

CHAPTER XVI

MADAME CERISE, CUSTODIAN

The woman closed the hall door and locked it. Then she led the way to a long, dim drawing-room in which a grate fire was smouldering. A stand lamp of antique pattern but dimly illuminated the place, which seemed well furnished in an old fashioned way.

"Will not you remove your wraps, Mees--Mees--I do not know ma'm'selle's name."

"What is your own name?" asked Louise, coming closer to gaze earnestly into the other's face.

"I am called Madame Cerise, if it please you."

Her voice, while softened to an extent by the French accent, was nevertheless harsh and emotionless. She spoke as an automaton, slowly, and pausing to choose her words. The woman was of medium size, slim and straight in spite of many years. Her skin resembled brown parchment; her eyes were small, black and beady; her nose somewhat fleshy and her lips red and full as those of a young girl. The age of Madame Cerise might be anywhere between fifty and seventy; assuredly she had long been a stranger to youth, although her dark hair was but slightly streaked with

gray. She wore a somber-hued gown and a maid's jaunty apron and cap.

Louise inspected her closely, longing to find a friend and protector in this curious and strange woman. Her eyes were moist and pleading--an appeal hard to resist. But Madame Cerise returned her scrutiny with a wholly impassive expression.

"You are a French maid?" asked Louise, softly.

"A housekeeper, ma'm'selle. For a time, a caretaker."

"Ah, I understand. Are your employers asleep?"

"I cannot say, ma'm'seile. They are not here."

"You are alone in this house?"

"Alone with you, ma'm'seile."

Louise had a sudden access of alarm.

"And why am I here?" she cried, wringing her hands pitifully.

"Ah, who can tell that?" returned the woman, composedly. "Not Cerise, indeed. Cerise is told nothing--except what is required of her. I but obey my orders."

Louise turned quickly, at this.

"What are your orders, then?" she asked.

"To attend ma'm'selle with my best skill, to give her every comfort and care, to--"

"Yes--yes!"

"To keep her safely until she is called for. That is all."

The girl drew a long breath.

"Who will call for me, then?"

"I am not inform, ma'm'selle."

"And I am a prisoner in this house?"

"Ma'm'selle may call it so, if it please her. But reflect; there is no place else to go. It is bleak weather, the winter soon comes. And here I can make you the comforts you need."

Louise pondered this speech, which did not deceive her. While still perplexed as to her abduction, with no comprehension why she should have

been seized in such a summary manner and spirited to this lonely, out-of-the-way place, she realized she was in no immediate danger. Her weariness returned tenfold, and she staggered and caught the back of a chair for support.

The old woman observed this.

"Ma'm'selle is tired," said she. "See; it is past four by the clock, and you must be much fatigued by the ride and the nervous strain."

"I--I'm completely exhausted," murmured Louise, drooping her head wearily. The next moment she ran and placed her hands on Madame Cerise's shoulders, peering into the round, beady eyes with tender pleading as she continued: "I don't know why I have been stolen away from my home and friends; I don't know why this dreadful thing has happened to me; I only know that I am worn out and need rest. Will you take care of me, Madame Cerise? Will you watch over me while I sleep and guard me from all harm? I--I haven't any mother to lean on now, you know; I haven't any friend at all--but you!"

The grim features never relaxed a muscle; but a softer look came into the dark eyes and the woman's voice took on a faint tinge of compassion as she answered:

"Nothing can harm ma'm'selle. Have no fear, ma chere. I will take care

of you; I will watch. Allons! it is my duty; it is also my pleasure."

"Are there no--no men in the house--none at all?" enquired the girl, peering into the surrounding gloom nervously. "There is no person at all in the house, but you and I."

"And you will admit no one?"

The woman hesitated.

"Not to your apartment," she said firmly. "I promise it."

Louise gave a long, fluttering sigh. Somehow, she felt that she could rely upon this promise.

"Then, if you please, Madame Cerise, I'd like to go to bed," she said.

The woman took the lamp and led the way upstairs, entering a large, airy chamber in which a fire burned brightly in the grate. The furniture here was dainty and feminine. In an alcove stood a snowy bed, the covers invitingly turned down.

