The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A TRUE STORY OF THE SOUTH OF FRANCE

CHAPTER XIII.

It was evening. In the lofty and richly furnished library of the marquis, the silver lamps burned with a soft, subdued glow, blending their moonlight radiance with the deeper and warmer tinge cast by the flaming wood fire upon the broad hearth over the magnificent apartment, with its rich, massive, antique furniture, its lofty, high walls, lined with costly and substantial volumes, the crimson draperies of its deep windows, and the polished oaken floor that shone and reflected back the mellow warmth in rippling lines of light.

Beside a table of curiously carven oak, which is strewn with rare and ancient volumes and the writing implements of the marquis, and which occupies the center of the floor, sits Rose. She is leaning forward upon this table, her face hidden in her folded arms—those fair, sculptured arms whose snowy whiteness gleams rarely through the veil of falling tresses. Her graceful form is attired in a robe of shining fabric, its pearl-hued folds sweeping the floor about her and shining, glittering softly in the mellow light shed all around her. She does not stir; she is silent—motionless; she hardly seems to breathe even. So quiet is she, as she reclines thus, with her face concealed, that you might think her sleeping.

But Rose is not sleeping. Her errand here is of too painful a nature for that. Alone, in this swelling silence, she waits; and listening for an approaching footstep, the hour passes in deep and sorrowful reverie. For Rose has a duty, too long deferred, to perform to-night, and the consequences may be only too bitter—bitter to her, inasmuch as they affect others. She does not fear the performance of this duty because she shrinks from fulfilling her trust—from keeping her plighted word; but she pictures to herself the disappointment she may be about to inflict on others.

A distant door uncloses, but so softly in its casing of cloth that no sound follows. It is a gentleman who enters; he pauses a moment; his glance takes in the beauty and subdued splendor of the scene before him; but it is accustomed to that. It rests upon the center of the whole—upon the bowed figure of the young girl under by the table. A shadow, a blending at once of sorrow and perplexity, rests upon his fine brow. Then closing the door, he advances, and stands beside the table.

"Rose!" he calls, gently.

The young girl raised her head.

"Is it you, Louis?" she asked, with an air of sadness. "I thought you were away."

"I have remained at home, Rose. I could not go. I wished to see you."

"You wished to see me, Louis? We see in each other's presence every day. To-night——"

"Ay, to-night, Rose! To-night, you would say, you have an interview with my uncle, and cannot listen to me. I know of this interview; my uncle told me; and, forgive me, dear Rose, but I would prevent it!"

He spoke in a subdued, but agitated voice. He seated himself beside her, and leaned, also, forward on the table, with his hands clasing hers, as he uttered these imploring words.

"You would prevent it, Louis!—why? Would you bid me neglect the fulfilment of a duty already too long delayed?"

"Ah, Rose, you are about to seal your fate! Think once more, I beseech you; there is time. Break this ideal bondage; be silent, and forget the vows that are no longer binding. Do not bring this great sorrow to my uncle, who loves you; do not break up this happy household, which can be no more happy when you have sacrificed yourself—when you have left the hearth that is only bright with your presence, to hide yourself in obscurity!"

The tears were filling her sweet eyes; a great cry was struggling for utterance in her breast; but she silenced it with a half-despairing effort. She raised her glance to his.

"You are aware, then, Louis, of the object of this interview?"

"Ah, too well—too well!" he answered; "for I knew that it must come, sooner or later, since you adhere to the decision you once made. But again I ask you—do not reveal this secret to my uncle."

"It is not alone my promise to Robin which I regard, Louis."

"You would say that you love him still, then?"

The tears fell from her eyes; a blush rose to her fair cheek; her head was turned aside.

"Ah, no—no! do not say it, Rose!" he cried, sorrowfully.

"Louis—Louis, this it not kind—it is not like you!" said the young girl, turning to him again. "You know I cannot break my promise. Do not add to the sorrow I already feel. I must see your uncle; I must acknowledge my betrothal to Robin."

