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The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A
TRUE
STORY
OF
THE
SOUTH
OF
FRANCE

CHAPTER XIV.

"I shall see Robin this morning," was the first thought of Rose, as she sprang from her couch at dawn, and her heart beat faster and her cheeks flushed with a deeper red, and her sweet hazel eyes sparkled with happy excitement as she sat before her mirror. The blue-eyed Finette was in raptures.

Rose had hardly thought, during the absence of Robin, that she could be so deeply excited by the news of his anticipated return; but she was too overjoyed to remain quiet a single moment. At breakfast, it was impossible for her to eat; and the remarks everywhere made concerning the sudden improvement in her appearance, as well as on her sudden and contradictory change of appetite, increased the tinge of crimson that already glowed in her young cheeks.

One thing detracted from her otherwise perfect happiness. Louis had excused himself from appearing. She had scarcely seen him the night before, after leaving the library, and then he had been unusually quiet, communing with himself during the entire evening; and he was absent this morning. She longed to see him—to hear him speak, that she might know he was not offended with her; for she remembered the interview between them; and might not the delicate, unconscious though it was, have wounded him? Yes; despite the tenderness of that silent parting. How her pulse quickened at the remembrance of his embrace! She could but sigh.

"I wonder at what time I shall see Robin," soliloquized the young girl. "Will monsieur le marquis call me into the library, I wonder? Or will the meeting take place here, among all these people? Where is Robin?" was her next restless inquiry—an inquiry which she had started a thousand times, and as a matter of course, the answer was, "I don't know." "And where is it that monsieur le marquis has seen him so often of late?"

Her queries were interrupted by observing suddenly that the marquis was about to leave the apartment.

"Ah, he has not said a word to me," meditated Rose. "He tantalizes me. Will he not come back and speak—only three words? Will he not even look at me, that I may understand that I may know whether Robin is coming soon?"

But he neither spoke, turned nor gave her a single glance. Yet there was something, despite his evident care, which betrayed in his countenance the sympathy he felt with Rose. He went out. The Count de Clairville talked, aside, with his wife, Helen Montauban, at a distant window, sat calmly at her embroidery. Lord Egerton bent over her, and spoke, from time to time, in low, confidential tones, their effect had been noted, might have been seen, ever and anon, to be followed by a deeper mantling of color in the fair cheek of the lady, though she scarcely seemed pleased, either. Anon the young man toyed and trifled with the gorgeous silks that lay in a tangled mass on the floor, and then his glance rested on her face with an expression difficult to be defined, though at times it was clearly one of unhappiness and disappointment.

But Rose, albeit she glanced towards the pair more than once, hardly took note of these things. She could only think of the marquis, of Robin, and of the anticipated meeting. She was restless—uneasy. From one employment to another she turned, without being able to settle her attention undividedly upon any individual thing. Suddenly mademoiselle called, gently:

"Rose, come hither a moment!"

The young girl advanced towards the window.

"You wish to speak with me, Helen?" she asked.

"I have been telling Lord Egerton of some favorite books of his which are in the library," returned mademoiselle Montauban, carelessly. "Will you have the kindness, Rose, to help him find them? He will tell you their titles."

"Cruel Helen!" murmured Francis Egerton, reproachfully, as he glanced at her quiet face before turning away.

"Not so, my lord," she answered, in the same tone, without lifting her eyes.

At that instant a domestic entered, and coming directly to Rose, informed her that monsieur le marquis desired to see her immediately in the library.

The young girl's heart bounded violently.

"I am going now," she answered; and yet she paused.

Francis Egerton glanced back at Helen, with an air, half of triumph, half of sorrow, which said plainly: "You see your unkind artifice to repel me avails you nothing. You will yet be lost in this conduct—this treatment of me?"

Mademoiselle Montauban saw the look, and read it easily; but she never once changed countenance, and her eyes were instantly fixed on her embroidery again.

Lord Egerton turned to Rose:

"You are going mademoiselle?"

"Yes—now." She gathered courage; she would not look up in her companion's face, but hastily proceeded to meet the marquis.

Francis accompanied her as far as the library door, and then leaving her, returned directly to Helen.

But Rose, even though her hand rested upon the fastening of the door, had, at first, scarcely the courage to pass in. She hesitated and trembled, but finally, laughing at herself for a little coward, she quietly entered. The marquis stood at the further end of the apartment, in company with a gentleman—a stranger, and both had their faces turned from the door. They had not heard her come in. She paused an instant longer, and looked about her. No other person was in the room. Robin, then, was not here. She had half expected, she hardly knew why, to see him at this moment, and she sighed. The marquis still continued his conversation with the stranger. This person, who was richly yet plainly attired in a suit of deep black, with a short cloak of sable velvet drooping from his shoulders, held in one hand a pen and a small

portfolio of papers; the other rested on the table beside him, supporting him, as he leaned forward towards the marquis. Suddenly the latter, aroused by some movement of Rose, turned and beheld her, and immediately, after whispering a single word to his companion, advanced to meet the young girl. There was an arch smile on his countenance as he bent down to kiss her.

"Rose, my pet," he said, simply, "you are here! Robin, go and meet him. And he passed her directly, leaving the apartment and closing the door behind him.

"That Robin?" Rose, in her astonishment, could neither speak nor move.

"That Robin?" was her inward query. For, forgetting the warning of the marquis, she had looked for Robin of the olden memory, and the change bewildered her, until recollection came.

