confused murmur stole through the window. It rose from the esplanade of the castle. A large number of the servants and tenants had gathered there, for it had been noised abroad that that night would see a renewal of the mysterious light in the watch-tower of Bluthaupt. What occasioned the tumult, however, was the sight of flames bursting forth from the floor below. The flames grew in volume, and the smoke rolled upwards in dense, black clouds.

Every effort was made to extinguish the fire within the castle. The most active in the work came across the incendiaries, Pitois and Mâlou, just as they were about to steal away, torch in hand, unobserved, as they thought. Their excuse was that they had received from the Geldbergs themselves the order to set fire to the watch-tower in order to destroy the bandits who made the turret their hiding-place. While these hirelings were being conducted to a safe place for the night the hour of midnight struck, and justice was completing its task in the room wherein the principal personages left of this story were assembled.

Franz now stood beside Otto, bearing himself with modesty, albeit with dignity. The four bodies had been removed to the graves awaiting them in the vault of the chapel. "Moses Geld," said Otto, "I have spared your life in answer to an angel's prayer for mercy; but, remember, I have in reserve a punishment far more terrible than that of my sword. Do you recognise this young man as the son of Count Gunther of Bluthaupt, and the Countess Marguerite?"

Madame de Laurens stole a glance at her trembling father, to dissuade him from taking the step which would be the ruin of his family; but Moses Geld was not to be influenced by his daughter.

"Yes!" replied the old Jew, in a voice that was scarcely audible.

The Viscountess d'Audemer and Julien had been full of doubt, and were not thoroughly convinced of Franz's identity until this moment. Both they and Denise, however, restrained their natural impulse to press their congratulations on Franz, for the act of restitution had yet to be completed. Franz, on his part, longed to pour out his grateful thanks to the brave guardian by whose side it was an honour to stand, and then to hear from the sweet lips of Denise a repetition of the vows that had so often been exchanged in secret between them.

"We have too many witnesses here, Moses Geld, for you to retract what you have said," resumed Otto; "and your recognition and acknowledgment of the new count will save us a world of trouble, for you have the greatest interest in denying the truth. But now, as a matter of course, the Count of Bluthaupt has simply to enter upon the inheritance of his forefathers; and Bluthaupt Castle, with all the land between Esselbach and Obernberg, must revert to him!" Then, pointing to the clock, he added, "Time presses. I give you a couple of minutes for consultation."

The Countess Esther, Madame de Laurens, and Abel profited by this permission. They engaged in a low and earnest conversation. Moses Geld sidled up noiselessly to join in the consultation. He tremulously begged and prayed them to give up all ideas of retaining Bluthaupt. "We shall still be rich," he urged. "I have yet some thousands of francs hoarded away, no one but myself knows where. They shall all—all—be yours. I will give you all—all!"

"Well?" came the stern inquiry of Otto.

"They accept!—they accept!" replied the old Jew, precipitately; whilst the silence of his family gave sanction to his answer.

"There now remains," said Otto, with a glance of pity at Moses Geld, "to account for the disappearance of the four men who have just been removed hence."

"It appears to me that that is your business," answered Madame de Laurens.

"You are mistaken. It is your's. Moses Geld is subject to fits of insanity, and under the influence of madness may commit any crime."

"Monsieur! Monsieur!" protested Abel Geld.

"I will put it to you, then, Abel Geld. Can a man be in his right mind who, a millionaire, and bearing the honoured name of Geldberg. has sold rags and lent money weekly in the Temple, under the sobriquet of Araby?"

This sudden identification of Araby, the mysterious usurer of the Temple, caused some stir among the small band of trusty Germans who clustered round Hans Dorn at one side of the room. Esther and Abel looked up with confidence at their father, whom they expected to hear refute this calumny with indignation. There was another present who waited for his reply with bated breath. But Moses Geld remained as if petrified. Madame de Laurens regarded her father with a look of scorn at his cowardice.

"Speak!" she hissed in his ear. "Are *you* Araby? You dare not answer. Good God! Araby and my father are one, then!" No thrill of filial affection saved her heart from being filled with a desire for immediate vengeance. Quicker than thought, she darted towards the trembling Galifarde, snatched her to her bosom, and hurried with her charge face to face with Moses Geld. "Is it true?" she whispered to the child. "Is this your master, Araby, standing before you?"

"Yes," was the tremulous answer.

Sarah plucked the silk kerchief from the child's neck, and revealed her bare bosom, still bearing the dark marks of the old Jew's cruelty. The mother's eyes were filled with an angry, revengeful light as she over-

whelmed Moses Geld with a furious outburst of indignation. "It is you, then, who are the monster Araby?" she said. "Ah! You may shrink from the sight of these terrible bruises now. But do you know they tell me these blows will be her death? It is you, then, who have killed her. What care I what becomes of the vender of old clothes?

I am not the daughter of Araby of the Temple. I am the daughter of Monsieur de Geldberg. It matters not to me where they put you."

"Sarah," murmured the old Jew, faintly, "it was for you I worked. How could I tell it was your child that was my servant?" He tried to take her hand. She repulsed him with uncontrollable aversion.

The trembling Jew, growing weaker every moment, his life ebbing with each last wave of remorse that swept over his soul, raised his hands in supplication to Esther and Abel for mercy. In vain! Moses Geld then drew himself up with a spasmodic effort, and with gasping breath upbraided them for their ingratitude. "Heaven knows, it was for you I have laboured all my life, and have become stained with crimes! But you renounce me! Curse you for your black ingratitude! If this is my dying breath, I say with it—Curse you! Curse you!"

The old man tottered as the last terrible curse escaped his lips, and fell heavily to the floor, a corpse! The work of vengeance which the Three Red Knights began was ended by a more than earthly power.

CHAPTER LXVI.

RESTITUTION.

ALTHOUGH the guests all thought the hunt by torchlight would be the final and crowning fête of their visit, another surprise was awaiting them on their return to the castle. There was to be one last ceremony in which they were to take part. Some had even heard that they were to assist at the formal recognition of the heir of Bluthaupt, abducted on the very morning of his birth, and now suddenly discovered in the person of a handsome guest staying at the castle of his ancestors as a stranger!

The doors of Franz's apartments had been thrown wide open; the bloodstains on the floor were hidden for the moment; and the body of Moses Geld had been removed and placed beside the corpses of his confederates in crime. Into this room the guests trooped, ignorant of the wierd scenes that had been enacted there within the past hour.

It was in a trembling voice that he whom the company regarded as the youngest host stood abashed before the guests, and fulfilled what seemed to be a most painful task. Sympathy struggled with surprise in the breasts of the listeners as the tremulous words of the humbled speaker fell upon their ears, and affirmed the truth of the rumours buzzing about the castle. "It will be news to most of you," said Abel Geld, "that my father died from an apoplectic fit a few minutes ago; but he lived long enough to do an act of justice, and to recognise the

young nobleman there, who will be familiar to many of you, as the son of Count Gunther, and to acknowledge him as heir of Bluthaupt!"

Every eye was directed toward Franz, who stood surrounded by the faithful servants of Bluthapt, with the Three Red Knights as his body guard. Franz bowed in acknowledgment of the respectful greetings which hailed him Count of Bluthaupt. His first action was to embrace Otto, Goetz, and Albert, whom he evidently thanked from his heart for their self-sacrificing devotion to him. His next was to hasten towards the Viscountess d'Audemer, who moved forward with Denise and Julien to meet him.

"Count Gunther," said the viscountess, saluting him with all the courtesy and grace of a high-born lady and the warmth of a relative, "let me acknowledge you as chief of our house, in which quality, you know, you will have the disposal of my daughter's hand."

The blood crimsoned the faces of Franz and the fair Denise simultaneously, while joy at their coming happiness filled their hearts, and a smile at their stolen meetings in Paris rose to both their lips as Julien pointed out to them a little ceremony going on quietly at the other end of the room—nothing less that Hans Dorn celebrating the occasion by bestowing Gertrude's hand upon young Jean Regnault.

. . . . . .