Madame Cerise set the lamp upon a table and without a word turned to assist Louise. The beautiful Kermess costume, elaborately embroidered with roses, which the girl still wore, evidently won the Frenchwoman's approval. She unhooked and removed it carefully and hung it in a closet.

Very dextrous were her motions as she took down the girl's pretty hair and braided it for the night. A dainty robe de nuit was provided.

"It is my own," she said simply. "Ma'm'selle is not prepared." "But there must be young ladies in your family," remarked Louise, thoughtfully, for in spite of the stupor she felt from want of sleep the novelty of her position kept her alert in a way. It is true she was too tired and bewildered to think clearly, but slight details were impressing themselves upon her dimly. "This room, for instance--"

"Of course, ma chere, a young lady has lived here. She has left some odd pieces of wardrobe behind her, at times, in going away. When you waken we will try to find a house-dress to replace your evening-gown. Will ma'm'selle indulge in the bath before retiring?"

"Not to-night, Madame Cerise. I'm too tired for anything but--sleep!"

Indeed, she had no sooner crawled into the enticing bed than she sank into unconscious forgetfulness. This was to an extent fortunate. Louise possessed one of those dispositions cheery and equable under ordinary circumstances, but easily crushed into apathy by any sudden adversity. She would not suffer so much as a more excitable and nervous girl might do under similar circumstances.

Her sleep, following the severe strain of the night's adventure, did little to refresh her. She awoke in broad daylight to hear a cold wind

whistling shrilly outside and raindrops beating against the panes.

Madame Cerise had not slept much during the night. For an hour after Louise retired she sat in her room in deep thought. Then she went to the telephone and notwithstanding the late hour called up Diana, who had a branch telephone on a table at her bedside.

Miss Von Taer was not asleep. She had had an exciting night herself. She answered the old caretaker readily and it did not surprise her to learn that the missing girl had been taken to the East Orange house by the orders of Charlie Mershone. She enquired how Louise had accepted the situation forced upon her, and was shocked and rendered uncomfortable by the too plainly worded protest of the old Frenchwoman. Madame Cerise did not hesitate to denounce the abduction as a heartless crime, and in her communication with Diana swore she would protect the innocent girl from harm at the hands of Mershone or anyone else.

"I have ever to your family been loyal and true, Ma'm'selle Diana," said she, "but I will not become the instrument of an abominable crime at your command or that of your wicked cousin. I will keep the girl here in safety, if it is your wish; but she will be safe, indeed, as long as Cerise guards her."

"That's right, Madame," stammered Diana, hardly knowing at the moment what to say. "Be discreet and silent until you hear from me again; guard the girl carefully and see that she is not too unhappy; but for heaven's

sake keep Charlie's secret until he sees fit to restore Miss Merrick to her friends. No crime is contemplated; I would not allow such a thing, as you know. Yet it is none of my affair whatever. My cousin has compromised me by taking the girl to my house, and no knowledge of the abduction must get abroad if we can help it. Do you understand me?"

"No," was the reply. "The safest way for us all is to send Miss Merrick away."

"That will be done as soon as possible."

With this the old Frenchwoman was forced to be content, and she did not suspect that her report had made Miss Von Taer nearly frantic with fear--not for Louise but for her own precious reputation. Accustomed to obey the family she had served for so many years, Madame Cerise hesitated to follow her natural impulse to set the poor young lady free and assist her to return to her friends. So she compromised with her conscience--a thing she was not credited with possessing--by resolving to make the imprisonment of the "pauvre fille" as happy as possible.

Scarcely had Louise opened her eyes the following morning when the old woman entered her chamber, unlocking the door from the outside to secure admission.

She first rebuilt the fire, and when it was crackling cheerfully she prepared a bath and brought an armful of clothing which she laid out for

inspection over the back of a sofa. She produced lingerie, too, and Louise lay cuddled up in the bedclothes and watched her keeper thoughtfully until the atmosphere of the room was sufficiently warmed.

"I'll get up, now," she said, quietly.

Madame Cerise was assuredly a skilled lady's maid. She bathed the girl, wrapped her in an ample kimono and then seated her before the dresser and arranged her coiffure with dextrous skill.

During this time Louise talked. She had decided her only chance of escape lay in conciliating this stern-faced woman, and she began by relating her entire history, including her love affair with Arthur Weldon, Diana Von Taer's attempt to rob her of her lover, and the part that Charlie Mershone had taken in the affair.