Here, indeed, was no sturdy figure, in his linen blouse, his heavy boots, no large hat, such as had covered the gardener's head, and shaded his face from the sun; no peasant's garb, or peasant's air; and yet it was Robin!

"Why does he not speak?" said the young girl, tremblingly to herself.

But suddenly the gentleman raised his hand, passed it across his brow, and held it there for an instant; then, laying aside the writing materials which he held, turned and advanced to meet her.

A low, glad cry escaped the lips of Rose on beholding that face—Robin's face, and then she was silent—she turned pale. What was this change which she beheld as he came nearer? What countenance was it? Did she indeed behold Robin himself, or—The cloak dropped from his shoulders.

"Robin—Louis!" she uttered, quivering with emotion.

"Well, which is it?" With the same light, beaming, sunshiny smile that she had met every day for the last two weeks—with the familiar voice and air that blended in one two characters hitherto distinct, he came forward, and taking her hands into the gentle yet firm clasp of his own, while he drew her to his breast, repeated: "Which is it, Rose? Doubting and believing, too? Tell me my name, my name!"

"Ah, Louis—Louis, tell me what this means," she cried, in an imploring tone. "Then you declare that I am Louis?" he said, laughingly; "but see—see how adroitly he has grown!" And the young man, with daring tenderness, pressed his lips to hers. "Which is it now, Rose?"

"It is—Robin—it is Louis; either, and both. I cannot tell. I am bewildered!" She covered her face with her hands.

"My Rose—my little, faithful, noble-hearted darling!" Louis murmured, lovingly, and with the softest emotion in his tones, as he led her to a seat. "My generous—brave Rose, will you forgive this long and heavy trial? You have conquered—nobly! conquered! You are victorious, love. Look up and speak to me. Let me see, at least, that Louis has not lost the heart that Robin won."

She did look up. The sweet face, tinged with reddish blushes, sparkled with blended tears and smiles.

"You deceived me, Louis. I see it now; I understand it all. But you deceived me most cruelly," she said.

"And almost broke my own heart, Rose, as well as your own. Ah, if you knew how I suffered last night, you would forgive me!"

And Rose could but do so. The period of probation was passed. The unhappiness to which each had been subjected, in its duration, was terminated now. Louis d'Artois had perfected his scheme, and tested it fully, to his own satisfaction. The outward charms of the woman he loved were nobly equalled by her truth, her firmness, her constancy. Neither ambition, nor pride, nor cupidity, had tempted her, for one instant, to swerve from her faith. She had remained true to the humble lover who had won her first affection.

"Rose, do you love me? Will you take Louis now?" asked the count, with arch tenderness.

"How can I take Louis? I am promised to Robin," returned she, gravely. "I came here to meet Robin; and he has vanished and you are answerable for his disappearance. I refused Louis last night."

"Nay, then—I will become a gardener again, for your sake, love. I will put on my peasant's dress once more and take my morning till night, while you sit as you used to sit, just by the cottage door and sing to me while you sew. What a pretty cottage girl you were, Rose! I believe I loved you the first time we met."

"And I thought—"

"Ah, what, Rose?" she answered, blushing.

"Helen, that little mouse, what put that thought into thy pretty head?"

"It came there, Louis; I do not know well how. I suspect the idea was a very natural one. She is so beautiful!"

"My pet, Helen said all her days rather than wed with so humble a personage as myself. She is a dear cousin, Rose; but I think that, secretly, she is ambitious. Francis Egerton loves her, I am sure; but do you not see that she treats him coldly?"

"I thought it was so," said Rose, in a half-musing tone.

"And, speaking of that same Francis Egerton, do you know, Rose, that I came near being jealous of him on the first evening of my return hither? He was continually near you. He seemed chained to your side."

"And you to that of Helen, do you remember?" archly asked Rose. "Probably the latter circumstance was the cause of the former."

He laughed.

"Perhaps; but I think, if he had never seen Helen, he would have been your captive. How would you have treated him, petite?—as you treated me last night?"

"Yes."

"I believe it. How fortunate he is! I endured agony last evening, Rose!" His tone was sad as he said it.

"Agony, Louis?"

"Lest I should gain the very boon I seemed so earnestly to crave. But you were true to Robin. I was more than satisfied with the result of my trial. And then, what joy filled my breast, with the ringing echo of that sorrowful, yet firm denial of my suit! It was music to me."

"Why, Louis—Louis! Where are you, my boy?" shouted the rich, clear, merry voice of the Count de Clairville, from the terrace; and the next moment they heard his step approaching the library.

Rose sprang up.

"Let me go, Louis," she said.

"Away, then, my bird!" And he sprang to a side door that opened on a staircase leading to the gallery above. "This way, Rose. Our mischievous friend, I strongly suspect, knows all about this business of ours, and is inclined to tease me a little."

And the door closed behind Rose just as the summons of the count was heard at the opposite entrance.

It required some hours of retirement and silence in the solitude of her own chamber to restore to Rose anything like her usual tranquillity. The excitement of the last four-and-twenty hours had their effect on her, and every nerve was thrilling to the tension produced by it. Quiet was a difficult matter, however, and she walked the floor to work off in some degree the restless agitation she felt. When she had succeeded in wearying herself with the exercise, she sat down, and leaning back among the cushions, laughingly and resolutely shut her eyes, with the determination to sleep. This was a difficult matter, however, and she walked the floor to work off in some degree the restless agitation she felt. When she had succeeded in wearying herself with the exercise, she sat down, and leaning back among the cushions, laughingly and resolutely shut her eyes, with the determination to sleep. 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