The last illumination had long died out, and the country seemed buried in a sombre sleep. No light even glimmered from any window of Bluthaupt Castle. But at one casement, whereat a maiden in white had long kept weary vigil, two figures were seen for a moment only. It was Lia clasped to Otto's breast in what might be a last passionate embrace, but which yet gave deep joy to one poor fluttering heart as there stole into her ear the sweet whisper, "I love thee with all my heart and soul, Lia. We shall meet again soon. But now I am bound in honour to return for awhile to the Frankfort prison."

The white figure of Lia alone was then seen at the window; and presently she fluttered her handkerchief in farewell as she saw the two mounted Red Knights on the other side of the moat joined by a third figure in a scarlet cloak, and then beheld the three ride off at a gallop, after waving their hands in the direction of the castle.

CHAPTER LXVII.

FRANKFORT PRISON.

THE last day in February was drawing to a close. The clock of the Frankfort prison was about to strike six. Master Blasius, the gaoler-in-chief, was dining alone, in a very melancholy fashion, and had scarcely the heart to fill himself a glass of wine. "I might have expected as much," he muttered gloomily to himself. "It was too bad of them, however, to serve an old follower of their family like this, and very likely cause him to be cashiered." He heaved a long sigh, and then drank a deep draught of Rhine wine.

"I have kept everything back as much as I could," he continued; "but the official inspection, confound it! will be certainly made to-morrow.—*They* will not be here, that's equally certain. More is the pity! I may be imprisoned in their place!"

"You are wanted, Master Blasius!" interrupted a warder.

"Tell them to come in," answered the gaoler.

The door was opened, and there entered three men, clad in long scarlet cloaks. "The thirtieth day is not quite spent yet, Master Blasius!" said the leader calmly.

The gaoler rubbed his eyes, looked at his visitors afresh, and then a smile sent his rubicund face into circles of wrinkles. "I knew they would return! I knew they would keep their word!" he exclaimed, with delight. "Welcome, Otto! Welcome, Albert and Goetz! Ah! I never doubted your good faith!"

In his joy, Master Blasius embraced his prisoners, opened two or three fresh bottles of wine, clinked glasses round, and showed his gladness by every demonstration in his power at their successful reinstatement of the heir of Bluthaupt, and at their victory over the persecutors of the house. "So that, if you were free," added the gaoler, with a dash of cupidity, "you would no longer be homeless adventurers, but would have a hospitable roof to give you shelter! Well, well! (he continued to himself) this is a villanous part, after all, that of a gaoler, particularly when one has had the honour of serving a noble family like the Bluthaupts. Do you think (raising his voice as he turned towards the three brothers) the new Count of Bluthaupt would feel kindly towards a faithful servitor of his father?"

"He would be sure to do so," answered Otto, exchanging a significant glance with Albert and Goetz, who suddenly roused themselves from their air of careless resignation, and let a ray of hope warm them into animation.

"Phew! How close this prison air is! How I should like to breathe the fresh air of Wurtzburg again! By-the-way, I wonder whether the count has a major-domo yet?" asked the gaoler, betraying his secret wishes as the wine mounted to his head.

"Not that I am aware of," replied Goetz.

"Then I know I can reckon upon you to give a poor fellow like me your influence, if necessary. Do you think the young count would bestow the post upon me?"

"He would do so without hesitation," answered Albert.

The old gaoler emptied his glass for the last time. Then, looking up with a knowing smile on his face, he said, "If that's the case, my gracious seigneurs, why, you can easily escape from here a second time. But, in that event, you will, perhaps, deign to admit an old vassal of Bluthaupt to the honour of your company."

VICTOR, THE HANDSOME COACHMAN.

MANY years ago, at a period when the Parisian system of police had not been carried to that degree of perfection which it has since attained, attacks on person and property were extremely frequent, and the public mind for a long time was kept in a state of fearful excitement by a succession of almost nightly assassinations, accompanied with robbery, which, from their frequency and the manner of their occurrence, seemed the result of a deliberate and extensive plot. In addition to the victims openly discovered, numerous persons—and these of no inferior rank—had disappeared under circumstances of mystery, that for the moment completely set at fault the speculations of private ingenuity and administrative sagacity. No one had hitherto escaped to tell his tale, or afford the slightest clue to the perpetrators of these acts, or the system on which they were apparently directed. The events we are about to give a sketch of, at length furnished one.

The carnival of 18— was at its close; it had been the most brilliant and lively that had taken place for many years. Masked and fancy balls were the rage. The different theatres vied with each other in splendour of decoration, variety of entertainment, and attraction of every description. The Opera, however, bore away the palm, and was consequently, night after night, the rendezvous of all the beauty, rank, and fashion in the French metropolis.

In an assemblage so numerous, composed, in a great measure, of the picked and chosen among the already select, it would have been difficult to assign first places—and still more so the first place of loveliness and distinction. Let it suffice to say that the youthful Countess Olga Weminski was remarked above all; and seldom, indeed, had nature moulded, or art perfected, a form of rarer beauty and grace. She had been married some months before, being then scarcely seventeen, to the Count Albert Weminski, colonel of one of the regiments of the Polish Legion, and who, on the first overthrow of Napoleon, had quitted the army, and, realising his property, had come to reside in his adopted country. He was not many years her senior, and was a man of striking personal appearance, amiable character, and engaging manners; loving her with much devotedness, but violent and ungovernable in passion when roused; and, at times, immensely jealous of his charming wife. Such was the Colonel Weminski, than whom a nobler heart, a more fiery daring spirit, his brothers in arms unanimously agreed, had never led them on to danger and to triumph.

Weminski felt proud and happy at the impression his wife created, yet he could not avoid yielding himself up to the misgivings of his jealous spirit. True, these were not wholly without motive. He had observed several times during the evening, hovering about the countess, and watching her every movement, a mask, habited in a Spanish costume of so costly a description as to attract the eyes of all beholders; sword-hilt, girdle, and buckles being alike studded with jewels, and a massive chain of richly wrought gold being ornamented in the same manner. He had more than once solicited Madame Weminski's hand for the dance, and had been with some hesitation refused. This apparent embarrassment did not fail to strike Weminski, and he immediately began to brood over it; he now thought he recollected something in the stranger's mien and gesture—even in his voice, though counterfeit, which was not wholly unfamiliar to him.

This suspicion was confirmed on the stranger's second approach to engage the countess for the next quadrille. Decidedly there were one or two accents of that voice which he recognised, which caused him, and which caused the countess, involuntarily to start—she knew not exactly why; perhaps, because her husband seemed moved. Weminski saw this, and was miserable. "Who was it? Who could it be?" Perhaps Olga could help his memory? Accordingly, the poor countess, who saw the struggle swelling in her husband's breast, was questioned over and over again, and each time became more confused, more ill at ease than before, as she noted her husband's agitation and ill-concealed emotion. He longed, yet feared to leave her, in order to glean from some friends any information they could give him respecting the Spaniard. Uneasy curiosity, the self-inflicted urgings of anxiety, at length prevailed, and on two occasions he tore himself from her side for a few minutes, leaving her safe, as he thought, in the centre of a group of acquaintances. His eye did not quit her, however; and he saw from a distance, with sentiments of anger and suspicion, that each time the object of his inquiries immediately advanced, and endeavoured to engage Madame Weminski in conversation. The colonel thereupon returned, and offering his arm to his wife, led her, sick at heart, trembling, and more dead than alive, as she marked his angry looks and lowering brow, to another part of the stage.

The countess walked about for some time listlessly and mechanically—answering at random, almost unconsciously, her husband's eager questions, and at length sinking with distress of mind, fatigue, and dizziness, she asked him to conduct her home, a request which he gladly complied with.

