

The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A TRUE
STORY
OF
THE
SOUTH
OF
FRANCE

CHAPTER VI.

A month passed. Louis had intended to leave the chateau at the expiration of a month. It went by, but still he lingered; and, as he had no pressing business elsewhere, he said to himself that the summer might wear away as well here as in places where he might not like so well to stay. So he was in no hurry to depart.

Time passed very pleasantly at the chateau. A great portion of his days was passed indoors, in the society of his uncle and his beautiful cousin Helen; and the remainder was spent in the open air, in the pursuit of his favorite amusements. Louis was as fond of sketching as ever, and nearly every morning he might have been seen roving about the neighborhood in search of food for his pencil, as we have already seen him, returning at noon, to display to Mademoiselle Montauban the result of his labor; though, on the first occasion of this kind, it must be allowed that the exhibition of his sketches was subjected to some slight reserve, the picture of Rose and her dwelling being withheld. For what reason, however, he himself, perhaps, scarcely knew at the time.

He had seen Rose two or three times since that visit, both at the chateau and at the cottage, where he had met her father also. The admiration of Louis for our pretty heroine certainly was by no means on the decrease; while Hugh Lamonte was an enigma to him. The peculiarity of this man's appearance and manners was a matter of no little perplexity to him as to others. The gravity and reserve of Hugh were so many subjects of mystery. But it was a mystery not likely soon to be solved. Nobody knew anything concerning him previous to the time of his coming to occupy his present abode. His former place of residence was unknown. Conjecture had done her best, and the mystery remained a mystery still.

Louis often spoke with his uncle on this subject. The good marquis could only shake his head in perplexity.

"He is a strange man, that is all I can say, my dear boy," said he; "and yet there is something about him which attracts me. That lofty sternness which he sometimes wears strikes one most strangely. I never observe it without thinking of—"

"Of what, monsieur?" asked Louis.

"Of my—of Henri—your uncle, my boy. We quarreled once, he and I, and he wore just that look and manner afterward. You never saw him, Louis." And the good marquis sighed.

"What was the reason of the quarrel, uncle?" asked Louis.

"It is a long story. I cannot tell you now," was the answer; "but, some day, perhaps, I will relate it to you."

It was no uncommon thing now for Louis to encounter Jacques Leroux now, in his usual strolls about the neighborhood. They often met; and the young count, feeling an interest in this rough, but evidently honest-hearted fellow, who had taken pains to render him a service, spent many an hour in conversation with him while reclining on the banks of the valley stream, engaged in angling, or roaming over wood and hill, with his beloved portfolio, for Louis was an unwearied artist.

And all this time Gasparde was away. Hugh and Jacques alone knew where; for the former, Hugh Lamonte, uneasy at a neighborhood so little to be desired, had dispatched him to manage the affairs of that portion of the horde engaged in the contraband trade, well reasoning that, being as far distant as the coast itself, he had nothing unpleasant to apprehend from him. Gasparde, as may be guessed, had been no little dissatisfied with this arrangement, and resolved to return, secretly, as soon as an opportunity presented itself.

It was one day when Louis had been rambling about during the whole morning that, wearied out, he threw himself beneath the shadow of a tree to rest, in the midst of a small grove half way between the chateau and the cottage. He had a book with him, and opening it, soon became deeply engaged in its perusal. Perhaps he might have passed half an hour thus. At the end of that time, however, he closed it, and taking up his gun, which he had thrown on the turf beside him, he took his way towards the road, which was not many steps distant.

But he had hardly reached it, ere a bullet whistled through the air, struck his left arm, ploughing up the flesh as it went, and continuing its course till it lodged in the trunk of a large tree by the roadside.

It had evidently proceeded from some place very near the spot which he had left; but he had no time to look for the source of the compliment, for the warm blood already poured down his arm, saturating completely the sleeve, which covered it. Hastening on, he sat down by the trunk of the tree which had received the bullet, and taking his handkerchief out, folded it into a bandage. At that moment, raising his eyes, he beheld Jacques Leroux coming along the road from the village. He called to him, and the man ran up.

"What's the matter now, Monsieur Louis?" he asked, in some surprise. "Shot in the arm? Winged like a wild fowl! Why, what—?" He glanced at the gun that the count had again laid down, and Louis recognized the impression which he entertained.

