

The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A
TRUE
STORY
OF
THE
SOUTH
OF
FRANCE

CHAPTER III.—(Continued.)

Without any rejoinder, the elder of the two knocked at the door. In a moment it was unfastened from within, and pretty Rose Lamonte opened it wide, uttering a joyful exclamation as she met the newcomer.

"Dear father!" she cried, gladly, "why did you not come before? I was beginning to be alarmed." And she threw her arms about his neck.

"Take care," he said, kissing her gently: "you will get wet; my clothes are none of the driest. I came home as soon as I could, for the rain."

"Poor papa! yes—you are quite wet. It is a pity!" And with her hand in his, she was drawing him in, when her glance fell, for the first time, on the figure of the man behind him. She half started, and a slight frown was visible upon her pretty face, but she quickly dispelled it, and, nodding carelessly, said: "Good evening, Gasparde."

The man closed the door, and then following them, seated himself on a wooden bench by the hearth; while Hugh Lamonte, putting off his heavy hobbled shoes, took them in his hand, and crossed the kitchen floor carefully, saying, with a slight gesture, to Gasparde, as he passed through the door on the other side of the apartment: "Wait awhile, Gasparde—wait awhile, and I will be with you again."

Rose put away her wheel, swept up a few dead ashes lying on the hearth, and then busied herself about her father's supper, without once speaking to or in any way noticing the guest. He, however, eyed her from time to time, as she moved about the room, with a glance which she evidently felt, rather than saw, to be fixed upon her, and which she apparently studied to avoid. After some ten minutes of utter silence, finding that she was determined not to speak, he opened the conversation on his own responsibility.

"Well, Rose, you are silent to-night. You are ill, perhaps?"

"No—I am not ill," she answered, coldly.

"You are not glad, then, to see me?" he continued.

"I did not say so," she replied, without looking at him.

"You will say nothing, Rose, that is pleasant and kind. Come, you might give me a friendly word when I have walked such a long way to-night."

"I did not give you the trouble, if it is a trouble."

"I came partly for the sake of being company to your father—that he can tell you," said Gasparde.

The pretty lip of Rose slightly curled. Her father need company!—a stout, bold, sturdy peasant, who was a sort of nothing human, and who, she very well knew, passed through the forest every time he went to market, and often returned after nightfall, too. "A probable story!" thought the young girl. "He only says it for the sake of appearing amiable."

"And so," she said, aloud, glancing, at the same time, at the strange adornments which he wore at his waist—"and so, as my father was not able to take care of himself—" She paused a moment. He had not seen the quick glance which she cast at his belt as she spoke, and standing an instant with her eyes fixed on his face, in silence, she suddenly said: "What are your pistols for?"

He started, and put his hand to them, remembering with consternation that he had forgotten to conceal them before entering. Recovering himself, however, he answered, putting on a careless look:

"O, these are arms that I brought on purpose to-night; for you know it is a much later hour than the one at which your father usually returns, and they would be good for both of us to have, as we were coming through the forest, in case of danger."

Rose gave a shrug, too slight for him to notice. As she did not once attempt to break the pause which he allowed to follow his words, by offering him the least encouragement to proceed, he mustered audacity without.

"I have been thinking for a long time," he went on, "that it is very lonely living without a wife, and as I am an honest fellow, likely to make my way in the world, though, perhaps, I am not so handsome a man as a pretty maiden might choose, yet I know, cousin, that you are too sensible a girl to refuse a good husband on that account, and will, perhaps, think reasonably of the affair. Will you marry me, Rose?"

"No, Gasparde, I will not," she replied; "and I wonder you ever presumed to think of such a thing."

"O, you are jesting, cousin—you are jesting, surely," he said; "do but consider the matter. Come, I will make you a good husband, as I said before, though I think it hardly ought to be repeated."

"Hardly, indeed," she returned, slightly, twisting his last words to suit her own fancy. "But for all that, Gasparde, I never will marry you, and you need not ask me again."

And, quite wearied with his pertinacity—indeed, with the very sound of his voice—she went out and shut herself in her own room till he should be gone. She had but just retired when Hugh Lamonte re-entered, bearing a small basket, which he gave to Gasparde.

