SISTER ROSE

By Wilkie Collins

"Nine months of the year in Paris," he said to himself sadly, "and Rose is to pass her married life at Lyons. Ah, if I could clear my heart of its dread on her account, how gladly I would accept the honors offered me! If this terrible distrust from which I cannot free myself should be in very truth the mute prophecy of evil to come! How soon she may want a friend, a protector near at hand, a ready refuge in the time of trouble! Where shall she then find protection or refuge? With that passionate woman? With her husband's kindred and friends?"

He dipped his pen in ink. "Be all to her, Louis, that I have been." Repeating his mother's last words, he began the letter. It was soon finished. It expressed in the most respectful terms his gratitude for the offer made to him and his inability to accept it in consequence of domestic circumstances which it was needless to explain. The letter was directed, sealed. It only remained for him to place it in the mailbag near at hand. He hesitated. He had told Lomaque, and he firmly believed himself, that he had conquered all ambitions for his sister's sake. He knew now that he had only lulled them to rest. The letter from Paris had aroused them. His hand was on the mailbag. Under ordinary circumstances he was not a man to procrastinate, but he did so now. "Night brings counsel. I will wait till tomorrow," he said. He put the letter in his pocket and hastily left the laboratory.

"I won't hear you talk so. It shocks me! It horrifies me!"

Inexorably that important morrow came. Irretrievably, for good or for evil, the marriage vow was pronounced. Charles Danville and Rose Trudaine were man and wife. The prophecy of the sunset over night had not proved false. The sky was cloudless. The ceremony had proceeded smoothly throughout and had even satisfied Mme. Danville. "Good girl," said she, following Rose into a corner and patting her approvingly on the cheek with her fan. "You looked well this morning. You have done credit to my son's taste. Get on your traveling dress and count on my maternal affection as long as you make Charles happy."

It had been arranged that the bride and bridegroom should pass the honeymoon in Brittany and then return to Danville's estate near Lyons. The carriage had driven off. Trudaine, after lingering long to look after it, had returned hastily to the house. Lomaque stood at the outer gate idly, as if he was an independent man; calmly, as if no such responsibilities as the calling of Mme. Danville's carriage and the escorting of Mme. Danville back to Lyons rested on his shoulders. "Poor girl! Ah, poor girl!" said Lomaque softly as he turned to ascertain who was coming from the house.

It was the postman with a letter in his hand and the mailbag under his arm.

"Any fresh news from Paris, friend?" asked Lomaque.

"Very bad, monsieur," answered the postman. "Camille Desmoulins has appealed to the people in the Palais Royal. There are fears of a riot."

"What a brave government, not to be afraid of anything worse! Any letters?"

"None to the house," said the postman. "Only one from it, given me by M. Trudaine. Hardly worth while," he added, twirling the letter in his hand, "to put it into the bag."

Lomaque looked over the postman's shoulder and saw that the letter was directed to the president of the Academy of Sciences, Paris.

"I wonder whether he accepts the place or refuses it?" thought the land steward, continuing on his way to the house.

At the door he met Trudaine, who said to him rather hastily, "You are going back to Lyons with Mme. Danville, I suppose?"

"This very day," answered Lomaque.

"If you should hear of a convenient bachelor lodging at Lyons, or near it," continued Trudaine, "you would be doing me a favor if you would let me know about it."

Lomaque assented and went into the house.

"A bachelor lodging!" repeated Lomaque, standing on the doorstep. "At or near Lyons! Ah, M. Trudaine, I put your bachelor lodging and your talk to me last night together, and I make out that you have refused the Paris appointment."

CHAPTER IV.

IT is five years since Lomaque stood thoughtfully at the gate of Trudaine's house gazing at the carriage of the bride and bridegroom. Great changes have passed over the firmament of France. What was a revolt five years ago is Revolution now—revolution which has engulfed thrones and principalities and powers; which has set up crownless, hereditary kings and counselors of its own and has bloodily torn them down again; which has raged on unrestrainedly until but one king can govern it. That king is named Terror, and 1794 is the year of his reign.