"Well, my good fellow," he said, lightly, despite the slight faintness he felt from the loss of blood, "you do not think

I would commit intentional suicide—do you? and if I did, I should certainly select a surer spot than this. But I am glad you are here. This one-handed work is rather awkward. Just fasten the bandage about it tightly, if you please—so. That is it. Be sure the knot is fast."

And during this time Louis had concluded, since Jacques had drawn his own inferences, to let him keep them, and tell him nothing concerning the actual state of the matter; for a thought had suddenly occurred to him, as he endeavored to account for the case himself, which made him resolve to trust his own dexterity in finding out the truth, and keep silent on the subject until then. For whoever had fired this shot at him was an enemy, since he could not bring himself to believe the deed unintentional. And what enemy had he besides Gasparde?

Louis passed several days in deep reflection. A double object occupied his attention, which was, in part, the discovery of the present whereabouts of Gasparde, whom he believed to be in the neighborhood without the knowledge of Hugh Lamonte; the other point the reader will presently understand.

A half-perfected scheme was in progress of completion. For a time, as we have said, he meditated on this, and finally laid it out to his own satisfaction.

By this time his arm was almost entirely healed. He had remained within doors for some days; but now resumed his usual out-of-door amusements, taking good care, however, to avoid every place wherein a foe might be concealed.

Some careless inquiries which he made of Rose and her father, assured him that, even if Gasparde were in the neighborhood, they were unconscious of it. He resolved to set a watch, however, to ascertain the amount of correctness in his suspicions.

One day, very shortly after the occurrences above recorded, Louis received letters from Lyons which seemed to interest him very deeply. Business of some importance, he announced, obliged him to leave the chateau sooner than he had intended. The good marquis expressed the utmost concern and regret at hearing this.

"Why, my dear Louis," said he, "I counted on keeping you for months yet. Why will you go? Surely you can submit to your agent, or avocet, all affairs of business for the present."

"My dear uncle, the case is imperative," answered the count.

"Then, as soon as this affair is transacted; you will return to us? I will hear of no refusal."

"I promise you, monsieur, I will return."

Helen Montauban had waited silently for the decision. She made no attempt to urge Louis to prolong his stay. She did not even express a regret at the announcement of his intended departure on the following day; but a closer observer might have seen the emotion which she felt. And she received the parting kiss of her handsome cousin with a smile.

"My dear Helen," he said, frankly, taking her hands in his, "tell me that you are sorry to bid me adieu, or I shall not believe it."

"I do regret your departure, Louis," she answered, in a low, clear tone; "but why should I display it? You say your business is imperative, and I would not detain you. Besides, you are to return."

"Yes—I shall return," he echoed. "Adieu, sweet cousin!"

"Louis," said the marquis, as he accompanied his nephew to the gate of the court, "you must mind and come back as soon as possible. If the plan which I mentioned the other day succeeds, Rose will be an inmate of the chateau before winter. Poor little Rose! one cannot but wish to see her in such circumstances as seem more befitting her. Helen needs a friend and companion, too, and both will be benefited. If Hugh Lamonte will consent to part with her, she shall come. The first thing that put this plan into my thoughts was the persecutions of that fellow Gasparde. I wished to remove her from his way. To be sure, he is not here at present, but then there is no knowing how soon he may return. I shall talk with Hugh—I shall talk with him; and Helen will use her influence, too, I know, for she likes Rose. So when you return, you may, perhaps, find another cousin, Louis."

"Your plan is an excellent one, my dear uncle," returned the young man, "and I wish you all success. Depend upon it, the endeavors which you and my cousin make, for the benefit of Rose, will not be thrown away."

The gate of the court closed; the guest was gone.

Slowly rode master and man down the valley to the little inn by the roadside, and here Louis dismounted. Immediately, as he did so, there came from an inner room a young man, who, appearing at the door, made a respectful obeisance to Louis, saying:

"Ah! monsieur; you see I am punctual."

"Good!" answered the count. "How long have you been here?"

"Three hours fully, I think."

"That is well. I see you do not forget your master's habits. But come; we must have a room in private for a little while. Francois!" to his valet—"get down and wait awhile. I wish to transact some private business with this person. Come, Robin!"

"You have got your spade and its ac-

companiments, with you, I presume?" inquired the young count of the man he had met, as the two entered a little room together.