"These are the things," he said. "But, Gasparde—those pistols in your belt?" and his glance rested upon them uneasily; "we forgot them. Did Rose notice them?"

"Yes; but I smoothed it all. She thinks, I suppose, I am a great coward. I made up a grand story of being afraid in the forest. Well, no matter. All the better—'isn't it, captain?"

"She is as well not to know."

"Well, I am going, captain. Shall you be at the rendezvous to-morrow night?"

"Hush! do not speak loud. I cannot tell. It is probable, though. Good night!" And he closed and barred the door behind Gasparde. And returning to the kitchen, he sank into a seat, with a bitter sigh.

"O, for your sake, my poor, innocent child," he murmured, "I would forsake this miserable way of life, but I dare not—I dare not!" and he covered his bowed face. Then, rising and pacing the room with an unquiet step, he went on: "Poor Rose! to think of the deceit—the crime, that surrounds you! even I, who should be honest, being the protector of a sinless child like you—even I am unfit—ashamed to look in your face! And you think me a good man! compelled to steal out in the dead of night to scenes of crime and darkness, and then return to meet your loving, holy kisses, and listen to your childlike words, that thrust a thousand daggers through me, because their purity shows me my own guilt in the blackest hue! O, Rose—Rose! to think of the wrongs I have done, and yours the greatest!"

The door opened, and, cautiously, pretty Rose entered. A quick glance cast about the room assured her that her disagreeable cousin had taken his departure. She ran joyfully to her father's side, exclaiming:

"He has really gone, then?"

"You do not like him, Mignonne?" asked her father, tenderly.

"Like him?—no, papa, nor ever did. He is not a pleasant visitor, by any means. Well, you shall come and eat some supper. See, it is all ready, and while you are doing so, I will tell you something."

"Let me hear it."

"Somebody has been here, papa. It was the young Count Louis—the Count d'Artois, papa. He has come to visit the chateau, as we heard he was about to do."

At this Hugh Lamonte slightly started. His knife dropped to the floor, and he quickly stooped to pick it up, exclaiming, "How careless!" Rising, he resumed his repast.

"The count has been here, Rose? What did he come here for?"

"For shelter."

Hugh Lamonte turned pale.

"Well, Rose—for shelter? You are not very explicit. Shelter from what?" His tone was hasty and agitated. He seemed to be aware of it, for he added immediately: "You must talk both to and for me, dear child, to-night, and not leave me anything to do, for you see I am fatigued. Tell me all about it, Rose. What did he want shelter for, and what did he say?"

"It was raining very hard, you know, papa," she answered, gently, "and he was journeying to the chateau. He stopped until the storm was over."

An hour later Hugh Lamonte paced his own apartment with a stern brow and a heavy heart, in which a thousand racking and tormenting thoughts rioted. Lowly and humble seemed his daily life; honest and good, though poor, he himself esteemed, and yet secret sin and years of hidden anguish and remorse were daily and hourly cankering in his soul. Under cover of his constant industry and the estimation of his neighbors, he led a life of hidden crime. But it was only in the darkness that he practiced it; only when he could steal forth and no neighbor was abroad to watch his steps; and stealing back again ere the dawn, pass another day of rustic labor, and await another night of crime.

Thus it had been for years, and this was not his worst deed, either. Yet this man had not always been bad. Away back, in the lapse of time, shone forth the light of happy years, and innocent thoughts and deeds; of an unstained conscience and a pure heart; of a life that once was sinless. But he dared not look upon these things now. For though he had long since sickened of these scenes of crime, and though he would gladly have forsaken them, he could not burst asunder the bonds that held and shackled him. He dared not seek a separation from the crew of desperate, lawless men who looked to him as their leader.

And the consciousness almost maddened him. There were times when he would have plunged a thousand degrees deeper into vice than ever he had yet done, that he might stifle these better feelings—these promptings of the yet living monitor within, since they were in vain; and then it was only the ever-present image of his child that saved him—the memory of her sweet face and innocent life, of her faith and of her love. Poor Rose!