M. Lomaque, land steward no longer, sits alone in a room in one of the official buildings of Paris. It is another July evening, as fine as that evening when he and Trudaine sat talking together on the bench overlooking the Seine. The window of the room is wide open, and a faint breeze is stirring. But Lomaque breathes uneasily, as if still oppressed by the sultry midday heat. There are signs of perplexity and trouble in his face as he looks down absently now and then into the street. The times he lives in are enough to sadden any man's face. In this fearful Reign of Terror no one in all the city of Paris can rise in the morning and be certain of escaping the spy, the denunciator, the arrest or the guillotine until night. Out of a mass of papers which lie before him on his old writing table Lomaque has just read one which carried his thoughts back to the past.

In less time even than he had anticipated the sad emergency for which Rose's brother had prepared overtook Trudaine and called for all the patience, courage and self sacrifice which he had to give for his sister's sake. By slow gradations her husband's character manifested itself less and less disguisedly. Occasional slights, ending in habitual neglect; careless estrangement, turning to cool enmity; small insults which ripened to great injuries—these were the pitiless signs which showed her that she had lost all while still a young woman. These afflictions would have left her helpless but for the ever present comfort and support of her self denying brother. From the first Trudaine had met these trials like a man in defiance alike of persecution from the mother and of insult from the son.

The task was lightened only when public troubles mingled with private griefs. Absorbing political necessities came as a relief to domestic misery. It grew to be the one purpose of Danville's life cunningly to shape his course so that he might move safely onward with the advancing revolutionary tide, he cared not whither so long as he kept his possessions safe and his life out of danger. His mother, inflexibly true to her old world convictions through all peril, might entreat and upbraid, might talk of honor and courage and sincerity, he heeded her not or heeded only to laugh. As he had taken the false way with his wife, so he was now bent on taking it with the world. The years passed on, destroying changes swept over the old governing system of France, and still Danville shifted successfully with the times. The first days of the Terror approached. In public and in private, in high places and in low, each man suspected his brother.

Crafty as Danville was, he fell under suspicion at last at headquarters at Paris, principally on his mother's account. In a moment of thoughtless rage he wreaked the irritation caused by it on Lomaque. Suspected himself, he in turn suspected the land steward. His mother fomented the suspicion. Lomaque was dismissed.

In the old times the victim would have been ruined. In the new times he was simply rendered eligible for a political vocation. Lomaque was poor, quick witted, secret, not scrupulous. He was a good patriot, he had patriot friends, plenty of ambition, a subtle, catlike courage, nothing to dread, and he went to Paris. There were plenty of chances there for men of his caliber. His chance came, and he made the most of it, attracted favorably the notice of the terrible Fouquier-Tinville and won his way to a place in the office of the secret police.

Meanwhile Danville's anger cooled down, and he sent to recall the discarded servant. It was too late. Lomaque was in a position to defy him. Danville received anonymous letters warning him to lose no time in proving his patriotism by some indisputable sacrifice and in silencing his mother, whose imprudent sincerity was likely to cost her her life. Danville knew there was but one way of saving her and thereby saving himself. She had always refused to emigrate, but he now insisted that she should seize the first opportunity he could procure for her of quitting France until calmer times arrived. Probably she would have risked her own life ten times over rather than have obeyed him, but she would not risk her son's, too, and she yielded for his sake. Partly by secret influence, partly by unblushing fraud, Danville procured for her such papers and permits as would enable her to leave France by way of Marseilles. Even then she refused to depart until she knew what her son's plans were for the future. She received a letter which he was about to dispatch to Robespierre vindicating his suspected patriotism and indignantly demanding to be allowed to prove it by filling some office, no matter how small, under the redoubtable triumvirate which then governed France. The sight of this document reassured Mme. Danville. She bade her son farewell and departed at last, with one trusty servant, for Marseilles.

"Trudaine and his sister are under surveillance."

Danville's intention in sending his letter to Paris had been simply to save himself by patriotic bluster. He was thunderstruck at receiving a reply, taking him at his word and summoning him to the capital to accept employment there under the government.

There was no choice but to obey. So to Paris he went, taking his wife with him. He was then at open enmity with Trudaine, and the more anxious and alarmed he could make the brother feel on the sister's account the better he was pleased. True to his trust and his love for his sister through all dangers as through all persecutions, Trudaine followed her, and the street in which she lived in Paris was also the street in which he lived.

