

The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A
TRUE
STORY
OF
THE
SOUTH
OF
FRANCE

CHAPTER XIX.—(Continued.)

They left the broken vehicle, the prostrate horses that struggled and kicked in vain attempts to free themselves from the harness and rise, and in the darkness and the storm pursued with all possible haste the road to the chateau. There was no shelter near. The light form of Rose was as nothing in the strong arms of the marquis. Rapidly he bore her along, keeping the folds of his cloak well wrapped about her.

"We are almost at the village," said Francis Egerton, as he supported his companion with a lover's tenderness that met now with no repulse.

For Helen Montauban knew nothing of it. She was saying to herself, "Is Rose dead? Has she escaped me? Am I to be spared my work at last?" She listened for a sigh—a groan, from the lips of that inanimate figure that was borne before her. No sound was heard from them. Already a strange fever of joy mingled with the shivering excitement, the awe, the horror, which Helen Montauban had felt. She never heeded the rain that poured over her in sheeted torrents; the wild winds raged in vain for her now; they were unheard. She only longed for light—light, to behold that childish countenance—to know the truth.

But so near were they to the farm houses now that no delay was made; the first one was entered, and Rose placed upon a couch, while the farmers' wives crowded about, with earnest kindness and sympathy, to render assistance. But at the sight of that pale, quiet face, those closed eyelids and colorless lips, they were silent; and some whispered among themselves, "She is dead!" while others, with scarce a hope, yet seeking still for one, worked over the lifeless form. And without stood the marquis and the Count de Clairville and Francis Egerton by the fire in the great farm kitchen, in dread, silence and suspense.

Helen Montauban and the countess had entered the chamber where Rose was laid, and rough yet comfortable garments were offered them to replace their own dripping ones. The countess was already making this welcome and really necessary change; but Helen Montauban, thrusting them from her, pressed to the couch.

"Stand aside!" she said to the woman. And she knelt down there to look at that pallid face, round which the dripping chestnut curls were lying in shining masses. Once those white lips parted—reddened.

"See—see! she lives—she breathes!" uttered one of the women, in an eager, tremulous tone, subdued almost to a whisper—"she lives!"

"It is a lie!" muttered Helen Montauban, between those beautiful shut teeth. A moment elapsed. The women gathered, with glad, excited, hopeful eyes, about the couch—those poor, simple, honest-hearted peasant women, praying for that young life, whose slender thread one among them would so gladly have seen broken. And fiercely watched that one, with a burning glance, a heart that stood all but still. It was no lie!

Slowly those lovely eyes unclosed, and rested upon the glad, smiling faces gathered about the couch. There was no recognition in them at first; but presently, meeting the anxious glance of the good countess, who bent over her, she sighed faintly, and putting her hand to her head, whispered, "O, yes; I remember—I remember now!"

Helen Montauban was gone. In an adjoining chamber she removed the saturated garments she had worn, and substituted for them, the apparel sent from the chateau by a domestic; then proceeding to the kitchen, joined her father and his companions, who had just learned that Rose had revived. The head of the marquis was bowed, his face buried in his hands. The emotion of gratitude he felt at the bringing back of that young life almost overcame him.

The night passed and morning broke, clear and still above the earth, where so lately all had been commotion. The voice of the tempest had died away in silence. Broad and fair the sunlight shone above the pleasant valley. They bore Rose with gentleness and care back to the chateau. She was quite ill, almost unable to move a limb from weakness. The injuries that others had escaped, she had received; and from being so long exposed to the storm, there was every reason to believe that serious consequences would ensue.

And the apprehension was justified. During the day her indisposition increased, and at night, feverish and delirious, she tossed upon her couch, with a wild brilliancy in those soft eyes, and a scorching flush upon her beautiful cheek. It was pitiful to hear her wandering words, and listen to the incoherent minglings of sorrow and joy, in her wild delirium. The marquis looked upon her once, and then turned away with streaming eyes from the room, to seclude himself in the library, where he passed the night in watchings. The Count Frederic and Francis Egerton remained till dawn in the saloon. Every domestic in the chateau kept vigil during those long and mournful hours; for not an eye could close in slumber. Helen Montauban and the countess had their post in that sick chamber, beside the couch of the sick girl, who recognized neither of them. All night long she raved, and the flush burned strong and steady on her cheek, and the lightning's flash was not more brilliant

than the fire scintillating from those dark eyes.

