

The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A
TRUE
STORY
OF
THE
SOUTH
OF
FRANCE

CHAPTER IV.—(Continued.)

Rose was very proud of her flowers, and she loved them, too. This morning she had brought the first of the rare white roses which had opened in the warm sunshine on her favorite tree. She was continuing her way, when a shadow fell across the sunlit path, and startled her. Raising her head, she beheld her cousin Gasparde.

"Good morning, Mademoiselle Rose," he said.

Carelessly and briefly she returned his salutation, and was hurrying on to escape from his unwelcome presence, when he laid his hand on her arm.

"Stop a moment, Cousin Rose; I want to ask you a question. I came over to the cottage a moment ago, and found neither your father nor yourself at home. I wanted to see him on business. I caught sight of you coming along the road here, and so hurried on to overtake you to ask you where he is."

"He is at the house of neighbor Antoine, I believe," answered Rose, coldly; "at least, he said he was going there. But let me go, if you please, Gasparde," and she slipped her arm away from his hand, whose lightest touch was disagreeable to her—"let me go; I am in a great hurry. I am going to the chateau."

"O, are you?" he said, coldly; "then I will accompany you as far as neighbor Antoine's, where I may meet your father. One always likes company on so lonely a road as this."

He walked on by her side, whistling some gay air from time to time; but he did not speak again for a long while. Rose was in dread lest the subject of discussion which had arisen between them the night before should be renewed. But he kept on, whistling and meditating by turns, without recurring to it; and hoping, as they went on, that he did not mean to trouble her with it again, she began to feel somewhat relieved.

At length, however, he stopped whistling and glanced down at his companion's face.

"They say the Count d'Artois has arrived at the chateau," he remarked.

Rose was silent, though she saw some rejoinder was expected.

"I suppose there will be gay doings there now," he went on, seeing that she did not mean to speak; "for the count is a gay man, and not a very good one, either," he added, maliciously, though he knew nothing whatever of the count's character. "People tell that he is a great spendthrift."

Yet Rose was silent, though her cheeks grew hotter. It was nothing to her what character the gentleman might bear; for was she not almost an utter stranger to him? But she had seen him, and conceived a good opinion of him, and she was ashamed and indignant at Gasparde's mischievous, ill-natured remarks.

"Report says, too," continued Gasparde, "that he is about to marry his beautiful cousin, Mademoiselle Helen. The contract was made years ago. What do you think of all that, Cousin Rose?" for he was determined, by a direct question, to make her speak to him.

"I think you are very wicked and very disagreeable," she answered plainly, "in pulling other people's characters to pieces, and a gossip who meddles with other people's affairs. Fie on you, Gasparde! I am ashamed of you," and she hurried on.

"Hard words—hard words, Mademoiselle," said Gasparde, speaking in a careless tone, and biting his lips to conceal the vexation caused by her sharp reproof; "but coming from such pretty lips, I never could take them for earnest in the world. Do you know, Cousin Rose, I have heard it said that a woman ever treats worst the man she best likes; so I take your hard handling for so many compliments, and feel quite flattered by them."

Rose grew a little paler; but she neither looked at nor answered him. And still she hurried on, glad that she was so near the end of her walk, for she had almost reached the ascent to the chateau.

"Well, cousin," said Gasparde, "I hope you have thought better of the offer which I made to you last night."

"No, nor ever shall," she answered, resolutely, though with a slight tremulousness of tone.

"That is a great pity; for I am resolved to have you, at all events, my dear, so you need not be shy. And now, there is another question still, Rose. I suppose you haven't seen this rascally young count of whom we have been speaking?"

There was a sneer in his tone. His evil glance, in a sidelong direction, scanned the young girl's countenance.

"O, you won't tell, eh?" he said. "I suppose if I should ask a closer question, I might get you to talk. Was he at the cottage last night, or this morning?"

"I will not tell you," she uttered, trembling in every limb with fear and indignation. And she attempted to spring up the path; but he seized her hand and prevented her.