Danville was amazed when he found that the post selected for him was one of the superintendents' places in that very office of secret police in which Lomaque was employed.

Robespierre and his colleagues had taken the measure of their man. He had money enough and local importance enough to be worth studying. They knew where he was to be distrusted and how he might be made useful. The affairs of the secret police were the sort which an unscrupulous, cunning man was fitted to help on, and the faithful exercise of that cunning in the service of the state was insured by the presence of Lomaque in the office. The discarded servant was just the spy to watch the suspected master. Thus it happened that in the office of the secret police and under the Reign of Terror, Lomaque's old master was nominally his master still—in public the superintendent to whom he was ceremonially accountable; in private the suspected man, whose slightest words and deeds he was officially set to watch.

Darker grew the face of Lomaque as he sat in his office and pondered over the changes of the past five years. A neighboring church clock striking the hour of 7 aroused him from his meditations. He arranged the confused mass of papers before him, looked toward the door as if expecting some one to enter, then, finding himself still alone, recurred to the special paper which had first suggested his long train of thoughts. The few lines it contained were signed in cipher and ran:

"You are aware that your superintendent, Danville, obtained leave of absence last week to attend to some affairs of his at Lyons and that he is not expected back for a day or two. While he is away, push on the affair of Trudaine. Collect all the evidence and hold yourself in readiness to act on it at a moment's notice. Don't leave the office till you have heard from me again. If you have a copy of the 'Private Instructions' respecting Danville which you wrote for me, send it to my house. I wish to refresh my memory. Your original letter is burned."

Here the note abruptly terminated. As he folded it up and put it in his pocket Lomaque sighed. This was a rare expression of feeling with him. He leaned back in his chair and beat his nails impatiently on the table. Suddenly there was a faint tap at the door and eight or ten men—evidently familiars of the new French inquisition—quickly entered and ranged themselves against the wall. Lomaque nodded to two of them. "Picard and Magloire, go and sit down at that desk. I shall want you after the rest are gone." Saying this, Lomaque handed certain sealed and docketed papers to the other men, who received them in silence, bowed, and went out. Innocent spectators would have thought them clerks taking bills of lading from a merchant.

The giving and receiving of denunciations, arrest orders and death warrants—the providing of its doomed human meal for the all devouring guillotine—were managed with the unruffled calmness of official routine.

"Now," said Lomaque, turning to the two men at the desk as the door closed, "have you got those notes about you?" They answered in the affirmative. "Picard, you have the first particulars of this affair of Trudaine; so make your report. I have sent in the reports, but we may as well go over the evidence again from the beginning to make sure that nothing has been left out. If any corrections are to be made, now is the time to make them. Read, Picard, and lose as little time as possible."

Picard drew some long strips of paper from his pocket and began reading them:

"Minutes of evidence collected concerning Louis Trudaine, suspected, on the denunciation of Citizen Superintendent Danville, of hostility to the sacred cause of liberty and of disaffection to the sovereignty of the people. (1) The suspected person is placed under secret observation, and these facts are elicited: He is twice seen passing at night from his own house to a house in the Rue de Clery. On the first night he carries with him money, on the second papers. He returns without either. These particulars have been obtained through a citizen engaged to help Trudaine in housekeeping, called servants in the days of the tyrants. This man is a good patriot, who can be trusted to watch Trudaine's actions. (2) The inmates of the house in the Rue de Clery are numerous and in some cases not so well known to the government as could be wished. It is found difficult to gain certain information about the person or persons visited by Trudaine without having recourse to an arrest. (3) An arrest is thought premature at the preliminary stage of the proceedings, being likely to stop the development of conspiracy and give warning to the guilty. Order thereupon given to watch and wait for the present. (4) Citizen Superintendent Danville quits Paris for a short time. The office of watching Trudaine is then taken out of the hands of the undersigned and is confided to his comrade, Magloire. Signed, Picard; countersigned, Lomaque."

