

The Contrabandist; OR One Life's Secret!

A
TRUE
STORY
OF
THE
SOUTH
OF
FRANCE

CHAPTER XXII

It was evening; and, in the chamber of the young girl so lately reclaimed from the very portals of death, the deepest stillness reigned. Softly burned the shaded lamps, casting a subdued glow about the apartment, yet so disposed as to leave in shadow the curtained couch and its slumbering occupant. For Rose was sleeping calmly, so calmly, so quietly, that you might almost have thought her dead. The breath that floated from those pale lips was scarcely perceptible, though regular, so much had illness reduced her strength. She slept, nor dreamed of danger.

For the first time to-day the invalid was left alone. But suddenly the door near the head of the couch was opened noiselessly, and with slow and stealthy caution, from without. A tall, light-robed, ghost-like form glided in without a sound—ghost-like, except for the large, brilliant dark eyes that gleamed more wildly than ever to-night, and the crimson spot of excitement burning on either cheek, while all the rest of that face was ashy white. It was Helen Montauban! What more fitting time was there for her work of evil to be accomplished? None could witness her now; none were near this place. And the tiny flask gleamed in the softened light, as she drew it from her bosom.

One hand, holding the vial, was stretched forth to the silver cup set upon the stand by the bedside. Courage, and the work is done. Yet that guilty hand shook with fear, as, drop by drop, the poison was poured into the cup. And Helen Montauban glanced fearfully towards the door by which she had entered; for it almost seemed, to her miserable, horror-struck fancy, that some one must be watching her.

A shadow had startled her. With a ghastly smile at her own nervousness, she silently mingled the poison with the night drink of Rose; then, as noiselessly as she had entered, returned to her own room across the gallery. It was done! What had she to fear now? Who would ever dream, when the hour of death came, that such agency as this had been employed? Closing the door, she paced her chamber restlessly, with both hands clasped tightly against her heart, whose violent throbbings seemed to fill with clamorous sound this awful midnight silence. Listening in almost intolerable suspense, and pacing her apartment, she waited for some signal from the opposite chamber.

A whole hour passed. Then there was a sound—a light step—in the gallery. It was the Countess de Clairville, returning to the bedside of Rose. Helen Montauban could endure this suspense no longer. She must see, with her own eyes, the conclusion of this tragedy. Emerging from her apartment, therefore, she joined the countess, as she entered the opposite door.

"Ah, my dear, is that you? Then you have been asleep also?" said the countess, smiling. "But it is rather chilly to-night—do you not think so?"

"Yes—it is cold," uttered Helen Montauban, hoarsely—"it is cold!" and she shivered.

She drew near the fire and crouched shudderingly over the broad blaze. The Countess de Clairville went to the couch of Rose and bent over it for an instant.

"The dear child is asleep, I think," she said, presently, returning to the hearth. "How refreshing—how delightful it is for one to see her once more enjoying so gentle a slumber! Poor little Rose! she must be well high worn out with this fatiguing illness. I wonder," the lady continued, seating herself by the hearth, opposite Mademoiselle Montauban—"I wonder how her father is down at the village? They thought he was dying this morning when the marquis went down. What a sad thing it would have been if the father and daughter had both died!" She spoke in subdued whispers.

Mademoiselle Montauban bent lower over the blaze, warming her hands.

"And peculiar, too," she returned, in a low tone. "But we cannot be too careful of her, even now; for M. Mery says that, in her present feeble state, the least excitement or alarm might be fatal to her. I dread that. I think, suppose anything should happen, after all our rejoicing? We must be so cautious! The least thing, you know—the least thing might kill her!"

She shook as she uttered these words; her eyes were wild and strange. Those delicate, slender hands touched the flames, as she held them out, but she never knew it. A species of insanity was upon her. The protracted contemplation of this terrible deed, strong as were her nerves, had begun almost to tell upon her reason.

"I wonder if Hugh Lamonte is still living?" continued the countess. "It is a pity that he could not be brought here; but Jean Morel said they had declared it impossible to move him with safety. Besides, it would be dangerous to Rose, perhaps, if he were in her vicinity, for she would be more likely to gain some knowledge of his situation. Yet what a sorrowful thing it is that they cannot bid each other adieu!"

At that moment the door near the head of the couch was opened. Both the countess and Helen turned to see who entered. It was the physician, M. Mery. He paused by the bedside an instant, bent over Rose and listened. Her respiration was calm and regular, though almost imperceptible. After regarding her a moment, he advanced silently towards the hearth. A chill struck through the guilty Helen. She had not expected him so soon, and the deed was yet unaccomplished!