"And render him unhappy, cut Helen Montauban to the very heart, leave me wretched—miserable! Rose, listen to me——"

"Louis, be silent, I entreat!" she uttered, withdrawing her hand from his, while the crimson glow of consciousness and timidity suffused her countenance; "have pity on me!"

"Rose, one instant. Let me speak for the last time. I love you; I would ask you to be my wife! Nay—do not start and turn away from me. Hear me to the end. How can I bear to see you—you, Rose, who should move among the highest and the noblest of France, envied and admired by all—who should have at command the thousand luxuries for which you were born—who should occupy, finally, a position and enjoy advantages suited to your beauty, your grace, your refinement, your intellect—how can I bear to see you the wife of a peasant? Ah, be merciful to me! be just to yourself; awake from this fatal trance; for you are dreaming, Rose."

He spoke with strange energy. His words thrilled through her; his glance sought hers, waiting for an answer, with an earnestness—an anxiety that confused her. A feeling of faintness stole over her; she put her hand to her brow; all was strange bewilderment about her. Still his eyes were fixed upon her; still he watched eagerly. But over his lips stole the palor of death; his fine brow grew cold and white as marble itself, and on it stood the very dew of agony.

"You yield, then?" he said, in a voice choked with emotion.

"Yield!" She rose slowly from her seat; she unclasped his fingers from hers with despairing strength. "Ah, no! You mistake! I love him; I will be true to him."

Louis stood with one hand supporting himself by the table, the other pressed hard against his side, and his face averted, so that she did not see its expression. He did not speak; but the hand resting upon the table was withdrawn in a moment and it trembled.

"Louis, I have hurt—wounded you; I have been too harsh! Will you not forgive me?" Rose said, gently, and in a tone that quivered with agitation. She drew near to him, and laid her hand imploringly upon his arm. "You can but see that my promise must be kept, and it pained me that you should urge me to break it. Ah, it is sacred, Louis! help me to keep it so."

There was no reply. But he turned towards her; he held out his arms; he gathered her to his breast and held her there, while his lips were pressed calmly, silently, tenderly to hers. Then releasing her, he went out from her presence. The door closed behind him. A step is heard without—that of the marquis.

"Well, my Rose, you are waiting for me," he said, cheerily, as he approached her; "and have been waiting some time, I am afraid, too. What shall I say for myself, eh?" and he seated himself beside her. "But, what ails you, my child?" he added, with evident concern; "you are ill!"

"No—no! I am not ill, sir; but I am unhappy," returned Rose, lifting her beautiful eyes, swimming with tears, to his earnest face.

"Unhappy? you are young for that, Rose. Some girlish whim it is, I'll warrant me—nothing more, and you are making yourself extremely miserable about it." And he stroked her bright hair gently, as he spoke these words in an enlivening tone.

"It is no whim, sir," answered Rose, sadly. "I have been doing wrong all this time——" She could proceed no further for her tears.

"Doing wrong, poor little mouse? and to make a confession?" smiled the good old man, kindly. "Why, Rose, I think, then, that I must grant absolution beforehand, and refuse to listen to your story. I won't hear any tales against my little girl."

"Ah, monsieur, you treat it lightly! You do not know how—how——"

"I don't know, I suppose you would say, how serious an affair it is—is that it, little Rose, eh?"

"Yes, monsieur," answered the young girl.

"Exactly. Well, then, suppose I try to guess?"

"You could not guess! Monsieur, you must read this." And she drew from her pocket a letter, which she was about to give him; but he put it away, smilingly, with his hand.

"You will not allow me to guess, Rose? then I will not look at your letter. I am harder than stone, my bird. And now, Rose, don't interrupt me, for, as I told you, I mean to guess; and I'll wager a——a wedding dress shall it be, petite?"

His good-natured, comical manner and lively tone, together with a certain significance which he threw into his last words caused her first to smile, and then to blush, despite her sorrow and agitation. He waited an instant, and then went on:

"What—silence? then you consent, Rose?—well, a wedding dress it shall be, then. As I said, I will wager a wedding dress, lace, jewels and all."