Having read so far, the police agent placed his papers on the table and, receiving no orders, went out. No change came over the perplexity of Lomaque's face. He still beat his nails anxiously on the writing table and did not even look at the second agent as he ordered the man to read his report. Magloire produced some slips of paper similar to Picard's and read from them in the same rapid, businesslike tones:

"Affair of Trudaine. Minutes continued. Citizen Agent Magloire, having been appointed to continue the surveillance of Trudaine, reports the discovery of additional facts of importance. (1) Appearances make it probable that Trudaine meditates a third secret visit to the house in the Rue de Clery. The proper measures are taken for observing him closely, and the result is the implication of another person discovered to be connected with the supposed conspiracy. This person is the sister of Trudaine and the wife of Citizen Superintendent Danville."

Lomaque sighed and shifted uneasily from side to side in his old leathern armchair. Apparently Magloire was not accustomed to sighs from the usually imperturbable chief agent. He looked up from his papers with a stare of wonder.

"Go on, Magloire!" cried Lomaque, with an outburst of irritability. "Why don't you go on?"

"All ready, citizen," returned Magloire submissively, and proceeded:

(2) It is at Trudaine's house that the woman Danville in connection with her brother's secret designs is ascertained through the vigilance of the before mentioned patriot citizen. The interview of the two suspected persons is private; their conversation is carried on in whispers. Little can be overheard, but that little suffices to prove that Trudaine's sister is aware of his intention to proceed for the third time to the house in the Rue de Clery. It is further discovered that she awaits his return and that she then goes back privately to her own house. (3) The strictest measures are taken for watching the house in the Rue de Clery. It is discovered that Trudaine's visits are paid to a man and woman known to the landlord and lodgers by the name of Dubois. They live on the fourth floor. It is impossible at the time of discovery to enter this room or to see the Citizen or Citoyenne Dubois without producing an undesirable disturbance in the house and neighborhood. A police agent is left to watch the place while search and arrest orders are applied for. The granting of these is accidentally delayed. When they are ultimately obtained, it is discovered that the man and woman are both missing. They have not been traced. (4) The landlord of the house is immediately arrested as well as the police agent appointed to watch the premises. The landlord protests that he knows nothing of his tenants. It is suspected, however, that he has been tampered with and also that Trudaine's papers, delivered to the Citizen and Citoyenne Dubois, are forged passports. With these and with money it may not be impossible that they have already succeeded in escaping from France. The proper measures have been taken for stopping them if they have not yet passed the frontiers. No further report in relation to them has yet been received. (5) Trudaine and his sister are under surveillance, and the undersigned holds himself ready for further orders. Signed, Magloire; countersigned, Lomaque."

Having finished reading his notes, Magloire placed them on the writing table. He was evidently a favored man in the office, for he ventured to make a remark instead of leaving the room in silence, like his predecessor, Picard.

"When Citizen Danville returns to Paris," he began, "he will be rather astonished to find that in denouncing his wife's brother he has also unconsciously denounced his wife."

"Friend Magloire," said Lomaque, winking mildly, "your last remark looks to me like a question in disguise. I put questions constantly to others. I never answer them myself. You want to know, citizen, what our superintendent's secret motive is for denouncing his wife's brother. Suppose you try and find that out for yourself. It will be practice for you, Friend Magloire—practice after office hours."

"Any further orders?" inquired Magloire sulkily.

"None in relation to the reports," returned Lomaque. "I find nothing to add or alter on a revised hearing. But I shall have a little note ready for you immediately. Sit down at the other desk, Friend Magloire. I am very fond of you when you are not inquisitive. Pray sit down."

While addressing this invitation to the agent in his softest voice Lomaque produced his pocketbook and drew from it a little note, which he opened and read through attentively. It was headed "Private Instructions Relative to Superintendent Danville" and proceeded thus:

"The undersigned can confidently assert, from long domestic experience in Danville's household, that his motive for denouncing his wife's brother is purely a personal one and is not in the most remote degree connected with politics. Briefly, the facts are these. Louis Trudaine from the first opposed his sister's marriage with Danville, distrusting the latter's temper and disposition. The marriage, however, took place, and the brother resigned himself to await results, taking the precaution of living in the same neighborhood as his sister, to interpose, if need be, between the crimes which the husband might commit and the sufferings which the wife might endure. The results soon exceeded his worst anticipations and called for the interposition for which he had prepared himself. He is a man of inflexible firmness, patience and integrity, and he makes the protection and consolation of his sister the business of his life. He gives his brother-in-law no pretext for openly quarreling with him. He is not to be deceived, irritated or tired out, and he is Danville's superior every way—in conduct, temper and capacity. Under these circumstances it is unnecessary to say that his brother-in-law's enmity toward him is of the most implacable kind, and equally unnecessary to hint at the perfectly plain motive of the denunciation. As to the suspicious circumstances affecting not Trudaine only, but his sister as well, the undersigned regrets his inability thus far to offer either explanation or suggestion. At this preliminary stage the affair is involved in mystery."

Lomaque read these lines through to his own signature at the end. They were the duplicate secret instructions demanded from him in the paper which he had been looking over before the entrance of the two police agents. He folded the note in a fresh sheet of paper and was preparing to seal it when a tap at the door stopped him. "Come in," he cried, and a man in traveling costume, covered with dust, entered, whispered a word or two in his ear, nodded, and went out. Lomaque started at the whisper, and, opening his note again, hastily wrote under his signature, "I have just heard that Danville has hastened his return to Paris and may be expected back tonight." Then he closed, sealed and directed the letter and gave it to Magloire. The police agent looked at the address as he left the room. It was "To Citizen Robespierre, Rue St. Honore."

Lomaque arose and walked restlessly backward and forward, biting his nails.

"Danville comes back tonight," he muttered, "and the crisis comes with him. Trudaine a conspirator! Rose a conspirator! Bah! Conspiracy can hardly be the answer to the riddle this time."

He took a turn or two in silence, then stopped at the open window, looking out on what little glimpse the street afforded him of the sunset sky.

"This time five years ago," he said, "Trudaine was talking to me on that bench overlooking the river, and his sister was keeping hatchet faced old Lomaque's cup of coffee hot for him! Now I am officially bound to suspect them, perhaps to arrest them; perhaps—I wish this job had fallen into other hands. I don't want it—I don't want it at any price!" He returned to the writing table and sat down to his papers with the dogged air of a man determined to drive away vexing thoughts by dint of sheer hard work. For more than an hour he labored on resolutely, munching a bit of dry bread from time to time. Then he paused and began to think again. Gradually the summer twilight faded and the room grew dark.

"Perhaps we shall ride over tonight, after all. Who knows?" he reflected, ringing his hand bell for lights. They were brought in, and with them returned the police agent Magloire with a small sealed packet. It contained an arrest order and a tiny three cornered note, looking more like a love letter or a lady's invitation to a party than anything else. Lomaque opened the note eagerly and read these lines, neatly written and signed with Robespierre's initials, "M. R.," formed elegantly in cipher:

"Arrest Trudaine and his sister tonight. If Danville comes back in time to be present, it may be all the better. He is now prepared for his wife's arrest. Watch him closely when it takes place and report privately to me. I suspect he is a vicious man. And of all things I abhor vice."

"Any more work for me tonight?" asked Magloire, with a yawn.

"Only an arrest," replied Lomaque. "Collect our men, and when you're ready get a coach at the door."

"We were just going to supper," grumbled Magloire to himself as he went out. "The devil seize the aristocrats! They're all in such a hurry to get to the guillotine that they won't even give a man time to eat in peace!"

"There's no choice now," muttered Lomaque, thrusting the arrest order and the three cornered note into his pocket. "The father was the saving of me; he himself welcomed me like an equal; his sister treated me as a gentleman, and—

He wiped his [illegible] locking his desk, [illegible] of brandy, which he drank slowly.

"I wonder whether other men get soft hearted as they grow older?" he said. "I seem to do so, at any rate. Courage! Courage! What must be, must be! If I risked my head to do it, I couldn't stop this arrest. There isn't a man in the office who wouldn't be ready to execute it if I wasn't."

Here the rumble of carriage wheels sounded outside. "There's the coach!" exclaimed Lomaque, locking up the brandy bottle and taking his hat. "After all, as this arrest is to be made, it's as well for them I should make it."

Chief Police Agent Lomaque then put out the candles and quitted the room.

[TO BE CONTINUED.]

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