"Ah, M. Mery, is that you?" said the countess; and she bent eagerly forward. "How is—"

The physician placed a warning finger upon his lip.

"Not too loud, my dear madame," he whispered. "It is all over!"

"Ah, how sad!" The tears came into her eyes.

M. Mery sat down, leaning his head upon his hand. He was very grave-toned. Softly spoke a scarcely audible voice from the couch. The countess rose and went thither.

"You are awake, my dear?" she said, gently. "Ah, you have slept so nicely! And now, you are thirsty. Wait a moment, dear Rose."

She turned and took up the silver cup on the stand. A mingling of joy and horror the most intense, seized the murderer by the hearth.

"One moment, my dear madame," said M. Mery, hastily, rising and going towards her. "Let me give it to her."

He took the cup from the hand of the countess, glancing back as he did so, at Mademoiselle Montauban. Her brilliant eyes, fixed upon him with an awful fascination, were instantly averted. He stirred the contents of the cup slowly.



HELEN MONTAUBAN PREPARING THE FATAL POTION.

"It appears to me," he said, with fearful deliberation, "that there is something here which will do our little invalid no good. I will remove it, if you please, madame, and bring something different." And following the stealthy figure of Mademoiselle Montauban, as it glided from the apartment, he closed the door behind him.

They were alone together in the gallery, lighted only by a single lamp, which but faintly revealed that ghostly form, moving swiftly towards the opposite chamber. But, quicker than lightning, his grasp was upon her arm. Her weird, white face gleamed awfully upon him through the dim twilight. But she spoke no word.

"Come with me."

It was all he said. There was no power of resistance in the form beside him. Rapidly those two descended the staircase. He entered the library, with her arm locked in his; then he closed and locked the door. He stood before her. She was very still—very white. Only those terrible eyes burned like live coals amid lifeless ashes. He held the cup in his hand; he made her look at it.

"You know what this is?" he said.

There was no answer.

"You do know. You placed it there. I was a witness of the deed. Unhappy woman! What evil has that sweet child done to you? Would you murder your own sister—Marguerite Montauban?"

One moment the guilty woman gazed at him wildly. A gasp, a struggle, a faint cry, and she sank in awful convulsions at his feet.

That was a fearful night which followed, but it was only the commencement of a season fraught with agony. The marquis returned to the chateau from the deathbed of his brother, to find Helen struggling between life and death. For weeks she lay unconscious of everything about her; only coming out of the dull stupor that wrapt her, to fall, ever and anon, into those terrible convulsions, in which it seemed that nature must sink, worn out with the contest. The agitation produced by this circumstance, strange and sudden as it was, and the death of his brother, would have been beyond his power to bear had it not been for the inexpressible happiness which it was permitted him to enjoy in the discovery of his long-lost child. How would he have shuddered had he known the fearful fate which that sweet child had so narrowly escaped!

But the scenes enacted within the walls of the chateau that night were mercifully concealed from him. Fortunately for Helen Montauban, in the illness which succeeded the overwhelming denouement of the dark tragedy wherein she had taken so terrible a part, there was no delirium, or her wretched secret would inevitably have been betrayed; and M. Mery, who tended her constantly, had destroyed all evidence of her guilt, of which, on that night he had so providentially been made aware by returning, unannounced, and entering the apartment of the invalid just before the stealthy approach of the murderer. Her illness he allowed all to attribute to the agitation, anxiety and excitement attendant on the late danger of Rose, trusting that, if she recovered, she would bitterly repent, in secret, her sinful attempt on her sister's life, and unwilling to add to the shame

and agony which she would feel by betraying her guilt. He could guess at the cause of her enmity towards Rose; for M. Mery was a shrewd man; and he resolved to expedite the union of the lovers as much as was possible, that, in case the hatred of Helen should be still unsatisfied, the young girl might be safe from her reach, under the protection of her husband.

Meanwhile the burial of Henri took place. It was quiet, unostentatious. He was laid in the family vault, to rest at last, after a weary life of sorrow, of desperation and of crime. Only the marquis and the immediate members of his family were made acquainted with the history of the unhappy man, in the records which he left behind. Louis returned from Paris in time for this burial. Returned, in anticipation of his approaching marriage day, to find his intended bride but just recovering from a dangerous illness, and Helen Montauban, as many believed, at the gates of death; to learn the story of the strangely chequered life of his deceased relative, and recognize, in his beloved Rose, a cousin, and the child so long mourned as lost by his uncle. What an astounding revelation was this.

In the evening preceding the bridal day the marquis called Rose to him in the library, and after some remarks, careless and insignificant enough in themselves, but accompanied by a manner that betrayed the emotion agitating him, he said, suddenly:

"Rose, my child, you have loved your father?"