"I shall want neither lace nor jewels, monsieur," said Rose, half sadly.

"Do not interrupt me, my child! Against—let me see—against a pair of diamond buckles. You see I mean to make you pay well, Rose—that I shall guess rightly."

"I do not understand you, monsieur," said the young girl, wondering, perplexed and diverted at his manner.

"You don't? what a pity!" There was mischief in his eyes, that brought the smile to hers. "What a pity!" he repeated. "Well, at all events, I will commence, and probably, by the time I shall have finished, you will comprehend my meaning more fully. In the first place, then, there is a certain young girl—you see I mention no names, Rose—a certain young girl, I say, who has a lover. You are listening, I presume, my child?"

"I am listening, monsieur."

"Good! This young girl, then, is betrothed. Very well; that is not at all to be wondered at, as young girls very frequently find themselves in this position. She is betrothed to a poor young man—a workman; we will say he is—a gardener. Well, these two—the girl and her lover—cannot marry yet, because they are by no means in suitable circumstances; for she is quite as poor as he. Ah, they must be content to wait!"

He paused, and regarded her with a curious smile. She looked up, her eyes sparkling with fresh-streaming tears.

"Ah, monsieur! you are telling me my——"

The good marquis kissed her.

"I am telling you about two people whom I once knew, my child. I will proceed. Our young gardener, we will say, goes away; and the girl, who meets with some slight change of circumstances during his absence, continues to remember him. But for some reason, which is, doubtless, in this case, an extremely natural one, she neglects to inform a certain friend, or friends, of hers, that she has promised to marry this young man. For this neglect she presently begins to reproach herself. Now, listen again, Rose;" and he grew quite serious; "if this young girl—if you, Rose, had been really about to bestow your hand upon a poor, low-born peasant, who had no desires, no aspirations, above his condition; if you had become the bride of such a one, and forsaken us and our love and care for you, after we have all been so happy here together, and cast away from you all that belongs to you in your present position; had suffered that finer mind, those quick sensibilities, that loftier, that more elevated and refined nature, to mate with the coarse, gross, blunt composition of a mere tiller of the soil, a rude, uncultivated peasant, then, my child, I confess that it would have been a bitter, bitter thing to me. It would have been the hardest blow this heart has borne for many a long year, Rose!" And his voice grew husky, and faltered, and the tears, despite his manhood, gathered in his eyes. "I have learned to love you, my darling," he said, "with a father's affection. I had a little child once, Rose, and I lost her. You seem to bring to my mind what she would have been; you grow more like that ideal daily—hourly! You have taken her place in my heart; you are dear to me, Rose, as she would have been!"

He clasped her tenderly to him; and the young girl, most deeply touched by his words and manner, wept silently upon his breast.

"But, my child," he continued, when he had become calmer, "it was no clown whom you promised to wed. You have been always sensible of that."

"Oh, yes, monsieur!" she responded, raising her head and speaking earnestly—seriously. "Robin was different from those about him. He was better—more noble than they. He was——" She broke off in the midst of her words, blushing and confused at her own animation.

"Nay, my child, you need have no shame," said the marquis, kindly; "this young man was, indeed, something more than those whom one is accustomed to meet in that class to which he was allied. I confess that your preference for him is no mystery to me, and I do not at all disapprove of it."

"Ah, how good you are, monsieur!" uttered the young girl, gratefully, as she pressed his hand to her lips.

"It is no merit to me, Rose, that my own honest convictions force me to acknowledge his superiority, and the good sense you have displayed in your choice. And now," he added, while the old laughing glance shone in his eyes, "I dare say you are dying with curiosity to know how I came into possession of all this knowledge."

"Indeed, sir, it is a matter of curiosity to me," she answered, frankly.

"What, then, will you say, if I assure you that Robin himself told to me the greater part of it all, and that I divined only a very little bit—eh, Rose?" he asked.