It was this Gasparde—this man whom we have seen with him to-night—who planned the last expedition. They were Lamonte's men who attacked Louis d'Artois in the forest; and Gasparde was one of them. They were defeated, as we have seen, to the infinite surprise and secret satisfaction of Hugh, who, while he had been unwilling to give consent to the plan, and yet had not dared offer opposition to Gasparde, who was next to himself in authority, had yet managed to avoid joining in its execution. Indeed, his errand that day from home had been secretly to warn Louis of the danger

awaiting him; but he had mislaid seeing him, and failed in his project. He did not know that the count had been warned, notwithstanding; and, knowing that the weapons of Louis had been rendered useless, in a measure, before his day's journey was commenced, was astounded to learn, on reaching the rendezvous in the forest, that he had baffled his enemies, and not only baffled them, but given them ample reasons for remembering him for some time to come.

Hugh Lamonte had reasons for not wishing to injure Louis d'Artois, or any of his people; and he earnestly desired to save him from the clutches of Gasparde, who had led this affair throughout; for he was more than apprehensive that if the count made a firm resistance, and gave them too much trouble, unless that resistance were overpowering, he would only exasperate his assailants, who might easily murder him in their rage and impatience. And now that he had indeed escaped, and left them with so severe a reminder of their defeat, Hugh trembled for him more than ever. He knew that Gasparde was enraged at the loss of the prize he had counted on, and yet more deeply at the treatment to which he and his men had been subjected, and that, if opportunity were given, he would be made to feel the vengeance of his desperate adversary, for Gasparde had sworn to make him pay dearly for that night's work.

These things occupied him long after Rose had retired, and it was not until an hour after midnight that he sought his own couch; yet he remained for some time, still, in a state of wakefulness, revolving a thousand affairs in his mind that had already brought many an untimely wrinkle to his brow, and many a silver thread to the rich brown locks that clustered about his head.

CHAPTER IV.

At the break of day, Rose Lamonte had risen, and was busying herself with her simple household affairs. Her father slept until an unusual late hour; but she would not disturb him, remembering his weariness of the night previous; so she set his breakfast to wait for him, and, sitting down in the sunshine by the door, took her little spinning wheel and applied herself to work with ready fingers while she awaited his appearance.

Before the sun was two hours high, however, Hugh made his appearance. He seemed lighter hearted, by far, this morning; his slumbers had evidently refreshed him. Indeed, this was the case; and at the sight of Rose, with her bright face and her pleasant smile, and the air of comfort and cheerfulness that everywhere was visible, betraying the beautiful touch of those fairy fingers of hers, he could not but wear a smile himself.

"O, you are better, papa, this morning; you are quite rested—are you not?" asked Rose, joyfully, as he gave her a good-morning kiss.

"Quite rested, Mignonne," he answered, with quiet cheerfulness.

He ate his breakfast and talked with Rose on one subject and another for awhile, then rising, he went to the door to look out. He stood there a moment,



ROSE ON HER WAY TO THE CHATEAU WITH FLOWERS.

while his daughter was clearing the table, and instantly turning about, he said: "Rose, do not speak to anybody of the count's visit here last night. To anybody—you hear, child?"

"Yes, papa."

He waited reflectively an instant, and then added:

"And especially to Gasparde."

Rose looked a little perplexed.

"No, indeed—not to him. But why especially to Gasparde, papa?"

"Because I wish it, Rose. And if you should see the young count in this neighborhood again, you are to be equally silent; you must tell it only to me."

"Yes, papa." And though Rose could not divine her father's reasons for these directions, she was wise enough to ask no farther questions.

He went, and left her standing there by the casement, a slight blush rising to her cheek. But presently she turned away with a half sigh, and commenced setting the simple furniture of the apartment in better order, and then went out into the little garden belonging to the cottage to gather flowers. She plucked a small basketful, arranged them quickly and with exquisite taste, and then, tying on a little rustic hat, set out on the road that led through the valley, among the distant hills, and far beyond, to the chateau.

This was her daily custom, as long as the flowers blossomed in the cottage garden; for mademoiselle liked flowers, and there was no garden near the chateau, only thick woods, and the narrow lawn that surrounded the stone walls of the courtyard; so she engaged Rose to bring her the flowers she raised.

(To be continued.)

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