Several parties, tired with the crowd and the heat, had already left, and more were endeavouring to leave; but not having calculated on retiring so early, they had not ordered their vehicles to be in readiness, and their servants, happy at the opportunity, were occupied in celebrating their carnival elsewhere. Many, after waiting some time, gave up in despair and returned to the ball, until at last there remained only two groups, one consisting of Olga and Weminski, the other of an old gentleman, the Marquis de ——, and three ladies, all of whom seemed equally desirous to get away. Weminski at last determined to

go and seek for a carriage, leaving his lady, of course, alone in the interval, and he had scarcely descended the entrance steps, when he perceived a hired coach of good appearance approaching, and immediately sprang forward to secure it; another person, whom he had not hitherto taken notice of, made a similar precipitate movement at the same instant, and they arrived together beside the horses. To his surprise and rage, he saw it was the Spaniard, and could no longer contain himself. "You here again!" he cried in an insulting tone, "the carriage is mine; you dare not take it."

"What I dare shall soon be seen," replied the stranger, and throwing himself on the short reins he seized them fast. In the hurry and suddenness of the movement, his mask fell, and Weminski, who was rushing forward to arrest his hand, remained for a few seconds as it were stunned, as he scanned the features of his opponent. "De Renzio!" he exclaimed, when sufficiently master of himself to utter the words. "Yes, De Renzio—Weminski, and what then? Anything further? Why stop in such good speed?"

"Nothing, marquis—my dear marquis, I mean," replied the latter to his questioner, seeing that a crowd of loitering bystanders, attracted by those few words pronounced in a tone not to be mistaken, was already collecting about them. "Nothing but *this*," he added in a suppressed tone of hatred and defiance; the rest was said in a whisper so that only De Renzio could hear it.

"'Tis well," answered the latter, as if unable to restrain a feeling of satisfaction. "Thanks, my best thanks! you have forestalled my wishes."

"This morning at seven."

"Good."

"Meantime," said Weminski, changing his manner altogether, "let us not keep these poor ladies waiting, and perishing with cold—who is to have the carriage?"

"Monsieur the Count Weminski, and no one else," exclaimed a voice from the box; "he was first to hail me, and, even if he were not, I should give him the preference. Besides," continued the speaker, "here comes a fellow of mine. Halloo—I say! Brison! fare here!—so let there be no quarrel gentlemen."

"Ah, 'tis you, Victor," said Weminski, looking upwards, and recognising the voice, "so much the better; come this way."

It will be necessary to say a few words here of the individual who is now introduced to the reader's notice. Victor S—— was a young man of no very obscure birth, nor humble expectations, who had been remarked from his earliest years, as well for the extraordinary symmetry of his person, as for the promptness of his wit and aptness of his intellect. Unfortunately, however, he was incorrigibly idle and indolent; his tastes and propensities driving him in search of pleasure and excitement, wherever they were to be found. The inevitable consequence was, that after having tried various pursuits, and been, through his own fault, unsuccessful in all, while his means were utterly squandered away, he was at last obliged to offer his services as a domestic; and in this capacity had been employed for some time in the household of Colonel Weminski. His ill conduct and irregularities

had, however, driven him thence, much to the colonel's regret. He was subsequently offered one or two situations, by persons less scrupulously rigid, in the domestic economy of their establishments, but after having quickly accepted, he as suddenly declined them, preferring, he said, the enjoyment of his own independence before every other advantage. Eventually he enrolled himself among the brethren of the whip; and both by the force of his natural abilities, his often tried physical strength and dexterity, and the influence of his personal appearance and manner, managed to maintain great mastery over his fellows. At the time we are speaking of, he was generally known by the title of "*le beau cocher*," or "Victor, the Handsome Coachman."

We left our principal personages at the door of the Opera, in front of which the two coaches drew up nearly at the same moment, De Renzio's in advance, however. It so happened that Weminski, probably not wishing to bring Olga into contact with the object of his dislike, waited until De Renzio had seated his party—the three ladies and the elderly gentleman already spoken of—before he went to seek her. The ladies insisted on De Renzio's accompanying them, assuring him they could easily make room for him.

"No, not at all—by no means," he answered, "I shall only inconvenience you; the night is cold; a walk will do me good; by taking the Rue de ——, I shall be home in less than ten minutes." So saying, he bade them farewell, and, wrapping his cloak about him, stepped briskly forward in the direction he had pointed out, while his friends drove away in a somewhat different one. Weminski now hastened back to the vestibule, and quickly returned, leading out the countess, much to her delight, for she had noted the movements of her Spanish persecutor, the cause of all their evening's unhappiness, and was filled with vague apprehension lest anything untoward should result from his again encountering her husband. The latter handed her into the vehicle, and got in himself without speaking, except to say "home" to Victor, who, in the interim, had been parleying with some of the lookers-on about the scene which had just occurred, and the abrupt termination of which seemed to disappoint them extremely. Weminski paid no attention to a circumstance too insignificant to call for notice; he was, besides, too much wrapped up in the gloomy musings of his own mind. The horses were soon in motion, and for a time proceeded quickly onwards.

Olga, now freed from the constraint of the public gaze, could at last yield to the feelings that swelled within her, and, overwhelmed by their intensity, she had only strength to throw herself on her husband's breast and burst into tears. At the sight of her affliction, all his love, his tenderness, his idolatry revived in a moment; he cursed himself as a fool, and a wretch, and gave way to the most passionate demonstrations. He forgot his anger, his jealousy, everything, but the weeping being before him, and used every means his affection could inspire to comfort and console her. In the midst of his endearments, casting his eyes by chance on one side of the road, they encountered the figure of De Renzio, whom the carriage had just then overtaken. This circumstance gave rise to a momentary pang and revulsion of

feeling, which immediately disappeared before the imploring looks of his suffering wife. Violent emotions by their very strength exhaust themselves quickly, and the countess and her husband had both regained a tolerable share of composure, when the latter perceived that the driver had slackened his pace, and was now proceeding merely at a walk; he fancied, too, the street through which they were passing, and which, at each step, became more narrow and dark, was not the same thoroughfare he was accustomed to. Letting down the window in front, he made the observation somewhat angrily to Victor.

"I beg your pardon, Monsieur the Count," replied the latter, with obsequious submission, "but I cannot make better haste; my poor horses are jaded, having been at work since daylight yesterday; as to the way I am taking, it is a short cut to the hotel; you'll find it to be so."

Weminski, quite satisfied, was in the act of raising up the window, when an outcry from a short distance behind caught his ear.

"Help!—murder!—assassins!—help!"—was vociferated in an urgently piercing voice, and that voice De Renzio's!

A sudden shock seemed to agitate Weminski's frame. "Open the door! let me down!" he cried, breathlessly. The countess threw her arms about him. "Do not go!" she almost shrieked in excess of terror, "do not go, Albert! do not leave me! they will murder you; stay, oh stay, I implore you!"

"Don't stir, Monsieur the Count," exclaimed Victor, stopping suddenly, and jumping from his box at a bound, "don't stir, don't leave madame; I'll deal with the ruffians." So saying, he rushed off, brandishing his loaded whip.

Some hours afterwards, late in the forenoon of that day, strange rumours were pretty generally circulated in the aristocratic world. The Marquis de Renzio, it was said, with many additions and commentaries, had been waylaid and murdered on his return from the Opera; the Count Weminski had been arrested, and was in prison, on suspicion of being the author of the crime; the Countess Olga Weminski had disappeared, and was nowhere to be found. As is generally the case in similar circumstances, some believed the news—others (these formed the greater number) smiled incredulously, convinced that the whole was one of those thousand fabrications, daily invented by the idle for the amusement of the gossips of a great city. A few, having by some means got wind of the dispute that had taken place, and the words of the provocation which closed it, asserted the fact to be that De Renzio had fallen that morning in a rencontre with Weminski; and that the assumed disappearance of the countess was a fable.