"Robin, sir? ah, then you have seen him!" said Rose, with hardly suppressed joy.

"I have seen him, my child."

"And lately?"

"Quite lately," he returned, pleased and amused at her innocent betrayal of delight.

"May I ask when it was, monsieur?"

"It was yesterday; nay—I have seen him as lately as to-day."

"To-day? ah, then, he is very near!" she said, in a subdued yet joyful tone, and with her eyes bent to the floor, as in meditation. Suddenly raising them, she asked: "Where was it, monsieur?"

"Too many questions, Rose," laughed the marquis—"too many questions. I must keep his whereabouts a matter of secrecy for a short time."

"Ah, monsieur!" said Rose, gently, and with a pretty air of deprecation.

"Indeed, my dear child, it will do you no harm. Wait till to-morrow, only to-morrow, and I will tell you where he is; nay, more—you shall see him. You will grant me until then?"

"Willingly."

"Now you can easily tell how I guessed at the object of your errand thither to-night."

"Since Robin told you all about this," she said, with a slight and charming blush, "you must have had little difficulty in divining my purpose, when, at your questioning this morning, I acknowledged that it was to say to you something immediately connected with myself that I desired to meet you here."

"Exactly, Rose," said the marquis, gaily. "Well, my darling, we have made our confessions—have we not? and they were not such terrible confessions, after all. Robin, I honestly declare to you, I like, and am proud of. I have invited him here to-morrow. But, Rose," and he took her hand in his, "you must not expect to behold the linen blouse and serviceable garments in which you were probably wont to see him. Robin is no longer a gardener, and, therefore, you must anticipate quite an alteration in his personal appearance."

"How?—no longer a gardener, monsieur?" iterated Rose, in some surprise.

"No longer, my child; he was offered an employment of an entirely different character, which he immediately accepted; it was much more congenial to his talents and capabilities, as well as to his tastes and desires. He is fast rising in the world, Rose;" and the good marquis smiled. "Ah, he will be a great man, some day! You would scarcely recognize him now, I'll warrant. Why, child, this rustic lover of yours is as great a gentleman as there is in France this day. The throne itself smiles upon him!"

"He said so," said Rose, musingly—"he said so—did he not? that he should rise to honor and preferments and wealth? Yet how little I imagined that it would be so soon!"

"Well, you see, I have won my diamonds, Rose," he said, laughingly. "You shall give them to me on your wedding day. And now, my darling, let us join our friends. They will be waiting for us."

And Rose went with him, almost in a state of bewilderment, knowing that she had not said half she wished to say, yet unable to recall it, or to think anything but this sudden revelation of the marquis.

(To be continued.)

A Legal Expectation.

An Illinois attorney argued to the court one after another of a series of very weak points, none of which seemed to the court to have any merit, until the court finally said:

"Mr. ——, do you think there is anything in these points?"

To which the attorney replied: "Well, Judge, perhaps there isn't much in any one of them alone, but I didn't know but your Honor would kind of bunch them."—Case and Comment.

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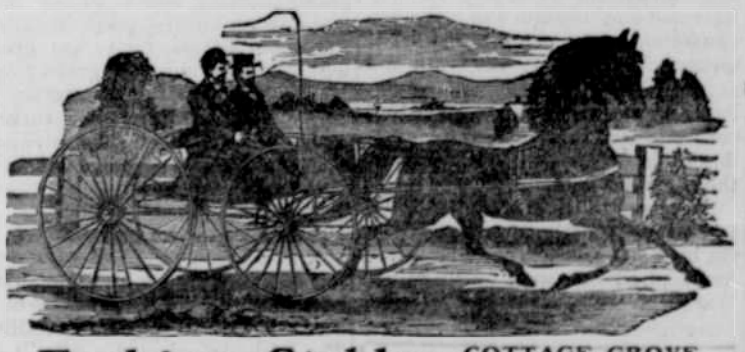

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