"Yes, indeed, Monsieur Louis, and one or two changes of apparel. It is for no more than a month or two, I think you said?"

"That is all."

"Then I dare say I brought sufficient with me; more than that might be thought superfluous, you know. We must be natural."

"Yes—yes, Robin. It is all right. Shut the door now, and be careful there is no chance for eavesdroppers."

They went in, and the door was closed upon them.

Some twenty minutes might have elapsed when it was re-opened and they came forth again, the young count striking from his varnished boot one or two straws with his riding switch, and bending his head to conceal a smile that curved his mustached lip; while his companion, with less apparent restraint, was laughing outright—a low, musical, but hearty laugh. He quickly grew grave, however, and said, aloud, as they proceeded to the outer door, where the innkeeper was still standing, and endeavoring to draw the usually gruff Francois into something like conversation:

"You think, then, monsieur le comte, that I shall get employment somewhere about here?"

"O, doubtless—doubtless, Robin!" was the reply. "You will have my certificate of character, if it is required; but your face will do as well, if I am not mistaken."

"Well—well! I need not tell you to behave yourself, Robin. I wish that you may meet with good fortune."

"Thank you, monsieur," returned the other, gratefully. "I shall endeavor to do credit to your recommendation."

"Ah—well!" muttered Francois, crossly, as he mounted his own little hack, and glanced surlily enough toward his master; "if young people will turn into wild geese, I do not know who will repent but themselves."

CHAPTER VII.

On the day of the count's departure from the Chateau Montauban, there stopped at the cottage of Hugh Lamonte a young peasant, dressed in coarse but neat garb, and carrying across his shoulder a heavy stick, on which swung a bundle neatly tied up in a large cotton handkerchief.

This person was of something above the medium height, light and athletic in form, and with straight, shapely limbs, whose grace and activity his rude dress could not conceal. His countenance was a fine, frank and pleasing one; the features indisputably handsome, and the complexion slightly darkened, evidently by exposure to sun and wind; while the simple openness and honesty of his manner could not fail to please one.

At the invitation of Hugh Lamonte he entered and sat down, stating that he had come from Arallon, and desired to obtain employment in this neighborhood. "What kind of employment do you seek?" asked Hugh.

"I am a gardener, monsieur," answered the young man, respectfully, "and if I could have the care of a garden somewhere about here—"

"But," interrupted Hugh, in a thoughtful tone, "we do not need gardeners about here. Up in the village, where the people are all farmers, they take care of their own gardens. Besides, it is late in the season for that work."

The young man blushed as he returned: "O, I know that, monsieur—I know that; but I would be willing to work for so much the less."

"Good! But still, I think it is not very likely that you will find employment of that kind. If it were the spring instead of near the autumn now, perhaps the marquis might take you. But as it is, you must think of something else. You are really in need of work, I suppose?"

"Yes, monsieur. I bring a certificate from my former master."

"Who was he?"

"The Comte d'Artois, monsieur."

"The Comte d'Artois!" Hugh regarded the young man fixedly for a moment, till the red color flushed into his cheek again. "Let me see your certificate, if you please," he said.

The man drew it forth and gave it to Hugh. It said simply:

"This certifies that the bearer, Robin Marron, is industrious, honest and temperate, and will be found faithful and trustworthy by whoever may need his services."

(Signed),

LOUIS, COMTE D'ARTOIS."

"That is well," said Hugh, quietly, as he returned the paper, "and speaks excellently for you, Master Robin. But it will not be of much use here. I am afraid. Is there nothing else you could do?"

"Oh, yes, monsieur," answered Robin. "I like this neighborhood, and I have some fancy for farm work. Doubtless I could make myself useful to some of your neighbors."

"Well, it is a busy time, and there is every chance for one who comes recommended like you. Extra work-people are wanted by several of the farmers. There is Antoine Lebrun and Pierre—Martin, both of whom I know need one or two more men. They live something like a mile or two beyond here. You will, without doubt, find work among some of them."

"Thank you. I will try them," returned Robin, rising, and taking up his stick and bundle, which he had laid beside him on the floor.

(To be continued.)

Would Never Do.

"I was thinking," said the architect, "that you might call the house The Crescent."

"Not on your life," protested the proprietor of the new theater, "that would be a hoodoo from the start. The crescent is never full."—Philadelphia Press.

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