Madame Cerise listened, but said nothing.

"And now," continued the girl, "tell me who you think could be so wicked and cruel as to carry me away from my home and friends? I cannot decide myself. You have more experience and more shrewdness, can't you tell me, Madame Cerise?"

The woman muttered inaudibly.

"Mr. Mershone might be an enemy, because I laughed at his love-making,"

continued Louise, musingly. "Would a man who loved a girl try to injure her? But perhaps his love has turned to hate. Anyhow, I can think of no one else who would do such a thing, or of any reason why Charlie Mershone should do it."

Madame Cerise merely grunted. She was brushing the soft hair with gentle care.

"What could a man gain by stealing a girl? If it was Mr. Mershone, does he imagine I could ever forget Arthur? Or cease to love him? Or that Arthur would forget me while I am away? Perhaps it's Diana, and she wants to get rid of me so she can coax Arthur back to her side. But that's nonsense; isn't it, Madame Cerise? No girl--not even Diana Von Taer--would dare to act in such a high-handed manner toward her rival. Did you ever hear of Miss Von Taer? She's quite a society belle. Have you ever seen her, Madame Cerise?"

The woman vouchsafed no reply to this direct enquiry, but busied herself dressing the girl's hair. Louise casually turned over the silver-mounted hand mirror she was holding and gave a sudden start. A monogram was engraved upon the metal: "D.v.T." She gazed at the mark fixedly and then picked up a brush that the Frenchwoman laid down. Yes, the same monogram appeared upon the brush.

The sharp eyes of Cerise had noted these movements. She was a little

dismayed but not startled when Louise said, slowly: "'D.v.T.' stands for Diana Von Taer. And it isn't likely to stand for anything else. I think the mystery is explained, now, and my worst fears are realized. Tell me, Madame, is this Diana Von Taer's house?"

Her eyes shone with anger and round red patches suddenly appeared upon her pallid cheeks. Madame Cerise drew a long breath.

"It used to be," was her quiet answer. "It was left her by her grandmother; but Mr. Von Taer did not like the place and they have not been here lately--not for years. Miss Von Taer informed me, some time ago, that she had transferred the property to another."

"To her cousin--Mr. Mershone?" asked Louise quickly.

"That may be the name; I cannot remember," was the evasive reply.

"But you must know him, as he is Diana's cousin," retorted Louise. "Why will you try to deceive me? Am I not helpless enough already, and do you wish to make me still more miserable?"

"I have seen Mr. Mershone when he was a boy, many times. He was not the favorite with Ma'm'selle Diana, nor with Monsieur Von Taer. For myself, I hated him."

There was decided emphasis to the last sentence. Louise believed her and

felt a little relieved.

From the mélange of apparel a modest outfit was obtained to clothe the girl with decency and comfort, if not in the prevailing style. The fit left much to be desired, yet Louise did not complain, as weightier matters were now occupying her mind.

The toilet completed, Madame Cerise disappeared to get a tray containing a good breakfast. She seemed exceedingly attentive.

"If you will give me the proper directions I will start for home at once," announced Louise, with firm resolve, while eating her egg and toast.

"I am unable to give you directions, and I cannot let you go, ma'm'selle," was the equally firm reply. "The day is much too disagreeable to venture out in, unless one has proper conveyance. Here, alas, no conveyance may be had."

Louise tried other tactics.

"I have no money, but several valuable jewels," she said, meaningly. "I am quite sure they will obtain for me a conveyance."

"You are wrong, ma'm'selle; there is no conveyance to be had!" persisted the old woman, more sternly.

"Then I shall walk."

"It is impossible."

"Where is this place situated? How far is it from New York? How near am I to a street-car, or to a train?"

"I cannot tell you."

"But this is absurd!" cried Louise. "You cannot deceive me for long. I know this is Diana Von Taer's house, and I shall hold Diana Von Taer responsible for this enforced imprisonment."

"That," said Madame Cerise, coldly, "is a matter of indifference to me. But ma'm'selle must understand one thing, she must not leave this house."

"Oh, indeed!"

"At least, until the weather moderates," added the woman, more mildly.

She picked up the tray, went to the door and passed out. Louise heard the key click in the lock.