Slowly the leaden night hours waxed and waned; and Helen Montauban sat beside the pillow of Rose, regardless of slumber. The countess, sitting by the fire, still wept and prayed in silence. The doctor came to the bedside.

"You need rest, mademoiselle," he said; "cannot I prevail upon you to retire and snatch a few hours' repose while I watch here? The fatigue and exposure of last night, though no present ill effects are felt from them, may be productive of evil consequences, if your nerves continue thus overtaxed."

"Your pardon," returned Helen, in cold and quiet tones, "but I anticipate no unpleasant results from our adventure of last night; and you must be conscious that, even if such were not the case, I should find it impossible to sleep now. I must remain here."

"Ah—well!" sighed the good old man; "if you are fully determined on this, it must be so; and I trust all will be well."

He sat down by the bed, leaned his head on his hand and fixed a thoughtful and sorrowful glance upon the feverish countenance turned towards him on the pillow. Rose looked at him with her wild, bright, piteous gaze.

"Where is Louis?" she asked; "where is he? Why do they keep him from me?" Tears stood in the physician's eyes. He laid his gentle hand, with its cool touch, on that burning forehead.

"Be quiet, my child," he said. "He will come—Louis will come."

"No—he will not—he will not come!" she cried, with feeble grief. "I have not seen him this long time. I thought we were to be married. It was a dream, was it not?" And again that heart-breaking, sorrowful glance was fixed on him. "I don't know why I am lying here," she murmured, sadly, looking about her. "I ought to be ready to meet him when he comes. But I am so weak—so tired! I believe I have been journeying somewhere. But such a strange journey! I don't think it ever will end; and I am wandering all alone. And so weary, weary! Ah, Louis, why don't you come and help me? You said you loved poor Rose!"

Mournful and plaintive grew those restless, feverish tones; tearful and troubled the brilliant eyes; but still, though exhausted by her constant ravings, and though her cheeks burned more hotly, and her heart throbbed with terrible violence, and her breathing was short and painful, there was no rest for her. Still she raved of Louis, and begged him to see how her feet were torn and bleeding with the long and weary way she came, and then she would moan that he never would come—"never, never, never!"

And that wild, mournful wail might have drawn tears from a stone; but Helen Montauban was more than a stone.

The doctor went out, leaving Helen Montauban there to bathe the heated forehead of the sick girl, and offer water to those parched lips. And she said, looking down upon the stricken form before her, "She is in my power!"

Alas! only too completely so! Mademoiselle Montauban had gathered that M. Mery had but a slight hope of Rose's recovery. It must be. No turning back, or flinching, or hesitating, for that desperate nature now! That hope must never become a stronger one! It was hers to see to it. Pouring out the water for which the sufferer prayed, ever and anon, her hand involuntarily clutched the tiny vial concealed in her bosom. Yet—no! A little delay; the disease might terminate fatally in a few days, and spare her the work for which she was prepared. But in case it were not so, then—It was a poison, subtle and sure as death itself. Few were there who knew of such; few—almost no tests that could detect its presence. To Helen Montauban had been given a knowledge of this poison in by-gone years, and she had guarded that knowledge like gold. The secret, so long preserved, was likely to become useful to her now.

It was midnight. All over the chateau, there was deep and heartfelt rejoicing; but it was subdued in its manifestations, for the life that had so lately been pronounced safe was only slowly and faintly fluttering up from the edge of the grave; and every voice spoke in whispers, every footstep was muffled. All day she had slept, and the exhaustion produced by her violent and protracted delirium was so great that that slumber had hardly seemed like the rest of a living form. For scarce the faintest breath could be perceived, or the slightest motion of that feebly beating heart. Yet had the physician filled the breasts of those about him with a too delicious hope that hung for certainty upon her awakening.

Then had the evil desire of Helen Montauban grown to an intensity that was fiendish. Watching, with her haggard face and gleaming eyes, beside that couch, she had fixed her serpent gaze upon the almost lifeless being who lay there, looking with cruel and terrible eagerness for the sign of death to set itself upon that young sufferer's brow. Yet it came not, and her eagerness grew almost into madness. The one way remained. She would make that sleep a lasting one!

But there was another watcher there. The aged physician had taken up his post also by the couch. He, too, was waiting; but it was for the angel of life—not that of death; and he stirred not from that place. Not a morsel of food had passed

his lips that day. Since dawn he had been there. And Helen Montauban, in her fierce desperation at her own inability to accomplish the work so long meditated upon, was almost insane. Still he watched there; never for an instant was his vigilance relaxed. And the hours passed on and Rose awoke—safe!