As the day wore away, the reports first spread assumed a more consistent shape; the inmates and domestics of the two establishments had been stirring, had been seen, had given the alarm—questioning and being questioned. The old Marquis de —— had told all he knew, and surmised the worst, which too soon proved to be the sad and inexplicable reality. De Renzio *had* been assassinated, Colonel Weminski *was* accused and in custody, the countess *was* missing. To put an end to all doubts and uncertainties on the subject, the evening papers

published the following account of what had transpired from the investigations of the police, whose every effort was at work to fathom the secret of this deplorable catastrophe :—

"A crime, or rather complication of crimes, of the most extraordinary and mysterious nature, has plunged several families of the Chaussée D'Antin and Faubourg St. Germain in mourning and consternation, and forms the principal topic of conversation there, and generally throughout Paris. It will, no doubt, tend still further to alarm the public mind, already so much and painfully excited by the incessant repetition of those deadly nocturnal attempts, which have for some months past afflicted our capital. The particulars of this occurrence, as we have been enabled to collect them, are these :—This morning, between half-past three and four, the attention of a patrol, making its rounds in the vicinity of the Rue ——, was attracted by cries of distress proceeding from the further end of that street. On hastening to the spot, they found two persons in masquerade dress, the one (recognised to be the Marquis de Renzio) lying senseless and bleeding from several wounds—the other, who immediately declared himself to be Colonel Count Weminski, apparently just risen from the ground, his dress disordered and covered with blood, supporting himself against an adjoining doorway. He stated rapidly, and, as the commanding officer judged, rather confusedly, that returning from the Opera with his lady, he had come to the assistance of the Marquis de Renzio, who had been attacked by assassins—that the latter had assailed him in turn, and struck him down—he could recollect no more.

The officer's suspicions (the sequel will prove how justly founded) now increased, particularly when, on sending two or three of his men in search of the carriage which the person calling himself Colonel Weminski asserted to be waiting further on, no carriage or trace of a carriage was to be found. Orders were immediately given to look to and secure that individual ; they were not executed without considerable difficulty, as he offered the most violent resistance, vociferating alternately threats and supplications, demeaning himself altogether like one bereft of reason. All attention was now turned to the other wounded man, evidently about to breathe his last, whose consciousness had returned. On an effort being made to raise him up, and offer him any succour that might still be availing, he motioned faintly to be left quiet—that all was over. Lieutenant S—— (whose zeal and entire conduct on this occasion we cannot sufficiently applaud) thought that, under the circumstances, the ends of justice ought to be paramount before all others, and he accordingly, in the immediate presence of his sergeant and two or three of his soldiers, essayed, with the utmost kindness and delicacy, to interrogate the unfortunate Renzio. At first no reply, even by signs, was elicited ; but when Lieutenant S—— caused the prisoner to be placed, well guarded, before him, the dying man made a sudden effort, raised his head, stared for a moment wildly about him, then, in answer to the well-timed question '*Who?*" feebly gasped, in a hollow voice, pointing with his hand as he spoke, 'He—there—Weminski!' and fell back and expired as the words passed his lips.

"The countess, who had accompanied her husband to the Opera, and was seen to quit it along with him in a hired coach, has not reappeared at the hotel, and is nowhere to be found; nor can the minutest trace, in spite of the most active researches of family and friends, aided by the strenuous exertions of the authorities, be discovered either of her or the driver (an individual formerly in her service, since well known through town under the soubriquet of '*le beau cocher*') or of the vehicle in which they had gone away. Anything that can be surmised on the matter amounts to mere conjecture, and that conjecture most unfavourable to the accused. Not satisfied, it is insinuated, with the sacrifice of his enemy (some say his successful rival in the affections of the countess, whom he is supposed to have loved to distraction, and been jealous of in the same degree), he has found means, in vengeance, to make away with *her*, and bribe his accomplice, the person above alluded to under the mock title of '*le beau cocher*,' to silence and voluntary exile. There are not wanting many who go so far as to hint that this man, too, has been summarily disposed of. Altogether it has been seldom, perhaps never, our task to lay before our readers a case more enveloped on every side in mystery —more replete with all the elements of terror and of crime."

A paragraph to the following effect was found in the afternoon papers of next day:—

"We this moment learn that important disclosures have just been made in reference to the awful charge alluded to in our number of yesterday, in consequence of which, Colonel Weminski, after having undergone a lengthened examination, is fully committed for trial at the next assizes. Weminski, it would appear, says our authority, was jealous of his wife and jealous of her in relation to the hapless De Renzio, against whom he likewise bore an inveterate ill-feeling, originating in some cause not well ascertained, but which the progress of the judicial inquiry may probably bring to light. His suspicions, continues the same person, received partial confirmation on the evening of the masked ball, when he was observed to manifest them in no measured manner, and to give himself up unrestrainedly to demonstrations which seriously alarmed his friends then present. Leaving the theatre abruptly, he all at once, on some frivolous pretext, fixed a quarrel on the marquis, appointing, on the instant, the time and place for a meeting. He waited until he saw his antagonist depart on foot in a certain direction, through the Rue de ——, which was wholly deserted at that time, and was plainly overheard to give his coachman (an individual, as we have hinted, supposed to be wholly at his devotion) orders to follow and keep up with him—the rest is known. Strange to tell (it is our informant who still speaks), neither money nor valuables of any description were found on De Renzio's person, though he had been conspicuous during the whole night for the richness of his disguise, which shone with the most costly jewels. It is supposed the accomplices of his murderer took occasion to rifle the dead body, as they thought. The light weapon, a mere sword of ceremony, which the marquis wore, had been broken in his efforts at resistance; a portion of the blade was found lying beside him, and a few steps further

on, a poinard, richly mounted, and bearing Weminski's arms! No intelligence whatever has been gained respecting the other presumed victim, or victims, up to the time of going to press; but the revelations of a person who had an opportunity of witnessing the greater part of the dreadful scene, and through personal fear, or the apprehension of being himself implicated, made haste to escape from it, are spoken of as likely to afford considerable aid both in this regard and in ensuring the satisfactory conviction of the offender."

Matters remained in the sâme state for several days—still no tidings of the countess—still no news of Victor. Weminski was strictly immured as before, and watched with the utmost care. He was allowed to communicate with no one but his counsel, and a very few friends. To them he fearlessly asserted his innocence, and they believed him; but they seemed to apprehend the worst, and to be prepared for it. Public feeling, on the other hand, as the day of trial drew near, had taken a strong bias in a contrary direction; and his guilt, to the general mind, was a thing beyond all doubt.

At an early hour on the morning of the appointed day, the various avenues leading to the Palais de Justice were literally blocked up by an eager crowd, composed for the greater part, not of the commonplace, emotion-seeking class, but of the select, the refined, and the fashionable. The applications for reserved tickets had been innumerable, and it was found impossible to comply with even a tenth of them. The favoured few were at their post long before the proceedings commenced, and the seats allotted to the bar were filled to overflowing with its most eminent members. The moment the doors opened, every available space became crowded, while lengthened lines of heads remained outside, attentively watching, to catch even a glimpse, a sound of what was going forward. Altogether, such a scene of intense interest and excitement had not, for a long period, been witnessed within the precincts of those walls, that had so often been startled by the frightful records of human abandonment, sin, and misery. On a table below the bench, in front of the spectators, was seen an open bundle, composed of the clothes, still soiled with blood, which De Renzio wore when he was discovered in a dying state, a fragment of his broken sword, and a dagger—the accusing dagger—by which he was supposed to have perished. Three quarters of an hour passed away in busy expectation; at length the court sat, the jury was called over, and the president gave orders to introduce the prisoner. All eyes were instantly rivetted on him;—he shrank not, he bent not, he bowed not beneath the general gaze; though evidently feeble and faint—so changed, too, so wan, so woe-stricken, that the friends, who had known him longest and most intimately, could with difficulty recognise in the grey-haired, sallow, aged-looking man before them, the formerly noble figure and fine manly features of the soldier Weminski. His eye was unaltered, his attitude and bearing were erect as before; his step, too, as walking calmly forward between his guards, he took his place in the dock, could not have been more stately had he been pacing the ground at a review before battle in front of his regiment. An indistinct murmur of admiration and pity

ran through the crowd. Could such a man be guilty of the atrocious acts imputed to him? was the question which every one inwardly asked himself. Alas! the proofs and damning testimonies were conclusive.