"Not so fast, my dear. I must keep you a little longer. Listen, now. I know he was there, although you have been very careful not to tell me; for the tracks of a horse's feet and a gentleman's boots are in the soil outside, the latter belonging to the count. I am pretty sure. I have his measure. But he won't come there again, mind that! Now, my pretty cousin, you may give me a kiss."

"Gasparde, let me go!" she cried, in

terror and disgust, as he held her hand.

"O, you won't give me one, will you? Why, then, I must take it."

"Must you? There are two words to that bargain, my man!"

It was a light form that sprang out of the thicket by the wayside; a resolute voice that uttered these words; a graceful arm with iron force that laid the rascal, at one stroke, prostrate on the earth. And Gasparde, lying at the feet of his assailant, was almost insane with rage. He had seen that form, heard that voice, felt the weight of that arm, to his cost before.

And Count Louis stood there quietly, as Gasparde rose again to his feet, shaking his clenched hand with muttered menaces, and seemingly inclined to return the attack.

"Come, you want some more, my fine fellow, I think," said the gentleman. "If that is the case, I can finish you as well now as any time. You deserve a sound thrashing, and I am quite willing to administer it. Are you ready to receive it?"

The man gave a vengeful glance, another warning with that clenched hand, and, turning, walked rapidly down the ascent, without uttering a word.

The count looked after him an instant, and then joined Rose, who, with blended fear and interest, had watched this brief scene.

"Ah, monsieur, I thank you very much!" she said, gratefully, as he advanced towards her.

"And I am very glad that I happened to be near," he returned, with a frank smile, "to chastise the insolent fellow. Why, he was over-bold, Rose! Who is he?"

"A worthless cousin of mine, monsieur," replied Rose, "who has undertaken to annoy me occasionally of late. I hope his well-deserved punishment will teach him better manners for the future."

"I hope so; but it will be best to beware of him now. You must keep, as much as possible, out of his way."

"That I have always done, monsieur. But he has never been so daring before."

"I think I heard him mention me, Rose. What did he say?" asked the young count.

Rose Lamonte blushed slightly, as she replied.

"He said that you should never come to the cottage again."

"Ah, yes; I heard it; I remember now. And he knew of my visit by the footprints? He must have been watching me closely. Yet, where could he have seen me? I only completed the journey from Lyons last night."

The good marquis was standing on the terrace steps as they went up.

"Good morning, my child," he said, kindly to Rose. "Out so early with your roses?"

She smiled.

"Yes, monsieur; and they are very fine ones. See!"

"Yes, indeed. And you have brought a rare supply of them. But, after all, you will carry back more than you bring. Your walk has done you good, I see; and he smilingly stroked her damask cheek, to which the exercise, and a little excitement together, had indeed brought the sweetest of roses.

Coloring still more deeply, our heroine, with laughing eyes, ran up the steps, and disappeared within the entrance of the chateau.

The young count related to his uncle the incident which had occurred during his morning's ramble. The good marquis listened with interested attention, and strongly evinced sympathy.

"The rascal!" he said, indignantly, as he heard of Gasparde's rudeness. "I am glad you gave him a suitable correction. That fellow marry Rose?"

"It is to be supposed that her father will resent his insolence."

"O, undoubtedly—undoubtedly, Louis. He is a stern man, that Hugh Lamonte, and will teach Gasparde his business after this. He is a strange, stern man, silent and reserved, and almost a hermit, as one might say. He seldom leaves home; works in his little garden, and tills the thrifty patch of soil adjoining it from morning till night, or cuts in the forest the wood which is to serve for his winter's fuel, and often a load to carry to the town on market days, with the produce from his land, as may not be required for his own use. He has, I think, no enemies; yet he seems disinclined to court the friendship of any, though the few neighbors about him, among the farm houses, are kindly disposed toward him, and every one of them loves little Rose. He is apart from them—a distant character."

"And a peculiar one, from your description."

"Precisely. He lives a peasant's life, and wears a peasant's garb, and yet he can assume—ay, and he does, at times, the bearing of a very king. The humility of his position is belied by the spirit and demeanor of the man: He is uncommunicative, distant, almost haughty, toward all others; to his child, he is the tenderest, most affectionate of parents."

"You interest me, uncle. How long have you known this man?"