CHAPTER XX.

It was nearly morning when the cure came to the chateau to request an interview with the marquis. He told him that Hugh Lamonte was at the village inn and dying. The marquis, astonished and affected at this sudden announcement, in the midst of his joy for the safety of Rose, prepared immediately to visit him; and the physician, M. Mery, satisfied that the most favorable change had taken place in his patient's case, left her in the care of Mademoiselle Montauban and the countess and accompanied the marquis.

In a few moments the party arrived at the auberge. Maurice met them with a nomenclature countenance.

"How is he—is there any change?" asked the cure, anxiously.

"None, monsieur," answered the man. "He raves still; but he talks of some guilty deed to be atoned for—some secret to be confessed. I can make nothing satisfactory, though, out of what he says, he wanders so."

The three ascended to the chamber above, where lay the dying man. The marquis started as he beheld him, stretched out upon the couch, with his wild, unshorn and emaciated countenance, and coarse, rough garments, which he had not suffered to be removed, presenting a spectacle so wretched. The kind-hearted old man could scarcely refrain from shedding tears as he gazed upon the wreck of that one proud form.

"Is this indeed Hugh Lamonte?" he exclaimed, advancing towards the couch.

"Who calls Hugh Lamonte?" shouted the sick man, sternly; "who calls him—the outcast—the robber? Who calls him, I say? And who are you?" fixing his wild, gleaming eyes upon the countenance of the marquis. "Ah, Armande Montauban, I know you—I know you!" he uttered, fiercely, trying to spring upright, yet falling, from very weakness. "Don't come near me, or I shall murder you! Where is Guidette?—where is she? You have hidden her from me! You have wedded her—and she was mine—mine! You stole her from me! I will have her blood!"

He sank back, exhausted, with white lips.

"Look—look," monsieur! uttered the cure, springing to the side of the marquis—"look, M. Mery, the marquis is fainting!"

And even as he spoke, the heavy fall of his friend attracted the physician's attention. Consternation and alarm were visible in his features.

"Let us carry him out into another room—quick!" he said, excitedly.

Together they bore him to an adjoining apartment, and there commenced the application of restoratives. But some moments elapsed ere he betrayed signs of returning consciousness. Then he revived slowly, and for some time gazed fixedly upon the face of M. Mery. Then a low moan escaped his lips.

"Gustave, I have seen my brother!" he uttered.

"Your brother?" echoed M. Mery, in astonished excitement.

"It is true! It is Henri who lies there—my brother Henri. Let me go to him."

"My dear friend, be calm, I command you," urged the physician, gently.

"I am calm; but I must go instantly. If he should die—ah, save him, I entreat you."

Weak and trembling as he was, he made them assist him to re-enter the other apartment. They advanced towards the couch; there was a different sight there now. From the height of delirium Hugh Lamonte was suddenly sinking into a stupor. His eyes were almost closed. Only faint, unintelligible murmurs broke from his lips at times. He did not see them approach. The cure and M. Mery cast glances at each other. The marquis comprehended them.

"You think he is dying, then?" he asked. "Ah, save him, Gustave! We were enemies once—he and I. Let him live, that we may once more embrace one another!"

"Be calm, my dear friend," entreated the physician again, "and listen to the truth. No power on earth can save him now; he is sinking fast. But maintain your energies; he may revive before death, with the possession of his full reason."

"Ah, Henri!" murmured the marquis, with indescribable emotion—"my brother! that I should recognize you thus, after all these years! See—see, Gustave!" and he lifted the matted hair from the temples of the unconscious man—"see where I struck him once! I knew the mark. Our father told me he would bear it to the grave—that scar."

"How," said M. Mery, in a low voice, "can this be your brother?—this man, who, for twelve years, has dwelt within half a league of you, and who has only been known as a peasant?"

"Ah, I recognize him too well!" answered the marquis, sadly; "it is he—I know him now through the disguise that has served him so long. And did you not hear his words? He said I stole Guidette from him. Alas! it is too true, though I was innocent of wrong. Henri—my brother—speak to me! say that we are friends once more!"

Eagerly he leaned over the couch, with his eyes fixed upon the sick man's face; but he was not recognized. There was no intelligence in that dying glance.