After having replied to the usual formulary of questions as to age, name, residence, &c., he suddenly anticipated the next coming demand, by a request to be allowed to speak. It was immediately granted him. He bowed to the president, laid his hand lightly to his heart, as if in acknowledgment, and in slow, distinct, measured accents, not unmingled with a tone of unhoping earnestness, which was inexpressibly moving, he proceeded :—

"To spare the time of the court, and abridge my own suspense, I shall beg leave, so far to depart from ordinary forms, as to give, as briefly, and exactly as I can, a relation of all the circumstances which have led to the accusations directed against me, and to which an inexplicable train of accidental coincidences appears in the eyes of the world, perhaps of my judges, to lend such fatal proof. My life, and, still more valued by me than life, my honour, is at stake ; I must make a struggle to defend them ; yet I am debarred the hope, the smallest hope of success. I have for my only resource—my only stay—the consciousness of perfect freedom from any crime, save that of unworthy suspicion and jealous violence. I am innocent, wholly innocent ; but of what avail to say so, when I can offer no evidence but my word in confirmation?" The latter part of this passage, particularly the sentences referring to "violence" and "jealousy," was uttered falteringly ; Weminski hesitated a moment, then passing his hand over his brow, immediately resumed. The auditory were breathless with attention.

"It were as useless as painful," continued Weminski, "to dwell on the incidents that occurred at the Opera, where, in an unlucky moment, I was tempted to be present. Others, I am fully aware, will be summoned to lay before you their views, their opinions, their belief respecting the subject of their remarks in that place ; and these views and opinions will, no doubt, go far to stir up impressions to my disadvantage. I shall merely say, that every successive event of that evening tended to awaken feelings the most destructive of my peace—feelings which I am now ashamed to have abandoned myself to, in reference to one who was ever, and shall ever be—if she has not ceased herself to be—pure and spotless ; and roused me to a degree of excitement, of furious passion, or madness, rather, that deprived me for a time of all control, of all command over my words or actions. I saw the wife of my bosom, that being in whom all my hopes of happiness were centred, pursued by the insidious attentions of a man, whose very aspect, though at first unknown to me, caused my blood to boil within me, I knew not why, and fool, madman as I was, I fancied that she tacitly encouraged his attentions. Slanderous thought!—infamous suggestion of some demon of hell! I was tortured—I was in agony ; regardless of what might be said or thought, I snatched her away from a spot that seemed to me accursed. I wished to go home, to be quiet, to know that she was safe, that she was with me, near me, no longer tempted, adulated, perhaps estranged. On the very steps of the build-

ing I encountered the object of my resentment and my hatred. The occasion but too well suited my mood—I insulted him grossly, and he was not slow to answer my defiance. The causes of ill-will he had given me that night, were not enough to urge me on to spurn and outrage him, but I was destined to find still greater incentives to my rage, at the moment we came thus in contact, under circumstances which else had been trivial. I ordered the driver of the coach I had secured, a man formerly in my service, to proceed quickly home. We had not gone far when we overtook De Renzio. Soon afterwards, while speaking to my coachman, and urging him to hasten, we heard cries for succour. I knew the voice—it was my antagonist's, and I felt strange emotions within me. I instantly resolved on going to his assistance, but was prevented by my wife clinging round me, and by the man Victor, who left me, saying he would manage the assailants. As he did not return, and the cries continued, I extricated myself from my wife's arms, and rushed, unarmed as I was, to where the sounds of struggling directed me. The place was very dark ; I could but imperfectly descry what was passing ; several persons were struggling one of whom fell just as I came to the spot ; I had not time to discover who it was, or to recognise the others, for at that moment a heavy blow aimed, I think, from behind, stunned and felled me to the ground. When I slowly and with effort recovered my senses, I perceived I was alone, with the lifeless body of De Renzio lying beside me ! For a while dizzy and faint I strove to regain the carriage, which I imagined to be still in waiting ; but finding I was unable, I endeavoured to support myself against a projection of the wall, and called out for help.

" A company of soldiers came up ; they seized me. My enemy, the persecutor of my repose, even in death, through hatred, error, or desire of foul revenge, had strength enough left to point me out, and name me as his assassin. Me his assassin !—me his murderer ! True, I was in every way his enemy, but frankly, openly, not treacherously and in the dark. He had crossed my path once before ; I little expected he would have done so again ; for in one struggle, man to man, blade to blade, fairly and honourably, he had fallen, and, I had reason to believe, never to rise again. I had pardoned—had nearly forgotten the injuries, the insults, the wrongs he had heaped on me, and on one dearer to me than life, than fame, and, heaven pardon me, than hope of salvation. When I recognised him in the individual pursuing with his odious attention that angel, now lost to me, and anew endeavouring to blight the happiness he envied, and had once before blackly aimed at destroying, I cannot attempt to describe my feelings. My hate, my bitter enmity, my desire of revenge, revived with a thousand-fold vigour. I longed for his life ; I thirsted for his blood, but honourably and fairly shed in the face of day, before the eyes of men. Assassination and murder in the night do not become the hands of one, who has passed his best years in front of his comrades in arms, sheathing his sword in the breasts of the foes of the adopted country he fought for. That man—I cannot bear to name him—has perished by another arm than mine. I regret it—I deplore it; for I could, perhaps, have forgiven him, and I feel that to forgive would at least have set my soul and heart at ease."

Several persons who had observed Weminski's conduct and demeanour at the ball, were now brought forward ; they told in more or less precise terms, all that we have already narrated ; on the whole magnifying, however, and giving a more suspicious colour to what really took place.

Three or four medical men were next examined ; they were nearly unanimous in their depositions—death had been the necessary, the inevitable consequence of the numerous injuries inflicted by a sharp-pointed weapon, sword or dirk it might be, similar to that presented for their inspection, and which corresponded exactly to the different orifices of the wounds discovered on the body—(a richly mounted poinard, let us not forget, had been found beside the victim, bearing Weminski's crest and arms). Pressed for explanation on this point, he could offer nothing satisfactory in reply, otherwise than by conjecturing that the dagger might have been stolen from him by one of the assassins, and made use of by them. The officer commanding the patrol which had arrested Weminski, and those of his men selected to testify to De Renzio's dying declaration, reproduced it exactly in the words he had used—adding nothing new, of course, to the facts already recorded.

The principal witness, from whom the most decisive proofs of the prisoner's culpability were expected, was now produced. He proved to be a tall, lank, stupid-looking man, in whom, beneath the semblance of simplicity and embarrassment, more than one close observer fancied he could detect unequivocal signs of calculating cunning. Be this as it may, *that* evidence was conclusive against Weminski. This man gave his name as Pierre Larsonnet, ticket-porter ; his employer, and the authorities of the quarter had given him the best character for honesty, trustworthiness, and good conduct, which explains the confidence with which his testimony was received. He attested on oath that it was he who had opened and closed the door of the coach, when Weminski and the countess got into it in front of the Opera ; he had witnessed the short but violent dispute, between the former and De Renzio, whom he professed to know, having been employed by him to bear some messages, and to do some similar offices connected with his calling. He distinctly asserted, that he had overheard Weminski, give orders to the coachman, Victor, with whom he was well acquainted (and to whom he had in a whisper communicated his suspicions, that there was going to be "bloody work" in the morning), *to follow De Renzio and keep up with him.*