"He came into the neighborhood some twelve or thirteen years ago, and settled in the place where he dwells at present, remote from every other habitation. His wife, it is supposed, or has been gathered from some remarks made by him or Rose, was dead. Rose herself was then

a little creature of, perhaps, three or four years. A peasant he may be by birth, but I cannot treat him like one. I confess, he perplexes me."

"I do not marvel at it. What a mystery the man must be! I have the greatest curiosity to behold him."

"That you will doubtless do, sooner or later, though it will be with difficulty. I think, that you will obtain communication with him. But here comes our Rose of the wilderness."

And, as he spoke, the young girl appeared at the door.

"Uncle," said Louis, "I must go back with her, to see her safely to the end of her way. She may meet that insolent fellow again."

"You are right, my dear boy—you are right," returned the marquis.

Louis could not help observing how much more beautiful, if possible, looked Rose this morning, than when he had first seen her, although, even then, it was as if he had suddenly come upon some lovely picture touched with the warmest coloring and most perfect grace of the painter's art.

"How pretty she is!" thought the count; "and she is only sixteen."

And it was not her face alone that was thus charming, as he shortly found, nor the innate grace of her manner; for Rose Lamonte possessed quick and delicate perceptions, a refined love of the beautiful, and a mind cultivated to a degree extremely unusual in one of her station, yet scarcely surprising in her. For both her father and Mademoiselle Montauban had taken pains to improve a naturally fine intellect, that expanded daily with the care bestowed upon it; and Louis was more deeply gratified than he could express, on recognizing this mental worth, combined, as it was, with such physical perfection.

A brief walk it was from the chateau to the cottage. So, at least, it seemed to the count. He smiled as they reached the door.

"How soon we are here!" he said. "I think the distance must have been estimated incorrectly. I think we have been hardly half an hour in coming. Is your father at home, Rose?"

He was not there. Louis did not go in, but stood an instant by the door and looked about him.

"What a pleasant little place this is!" said he. "Rose, I should like to take a sketch of it, some day, with you sitting just here in the sunshine in the doorway, at work."

He paused a moment longer; bent to inhale the fragrance of the mignonette in its box on the window ledge, and then turned to his pretty companion again.

"Adieu, my little friend." He touched her hand in a half-assured clasp.

"Adieu, monsieur. You have been very good to come so far with me."

"It was a pleasure." He smiled, turned away, and was gone.

And Rose, after a moment's thoughtful glance at his receding figure, went in, and prepared her father's dinner against his return.

"I will have no insolence, Gasparde, mind that! You will keep away from Rose in the future. She detests you, and your language and conduct of this morning fully justify her in so doing. I warn you. You know my character; beware of arousing me by a repetition of this."

Hugh Lamonte, at sunset, had been standing at his door, and Gasparde, returning to his home beyond the forest from the village, where he had passed the day, was obliged to pause on the path leading past the cottage, to receive the stern reprimand of the former. He feared Hugh; he could not escape, by a display of his usual bravado, the bitter severity of Hugh's words, and, in these circumstances, his last resort was a sullen silence, which indicated the spirit in which he received them.

"Do not come hither again. Keep where you belong, among your fellows. I shall be there to-night, at the rendezvous. And it will be near the last time, to give you orders. I must clear my hands of this business soon. I am getting sick of it."

"Getting sick of it, is he?" muttered the fellow to himself. "Good! I shall have a rare sweep of it, when I get affairs under my management. You will abdicate, monsieur, in my favor. Excellent!"

"Go," said Hugh Lamonte, coldly, at length, as he looked up once more—"go; it is sufficient—the lesson which I hear the count has taught you this morning; otherwise, you would receive from me now something more serious than the reproof I have given you. Go!" And he turned and went into the cottage, shutting the door behind him.

"Oh, I will pay you finely—won't I, monsieur?" muttered Gasparde, between his clenched teeth, and making a menacing motion towards the direction. "And the count, too. I have a reckoning with both of you, a long one. Never fear but I will pay it well; and then for my pretty Rose, of whom you are so jealous!"

(To be continued.)

Unignorant.

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