Hugh—or Henri, rather, awakened from the dull stupor. But it was only the sudden and fitful flare of the expiring flame of life. He lay, for an instant, gleaming about the apartment; then looking upwards, he encountered the regards of the good cure, who stood by the couch in silence.

"Monsieur le cure, I recognize you," he said. "I am dying—is it not so?"

"It is true," answered the good man,

mournfully. "But there is yet time for confession and repentance."

"Confession—repentance! You know, then, that I have a confession to make—sins to repent of?"

"It is a work which every dying man has to do, my friend."

The marquis advanced towards the couch. "Ah, Henri, forgive me!" cried the grief-stricken man.

"Never!" shouted Henri, madly. "I have been revenged on you; I have brought sorrow and darkness to your hearthstone, and I am satisfied! For the sake of your child—the angel who has smiled upon a wretched life, and touched an evil heart with her innocence—for her sake I will atone, at this last hour, for the misery I have caused you. You shall be happy once more; but I will not forgive you for the wrong done to me—never—no, never!" And raising his clenched hand to heaven, he sealed the declaration with a fearful oath. Then he sank down, exhausted. A shudder ran through every form within that chamber.

"Henri," cried the marquis, throwing himself on his knees beside the couch, "recall those words, I conjure you! Listen to me. I knew not of the wrong I had done you, till it was too late. Guidette deceived me; she never told me that you loved her—that she was betrothed to you! I wedded her, thinking her free. But she was a curse to me. Ah, Henri, if you desired revenge, she was the fittest instrument!"

The dying man's eyes were fixed earnestly on his brother's face. "Say it once more—once more!" he panted, eagerly; "tell me again that you were innocent—that you knew not of our betrothal—that she deceived you, and was false to me!"

"It is true. Listen, Henri; I swear it!" His face was pale; the tears streamed from his eyes; his clasped hands, uplifted, trembled.

"Then pardon me, Armande, for the injustice I have done you," faintly uttered Henri, extending his almost powerless hands, and seeking that of his brother—"pardon me, and I shall die in peace!"

The marquis clasped that wasted hand tenderly within his own. His tears fell upon it.

"Henri, I have nothing to forgive. We have both been unhappy," he uttered.

"Nay—you do not know the misery I have caused you. But I repent. It shall be confessed." His voice grew weaker.

"Where is Rose?" he asked.

"She is at the chateau. She has been ill; but, thanks be to heaven, she is recovering!" answered the marquis, earnestly.

"It is well. Give her my blessing, if she will receive it from me, when she knows all. I have been a wretch; but she has been an angel in my miserable home. Ah, if the prayers of one so good and pure as she could be offered to heaven for my salvation, surely they would be heard! Ask her to forgive, and pray for me, Armande." He paused, panting for breath, and unable for a moment to continue. There was a terrible and mournful silence in the room. Suddenly he regathered his waning energies. "Hear me, Armande, my brother, while I have strength left to make atonement. Beneath the hearth at the cottage, you will find an iron chest; it contains my confession!" He paused again; his strength was rapidly failing. A moment, and he resumed, turning once more his fast-dimming eyes to his brother's face. "It will tell you of your lost daughter—of Marguerite!" he gasped.

"Of Marguerite! Speak—speak, Henri!" cried the marquis, in terrible agitation; "tell me—I divine it—confess, I implore you! He cannot tell it—he is dying! O, for a moment longer!" he said. "Henri, tell me; breathe but one word; what of Marguerite?" He bent down nearer, waiting in awful suspense.

The glazing eyes opened again. The lips moved. "Armande, hear!" were the slow, painfully whispered words. "Rose—I stole her! She is—your child." (To be continued.)

Edison's Deafness. The Electrical Review says that an ear specialist recently visited Thomas A. Edison and offered to cure him of his deafness. "What!" exclaimed Mr. Edison. "And give up the great advantage I have over you fellows! Why, I need it in my business—for, you see, my business is thinking, and, no matter what the rest of you are doing or how much noise you are making, it doesn't bother me, and I am able to concentrate my mind fully upon the subject in hand without interruption. Give up an advantage like that! Not much, until, possibly, I get so old I cannot work any longer."

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"What's the matter?" asked his wife. "Give me my hat, quick. There goes Timmins with a straw hat on. First straw hat of the season! If I don't make life a burden to him I'll know the reason why."—Washington Star.

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