He proceeded to say—"Curious to see how it would all end, I got up behind, and we overtook M. de Renzio and passed him. Soon after he was set upon, and cried out ; whereupon the coach stopped. Victor got down, and as he quitted us I heard M. de Weminski say to him in a suppressed voice—'Take care, Victor—don't fail—make sure work!' I was frightened out of my wits, I did not know what to do, I was afraid of being killed myself if I interfered, so I got down and strove to slip away; the scuffling and shouts of 'Murder' still continued, M. de Weminski got down also, and ran to where they were killing the man. I strove to creep off as quietly as I could, unperceived in the dark, but in my fright and confusion, took the wrong way. I soon found myself nearly

in the midst of them, and had only time to hide in a dark entrance, near at hand. I was close enough to see what was going on. M. de Weminski came up and made stabs at M. de Renzio, while he was still striving to keep up against the others. 'Ah, villain—Weminski! villain!'—I heard him say, groaning, 'you have murdered me.' I was half dead myself with fright. I crept as far as I could into the passage, and concealed myself there until all was quiet; I then stole out—and could perceive nothing but the two bodies lying on the pavement. In my hurry and trembling to get away, I slipped and fell on my hands and face over them; I made greater haste then, feeling that I was spotted and splashed with blood, lest the guard should come, and I should be taken up for the murderer. I ran home as quickly as I could, and fainted when I got there; I told no one but my wife about it, and I would have kept silent still, but that I heard how things were and that the real assassin was in prison for his trial. Then I knew I had nothing to fear, and I came forward to tell the truth." This deposition, in which the witness never varied, though the presiding judge and several of the jurors urged him with conflicting questions, produced a deep and painful impression on the court, the jury, and the audience. The prisoner did not seem visibly disturbed, while his accuser spoke. Several times, he looked inquiringly at him for a few minutes. When the witness had ceased, in reply to an interrogation of the president, Weminski again fixed his eyes steadfastly upon him, and exclaimed in a loud voice, "'Tis false—every word of it is false, he must have been one of them! I could almost swear it!" Larsonnet started in amazement, but soon recovering himself confirmed anew on oath, all he had already declared, and no effort of president, or suggested demand of prisoner's adviser, could make him for an instant waver.

Weminski's case, it seemed now to be generally felt, was hopeless. That he thought so too, might be read in the suppressed workings of his brow and lips; 'twas but for a moment; he quickly regained his former composure, if composure that could be called, which at times resembled unconsciousness. His numerous friends, the generals he had fought under, his brother officers, men of the most illustrious rank and highest authority, were called, and deposed in his favour. They spoke, many with an emotion that betrayed itself by tears and broken words, of his bravery, his almost ideal heroism, his chivalrous sense of honour, the natural goodness and generosity of his heart, of all the fine and noble qualities they esteemed and loved him for. The venerable Marshal ——, whose aide-de-camp he had been for a long time, was so affected while giving his evidence, as to be unable to proceed, and had to be removed from court; but, alas! friends admirers, and well-wishers, when questioned on one head, the fatal point of the accused's inflexible, unforgiving temper when once stirred into ill-will, could only with reluctance admit the fact.

The last words of the proceedings, the final rejoinder of Weminski's advocate was over. The president, amid a dead silence, with visible emotion, proceeded to put the questions for the decision of the jury in the usual form—"Is the prisoner—yes or no—guilty of the crime of wilful and premeditated murder, imputed to him?" "Do there exist

extenuating circumstances?" They immediately retired. The discussion in the jury-room was a prolonged, dubious, and stormy one. The foreman several times appeared to report progress, and ask the advice of the court. "It was impossible," he first said, "to agree on a verdict;" afterwards he announced, that an insufficient majority, then that the majority (two thirds), and finally that the whole of the jury had come to a decision. Several hours had passed away in this manner, each moment adding to the dread suspense that hung alike over prisoner, spectator, and judge; yet to such an intense and painfully exciting pitch were the feelings of sympathy wound up, that no one stirred from his place. On the entry of the jury with the foreman at their head, a silence still as the grave, that soon, perhaps, awaited the living being before them, seized on the motionless, eager, breathless crowd,

"Yes," he falteringly said, "on our soul and conscience, the accused is guilty—we find so unanimously—of wilful and premeditated murder."

"No! there do not exist extenuating circumstances."

A cold shiver ran through every human being present; not a sound, not a murmur was heard for several seconds; at length a sigh, an universal sigh, or rather groan, broke forth. The condemned man alone appeared unmoved, undaunted, undisturbed. "My wife—my wife—my Olga!" was all he said, raising his hands and eyes to heaven—he then lapsed into impassibility as before.

His advocate rose to offer some observations—to ground some motives of opposition to sentence being pronounced: Weminski, with a sudden imperative gesture, motioned him to be seated, adding a few inaudible words in his ear.

The forms usual on such occasions were quickly gone through, and sentence passed; the law-officers and judge seeming as if anxious to be rid of the dreary task. The crowd, whose attention and interest had never for an instant flagged, silently, sadly, gloomily dispersed.

The fickleness of public opinion is proverbial. But a few days since, people seemed positively anxious for the sealing of his doom, and were firm and ardent in the desire that he should suffer, being innocent, rather than by any hazard escape, being guilty. Now, however, that his crime was proved, they began to waver; the recollection of his past character and services, his noble bearing, his mute and despairing affliction during the progress of the trial, pleaded widely and not unsuccessfully.

It was thus, that when the fact of an appeal to the Cour de Cassation having been lodged against the judgment was made known—an appeal presented, in direct opposition to Weminski's desire, by his counsel and friends, and which he had only consented to authorise from the sole motive repeatedly urged on him, that, by gaining time, some intelligence of the countess might be procured—nearly the whole Parisian world, with one accord, united in hoping it might not be made in vain. The judges of the court were, however, believed to be unfavourably disposed towards Weminski.

The day of hearing at length arrived; the pleadings on both sides

recommenced, and did not terminate till an advanced hour. An adjournment was ordered, to afford time for deliberation, much to the disappointment of an assemblage, scarcely less numerous than on the former occasion; and it was not until the third day following, that they heard, with marks of satisfaction, which respect for the seat of justice could not wholly repress, a decree pronounced, quashing the verdict, aud ordering a new trial. It ended by a second, but qualified condemnation to perpetual imprisonment. This it was generally given to be understood, was but a step to a further extension of clemency: accordingly, in the course of a few weeks, yielding to the solicitations of family and friends (the prisoner himself had obstinately refused to sanction any proceeding of the kind in his own name), backed by the recommendation of the ministerial circle, and the request, nay prayers, of almost every one of note in the diplomatic and other bodies, superior authority intervened to use its best prerogative, and Weminski was once more restored to freedom and society.

To freedom, yes—but to society, he could scarcely be said to have been in reality restored. The final lenient award of his judges, the royal clemency too, had done much—but not even both together, no existing power in fact, could reinstate him in the position he had lost, or cause him to re-occupy the station he had moved in. There appeared, there *was* still in point of fact, something dark and unexplained in the whole affair, men looked upon him with a dubious eye—a blot, a slur, was somewhere. It seemed as if he were unconvicted and unpunished solely by courtesy. He had, in a word, irrevocably lost caste on appearing at the bar of the Cour d'Assizes. But what imported it now? The world and he were two! Life itself seemed, as it were, gone for him. Abstracted from every thought, every feeling, every pleasure, every occupation, save one—the seeking for his wife, and bringing to justice, or wreaking his own vengeance upon her seducers, it might be, her murderers; he continued day after day, week after week, to devote his time, his strength, his every energy to the search. No means towards this end that wealth could purchase, or ingenuity devise, were left untried by him. He courted, he recompensed, he bribed the underlings and the superiors in authority. He offered large rewards for information. He employed crowds of open and underhand agents, spies, and such others, to be on the watch at all times and places, where a hint, a breath, a cob-web clue of insight could be gained into the object of his wishes—in vain, still in vain. As was naturally to be expected, numerous designing persons, attracted by the hopes of reward so liberally held out, and the avidity with which he received even the promise of assistance, preyed extensively on his credulity; yet he persisted in lavishing large sums in the prosecution of his ever renewed schemes of detection.

His relatives now thought it fitting to interfere, and accordingly, soon came forward to sue for a commission of lunacy against him, grounded chiefly on the plea of his profuse expenditure of money, for the chimerical purposes (as they termed them) alluded to. A commission was issued in consequence, and Weminski underwent a lengthened examination before it. Far, however, from justifying their

averment of insanity, his relations failed, after a tedious investigation, in producing any conviction on the minds of the commissioners, except that of their interested motives. The object of their vexatious pursuit was unanimously declared, to be perfectly sane and capable of directing his affairs.

Before we proceed farther, it were well, perhaps, to say a few words explanatory of the original causes, hitherto obscurely hinted at, of the hatred existing between the two principal personages of this narrative, and of the melancholy results of which it is the recital.