"O, yes, monsieur," she replied, earnestly, and with tears standing in her eyes.

"And you have also loved me, Rose?" His voice trembled, despite his efforts to control himself.

"Ah, my friend, my benefactor, what have you been to me but a second father?"

He seated himself beside her.

"It is sweet, my child, to hear you say this—ah, you do not know how sweet to me! Rose, did I not tell you once that I lost, fourteen or fifteen years ago, a child—a lovely, gentle infant, whose picture you have seen in the saloon—a child who was stolen from me?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"And I have told you that you were what that child would be now if she were living. It is why you have ever been so dear to me. Ah, many a time, Rose, I have clasped you in my arms with an emotion of tenderness which, even had you felt, you could not have comprehended! For my child—my Marguerite—my pearl—resembled her mother—her sweet mother, my wife, and you were the image of both mother and child. And now listen, Rose. It is within these two last months, Rose, that I have discovered what became of my little Marguerite. She was stolen from me by my own brother, Henri. You start, Rose, and turn pale. It was so; it was his revenge. He would have taken Helen, the child of her whom he had loved so madly; but he knew that I loved my youngest darling the best—that I idolized the daughter of my lost Marguerite; and he took the youngest. He reared her as his own. He brought her into this neighborhood, after an absence of two years, during which time she had grown and altered beyond recognition, though, when I met her, I saw a likeness to my wife. Yet I never suspected. He dwelt, a solitary man, with this little orphan child, whose mother—his wife—they said was dead. He lived not more than half a league from this very dwelling. There my child, unrecognized, expanded into a lovely womanhood. She was—"

He was interrupted in his hurried and agitated recital by a faint cry from Rose. She sprang up with clasped hands and quivering lips.

"O, tell me—tell me who it was!" she cried. "Speak—it was—"

"My child—my daughter!" uttered the marquis, extending his arms to embrace her; "behold her—for they called her—Rose Lamonte!"

"Ah, my father!" And with the soft utterance of that dear name, she fainted upon his breast.

As a matter of course, Rose—no, Marguerite—and Louis were united. And though Marguerite mourned still, with a child's affection, the loss of him whom she had hitherto regarded as a parent, yet her heart turned, with natural love, to her true father; and the regard which she had ever felt for him, while her relationship to him was yet unknown, expanded and deepened now into that holiest and tenderest of sentiments—a daughter's affection.

Helen Montauban, as soon as her health became re-established, entered a convent, to enter upon her novitiate; and when it was expired, assumed the veil, that shut her from a world grown hateful to her. The frustration of her evil design upon her sister was too much for her to bear; and though, thanks to the mercy of M. Mery, her guilt remained a secret from all save himself, yet she could not endure to meet daily with those whose happiness continually reminded her of the fate alike of her love and her revenge. None knew why she entered the convent, save M. Mery. Persuasion had availed nothing, and a nun she became.

Francis Egerton returned to Paris, where, in a year or two, he married happily. Jacques Leroux, shortly after the death of his former leader, returned to the neighborhood of the Chateau Montauban, and entered in the service of Louis d'Artois, whom he served faithfully and who rewarded him well for his many services.

(The end.)

A REVERSAL.

Frank—John's wife isn't the kind of a woman he should have married at all. And I understand she was his cook before he married her?

Henry—Yes.

Frank—What did he ever do that for?

Henry—Well, he said the first woman he married was a good wife, but no sort of a cook, so he thought he would reverse the order when he had the chance.



Mrs. Anderson, a prominent society woman of Jacksonville, Fla., daughter of Recorder of Deeds, West, who witnessed her signature to the following letter, praises Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound.

"DEAR MRS. PINKHAM:—There are but few wives and mothers who have not at times endured agonies and such pain as only women know. I wish such women knew the value of Lydia E. Pinkham's Vegetable Compound. It is a remarkable medicine, different in action from any I ever knew and thoroughly reliable.

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Why He Quit.

Hal—What, you've stopped calling on the girl with the plaid waist!

Tom—Yes; it's all over there.

Hal—Why? Father object?

Tom—Bless you, no! And I had nerve enough to dodge all her hints about popping the question also, but the last time I called she had the sign "Do It Now" stuck on the center table. That floored me, and I've quit.

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Could Use Him.

"Do you know," said the pretty girl, addressing the strange young man on the opposite seat in the street car who had been staring at her impudently for several minutes, "you put me so much in mind of my brother?"

"Do I?" he responded, with a killing smile. "I am delighted to hear it."

"Yes. You make me wish he was here for just about a minute."—Chicago Tribune.