De Renzio, a Piedmontese gentleman of birth and large property, had been one of Weminski's fellow-suitors—his chief competitor, in fact—for the hand of the Countess Olga Imhanhoff, one of the brightest ornaments of the Austrian court, where her family occupied a distinguished diplomatic rank. Finding himself likely to be supplanted by this more fortunate and brilliant rival, he watched, he spied, he employed emissaries, he lavished bribes, he did not even stop at spreading reports derogatory to Weminski's honour, reputation, and fortune; and, not even satisfied with this, to the purity of his now all but affianced bride. The consequence was a sudden breaking off of the engagement on the part of her family. Weminski immediately sought for, and insisted on an explanation from them—heard all—followed it up with the characteristic impetuosity of his fiery nature—traced it to its source, to De Renzio, and, meeting him in the raging height of his exasperation, at once reproached and finally struck him. They fought, it might be said, almost on the spot, choosing seconds from among the first comers in the public room where the explosion had taken place. De Renzio, after a sanguinary and prolonged struggle, in which both were wounded, received his antagonist's sword through the body, and was left for dead. He did not die, however, though such was the belief long current.

Weminski almost immediately quitted Vienna, following the young countess to Paris, whither the Prince Imhanhoff had been sent on a private mission. All matters at issue having been satisfactorily cleared up, he was soon after wedded to the countess. In common with every one to whom the circumstances had been made known, he was under the impression that De Renzio was no more. Hence his surprise, and subsequent conduct, when he encountered him on the steps of the Opera. The sequel is known. What can have prompted the victim's dying declaration—whether he made it through mistake, imagining he had been in reality waylaid by his rival's orders—or to gratify his hatred by contributing to that rival's destruction, remains wholly unexplained. His motives and his secret died with him. Let us now return to him upon whose head it had so materially tended to draw down a fatal sentence.

On being restored to the usual exercise of his liberty of action, which the proceedings instituted by his family had temporarily interrupted, he resumed the same course of researches as before, but from this time forward wlth more caution and judgment. He frequently wandered out alone in mean disguises, sometimes vaguely into the country immediately surrounding Paris, sometimes into the interior of the city;

almost constantly guiding his steps towards the obscure quarters and abodes of misery, as if naturally expecting to meet there with crime or its traces, always prying, always questioning, always eagerly alive to snatch a gleam of hope from the most casual incident.

In one of these excursions, on which he had remained absent for the better part of two whole days, it so chanced that he found himself near the entrance to the Catacombs, not far from the Barrière d'Enfer, at the moment a large party was about to descend to view those curious caverns, which, as doubtless our readers well know, were formed in quarrying the stone used in the erection of the city. Suddenly an idea struck him. He would go with them. He, too, would take a view of the regions filled with the memorials of death.

The guide, struck with something strange in Weminski's manner and appearance, as may be conceived from what has been said of his habits and mode of acting, made some difficulty; the visitors, too, looked rather oddly at him. A gratuity of liberal amount to the former having settled the question, he was permitted to accompany the party.

They proceeded for some time in silence—Weminski vacantly staring at the different sights pointed out to the awed gaze of his companions. The place and its objects were akin to his thoughts; unconsciously musing, he lingered behind the party, his wax taper in hand, and did not perceive himself to be alone till roused by the deep stillness of the place around, interrupted only by the rustling of reptiles crawling over the skeleton remains there deposited, or the gnawing of rats at some crumbling bone. He felt at once the horrors of his position, and stepping briskly forward, endeavoured to rejoin his conductor and fellow explorers. Confused, bewildered, amid the windings and intricacies of this subterranean labyrinth, he forgot the instructions of the guide to follow always the black mark traced along the roof, and went on seeking, examining, stooping to descry even a footmark, if there were luckily one to be discovered, stopping at intervals to listen, and calling out, mistaking the prolonged reverberations of his own voice for welcome sounds in reply; 'twas in vain—no one came, no other accents answered his. He felt he had irrecoverably lost his way, and grew faint at the thought of the prospect that now opened before him—death by hunger—immured, buried alive in these bowels of the earth, cut off, too, from the only hope and expectancy that made life supportable; for *this*, even at the dreadful moment when the conviction of his probable fate burst upon him, was his still-pervading idea. The very thought inspired him with new strength, urged him on still to struggle, still to endeavour to live for the sake of the hope it held out to him.

He continued to advance, stopping and listening as before: more than an hour, which seemed a century, passed in those useless wanderings. His senses were at length struck by what seemed to be the smell and appearance of smoke. He looked again—it *was* smoke. Walking hastily forward, guided by that which to him was fragrance, he rapidly came to the spot whence it proceeded; this he found to be a circular recess, or widening of the gallery, of considerable height, which on closer examination, shewed evident marks of having been lately inhabited. In one corner, was a sort of rude fireplace, constructed

of fragments of stones, where several logs of dry wood were still burning. A rough table, some half-broken uncouthly-formed chairs and benches, a mouldering chest of drawers, and other dismantled pieces of furniture of the most common kind, stood in different parts of the apartment, if such it could be termed. Carefully arranging his taper, of which fortunately the greater part remained unconsumed, Weminski proceeded with searching eye to examine this singular abode. Against the walls were hung, and on the floor were strewed articles of many sorts—arms, implements and instruments of various kinds, as well as writing-desks, dressing cases, trunks, and wearing-apparel of more or less valuable quality. It was manifestly, in a word, the receptacle of a gang of thieves—and, in Weminski's mood of mind, the place of all others he ought to leave no corner of unscrutinised.

The chest of drawers already mentioned was without a lock: he opened it, and saw huddled together without any arrangement, a quantity of things of which the first glance told the value—pieces of plate, silver dish covers, watches, chains, trinkets, &c. Weminski rapidly looked them over—a sword-hilt caught his eyes a broken sword-hilt! his heart throbbed; he looked more closely, it was De Renzio's—he knew it well, too well, alas!—De Renzio's broken weapon. With what intensity of hope and fear, misery and anguish of mind, did he now search further! Can his eyes deceive him? What is this that meets his gaze?—a bauble, an ornamental plaything, the fairy wand his countess wore in character, when they last—. He saw no more; a mist swam before his eyes; he felt dizzy, and, staggering faintly a few paces backwards, fell powerless into a seat he had barely the strength to reach. The whole horrible reality flashed through his mind. Olga carried off, made away with, murdered—worse, infinitely worse—a prey to wretches, the vilest of living demons, whom beauty and innocence could move only to crime. Despair, all the tortures of the doomed were in that thought.

Recovering from this mute yet conscious trance, his plan of action was at once resolved on, and he began to put it into execution. He re-lighted his taper, which had fallen, and endeavoured to retrace his steps to light and the world again. The effort was fruitless; he was lost in the subterranean labyrinths, which he explored in vain for an outlet. At last, feeble from fatigue, and exhausted from want of food, he flung himself hopelessly on a block of stone to rest awhile, when, raising his eyes by chance towards the roof, he espied the black mark the conductor had spoken of, as he now for the first time recollected. But it was too late; he lacked strength to retrace his steps. Yet still there was a gleam of hope. "I shall perhaps be missed," thought he; "or if not, the next coming party must pass this way, and I may be succoured, if alive!" It happened, as he had surmised he *was* missed.

It is the custom, to count over the number of persons who descend into the catacombs on each occasion, and recount them on their exit from the vaults. Weminski had been found missing, and the interest of all, particularly the guide, who remembered his generosity, was much excited. This man immediately went back, and paced

through the galleries in every direction, but without discovering the object of his search. Nothing discouraged, he returned, however, bringing with him others of his fellows, well acquainted with the different windings and recesses of the caves; and at length, on the evening of the following day, they found Weminski stretched senseless on the stone where he had thrown himself to obtain a few moments' repose. He had tasted no nourishment for nearly forty-eight hours, and had doubtless traversed some leagues up and down the endless labyrinth. Suitable restoratives being immediately administered, he was transported home, where every care and necessary attention were bestowed upon him.

In the course of some hours he had partially recovered. No entreaties of friends, however, or injunctions of his physicians, from the moment perfect consciousness returned, could induce him to remain quiet. Though faint and worn, and only able to move with difficulty, he insisted on being conducted to the instant presence of the prefect of police. He was immediately admitted to that functionary's presence, and remained for a long time in close conference with him. Nothing transpired of what passed, but ere long the chief of the criminal police was sent for, and he soon after summoned fifteen or twenty of his most dexterous and trusty assistants. A map of the environs of Paris was consulted also, more particularly a manuscript one of the Catacombs, respecting which an experienced clerk connected with the engineering department, who had been employed in drawing it out, was called upon to be advised with. Numerous agents were despatched in different directions. A strong detachment of gendarmes was commanded for immediate duty, and ordered to provide themselves with a supply of provisions. Altogether there appeared to be an unusual stir, a noiseless one, however, in the whole administrative beehive, of which the intent was to the many a mystery.

This mystery was promptly solved.

At an early hour on the second ensuing morning there was seen slowly advancing through some of the most frequented streets of the city, a body of gendarmes both mounted and on foot, whose appearance bespoke recent hard service and severe conflict. Their accoutrements were soiled and in disorder. Several were wounded, as slings and bandages, stained and clotted with blood, sufficiently testified. All looked haggard and exhausted, it might be with watching or fatigue. Escorted by them in pairs, handcuffed and pinioned together, marched a number of sinister-looking individuals, in front of whom walked boldly erect, our old acquaintance Victor, "*le beau cocher*," smiling in derision of his captors and the multitude, as a mere spectator might, had something ludicrous occurred. By his side, no longer wearing a face of vacant stupidity, but one that expressed the most acute perception of the predicament he was in, and the keenest reflection on the best means of getting out of it, was Weminski's condemning witness, Pierre Larsonnet! A large covered car filled with various articles, trunks, clothes, furniture, &c., followed well-guarded, and two hackney coaches, containing, it was understood, several dead bodies, closed the procession. Soon afterwards, guards,

prisoners, and conveyances, were safely received within the gates of the Prefecture of police.

From the circumstances now related, the probable conclusion of this long and melancholy tale may be, in a great measure, inferred. The gang, sixteen in number, which had been seized upon, in consequence of Weminski's information, formed the principal nucleus of an extensive body of criminals disseminated widely in different quarters of Paris and its environs, a body regularly and most admirably organised for the carrying on a wholesale system of depredation, whether as regarded the facilities provided for the easy commission of crime, the avoidance of detection in the act, or escape from its consequences. They had established their chief place of rendezvous at the spot we have described in the Catacombs, which communicated through a dried up well with some dismantled buildings, situated in the then thinly inhabited quarter, extending between the Barrière d'Enfer, St. Jacques, and the Faubourg St. Marceau, and ostensibly serving the purpose of a cowhouse and dairy. There and in their subterranean retreat, they had been waylaid and watched, and after a desperate resistance, which cost several lives both of the criminals and their captors, they were at length secured.

Of this band, Victor might be considered the chief. He it was whose ingenuity and deep foresight had formed and carried into execution the whole plan of the society. Next, perhaps equal to him in influence, if not in real authority, was the man so long regarded as little more than an idiot, Pierre Larsonnet. Admitted in the exercise of his duties, into a considerable number of houses, he was everywhere treated with implicit confidence, in consequence of his character for honesty and his general good conduct. Wherever he set foot, he noted everything, he explored everything with quick and comprehensive glance, the issues, entrances, as well as the habits and hours of the occupants, and eventually sent in his report, and the project founded thereon, to the gang. It was generally acted upon without alteration, and seldom failed when thus planned and directed by him. His authority, in consequence, was great among his associates, and nearly counterbalanced that of Victor. It was he who, on the fatal night, gave a hint of the design on which they and others of their accomplices subsequently acted.

Larsonnet and the two assassins had followed De Renzio at a short distance, and when the carriage had advanced a few paces beyond, they attacked him. He had time to draw his sword, and defended himself vigorously, wounding one of them, until Victor, fearing that Pierre, whose real cowardice he was aware of, might shrink away from the struggle, running up, stabbed De Renzio several times while he was engaged with his antagonists. Weminski arriving as De Renzio fell, the dastard villain, comprehending in an instant the advantage that might be derived from the circumstance, struck him heavily down with a bludgeon. Not a moment was lost, Victor understood Larsonnet's plan in half a breath, and rushed away with him to the carriage, leaving their fellows to rifle De Renzio's body, and taking care to cast beside it Weminski's poinard, stolen formerly by Victor

himself. Larsonnet mounted the coach-box, and Victor got inside, where he found the countess in a swoon, from which she but partially at intervals recovered. Her companion profited by her state of insensibility, to place a rough bandage over her eyes, and another, that scarcely permitted of her breathing, across her face and mouth. The countess only finally awoke on being released, to find herself alone, far away from help or hope, in the robbers' hiding-place, wholly, irrecoverably, at their mercy.

We must shudderingly draw a veil over the scenes that ensued; too faithfully, too painfully revealed in the course of the prosecution, and confirmed, as regarded the welcome close of her sufferings, by the inspection ordered by the court of the ground beneath her murderers' den. This search took place by dim torchlight. It was a sight of thrilling terror and solemnity; Weminski had insisted, and there were none to control him, on being present along with the magistrates and the accused. One by one, five bodies, buried but a few feet below the surface, were dug up successively, and, owing to the peculiar nature and geological composition of the soil, were in so perfect a state of preservation as to be easily identified; they were those of individuals who had at intervals been missed. Last of all was raised out of the earth the graceful statue-like form of the Countess Olga, still covered—dread mockery of woe—with a portion of her masquerade dress. A livid mark was plainly perceptible round her small and delicate neck. The assistants instinctively drew close so as to shield the body from the husband's view. He had seen it, however, but he stirred not, he spoke not.

Within a week from this time, the principal criminals were in eternity. They died as they had lived, each in his proper character. Larsonnet crouched and shrunk from his doom. Victor was reckless to the last. When it came to his turn to mount the fatal steps, he motioned the attendant priest to advance, then rushing suddenly forward, as the latter obeyed the sign, he butted his head against the old man's chest, exclaiming, "There is my fee; take that for your tom-fooleries!" The demonaic laugh he burst into at this, his parting exploit, still resounded as the guillotine-knife fell.

How shall we speak of the yet remaining survivor of this dismal tragedy? He did not put an end to himself though it was thought he would; religious feeling, of which, by a rare exception with the men of his time and profession, he had never wholly lost sight, forbade it. He retired to the deepest solitude, and would perhaps, soon have ended his days there, for *his* was not a spirit that could long suffer and not sink under silent woe, now that it had no longer the desire of revenge to keep it alive; but the tidings, which had roused all Europe before, came to rouse him in turn. Napoleon, the hero of his dreams, had landed and was in arms again to reconquer his throne. This stirred the only still unextinguished aspirations of Weminski's soul: this struck the only vibrating fibre of his heart. All his former fearless valour urging him, he had united himself to his toil-worn, unconquered comrades, before it was known or guessed what had become of him.

The events of the three short months, that finally closed the career

of the extraordinary man whose power they forever crushed, are sufficiently known. Weminski distinguished himself, as he had always done during the campaign, by repeated acts of incredible daring. Wherever peril was, there he was foremost. He was seen to lead the last forlorn charge of the "Lanciers rouges," at Waterloo, and three times desperately rallied them to the breach of the British lines. When the shattered remnant of that troop retreated, he was not among them.

The day after, a vivandière belonging to the regiment, was seen to search long and perseveringly over the theatre of that deadly conflict. She drew forth, at length, from amid heaps of slain, a yet breathing form—'twas Weminski. In a few moments he opened his eyes, and seeing a friendly face bending over his, moved his lips as if to speak, but no sound followed the effort. He attempted to raise with his right hand, which, mangled and covered with blood, lay close to his heart, something which it clasped. He died as this reached his lips—it was a medallion, with the portrait of Olga—his last sigh had been for her.

THE END.

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