

Chapter 22

HOW M. AND MADAME DE ST. LUC MET WITH A TRAVELING COMPANION.

The next morning, about the time when Gorenflot woke from his nap, warmly rolled in his frock, our reader, if he had been traveling on the road from Paris to Angers, might have seen a gentleman and his page, riding quietly side by side. These cavaliers had arrived at Chartres the evening before, with foaming horses, one of which had fallen with fatigue, as they stopped. They entered the inn, and half an hour after set out on fresh horses. Once in the country, still bare and cold, the taller of the two approached the other, and said, as he opened his arms: "Dear little wife, embrace me, for now we are safe."

Then Madame de St. Luc, leaning forward and opening her thick cloak, placed her arms round the young man's neck and gave him the long and tender kiss which he had asked for. They stayed the night in the little village of Courville four leagues only from Chartres, but which from its isolation seemed to them a secure retreat; and it was on the following morning that they were, as we said, pursuing their way. This day, as they were more easy in their minds, they traveled no longer like fugitives, but like schoolboys seeking for moss, for the first few early flowers, enjoying the sunshine and amused at everything."

"Morbleu!" cried St. Luc, at last, "how delightful it is to be free. Have you ever been free, Jeanne?"

"I?" cried she, laughing, "never; it is the first time I ever felt so. My father was suspicious, and my mother lazy. I never went out without a governess and two lackeys, so that I do not remember having run on the grass, since, when a laughing child, I ran in the woods of Méridor with my dear Diana, challenging her to race, and rushing through the branches. But you, dear St. Luc; you were free, at least?"

"I, free?"

"Doubtless, a man."

"Never. Brought up with the Duc d'Anjou, taken by him to Poland, brought back to Paris, condemned never to leave him by the perpetual rule of etiquette; pursued, if I tried to go away, by that doleful voice, crying, 'St. Luc, my friend, I am ennuyé, come and amuse me.' Free, with that stiff corset which strangled me, and that great ruff which scratched my neck! No, I have never been free till now, and I enjoy it."

"If they should catch us, and send us to the Bastile?"

"If they only put us there together, we can bear it."

"I do not think they would. But there is no fear, if you only knew Méridor, its great oaks, and its endless thickets, its rivers, its lakes, its flower-beds and lawns; and, then, in the midst of all, the queen of this kingdom, the beautiful, the good Diana. And I know she loves me still; she is not capricious in her friendships. Think of the happy life we shall lead there."

"Let us push on; I am in haste to get there," and they rode on, stayed the night at Mans, and then set off for Méridor. They had already reached the woods and thought themselves in safety, when they saw behind them a cavalier advancing at a rapid pace. St. Luc grew pale.

"Let us fly," said Jeanne.

"Yes; let us fly, for there is a plume on that hat which disquiets me; it is of a color much in vogue at the court, and he looks to me like an ambassador from our royal master."

But to fly was easier to say than to do; the trees grew so thickly that it was impossible to ride through them but slowly, and the soil was so sandy that the horses sank into it at every step. The cavalier gained upon them rapidly, and soon they heard his voice crying,--

"Eh, monsieur, do not run away; I bring you something you have lost."

"What does he say?" asked Jeanne.

"He says we have lost something."

"Eh! monsieur," cried the unknown, again, "you left a bracelet in the hotel at Courville. Diable! a lady's portrait; above all, that of Madame de Cossé. For the sake of that dear mamma, do not run away."

"I know that voice," said St. Luc.

"And then he speaks of my mother."

"It is Bussy!"

"The Comte de Bussy, our friend," and they reined up their horses.

"Good morning, madame," said Bussy, laughing, and giving her the bracelet.

"Have you come from the king to arrest us?"

"No, ma foi, I am not sufficiently his majesty's friend for such a mission. No, I found your bracelet at the hotel, which showed me that you preceded me on my way."

"Then," said St. Luc, "it is chance which brings you on our path."

"Chance, or rather Providence."

Every remaining shadow of suspicion vanished before the sincere smile and bright eyes of the handsome speaker.

"Then you are traveling?" asked Jeanne.

"I am."

"But not like us?"

"Unhappily; no."

"I mean in disgrace. Where are you going?"

"Towards Angers, and you?"

"We also."

"Ah! I should envy your happiness if envy were not so vile."

"Eh! M. de Bussy, marry, and you will be as happy as we are," said Jeanne; "it is so easy to be happy when you are loved."

"Ah! madame, everyone is not so fortunate as you."

"But you, the universal favorite."

"To be loved by everyone is as though you were loved by no one, madame."

"Well, let me marry you, and you will know the happiness you deny."

"I do not deny the happiness, only that it does not exist for me."

"Shall I marry you?"

"If you marry me according to your taste, no; if according to mine, yes."

"Are you in love with a woman whom you cannot marry?"

"Comte," said Bussy, "beg your wife not to plunge dagger in my heart."

"Take care, Bussy; you will make me think it is with her you are in love."

"If it were so, you will confess, at least, that I am a lover not much to be feared."

"True," said St. Luc, remembering how Bussy had brought him his wife.
"But confess, your heart is occupied."

"I avow it."

"By a love, or by a caprice?" asked Jeanne.

"By a passion, madame."

"I will cure you."

"I do not believe it."

"I will marry you."

"I doubt it."

"And I will make you as happy as you ought to be."

"Alas! madame, my only happiness now is to be unhappy."

"I am very determined."

"And I also."

"Well, will you accompany us?"

"Where are you going?"

"To the château of Méridor."

The blood mounted to the cheeks of Bussy, and then he grew so pale, that his secret would certainly have been betrayed, had not Jeanne been looking at her husband with a smile. Bussy therefore had time to recover himself, and said,--

"Where is that?"

"It is the property of one of my best friends."

"One of your best friends, and--are they at home?"

"Doubtless," said Jeanne, who was completely ignorant of the events of the last two months; "but have you never heard of the Baron de Méridor, one of the richest noblemen in France, and of----"

"Of what?"

"Of his daughter, Diana, the most beautiful girl possible?"

Bussy was filled with astonishment, asking himself by what singular happiness he found on the road people to talk to him of Diana de Méridor to echo the only thought which he had in his mind.

"Is this castle far off, madame?" asked he.

"About seven leagues, and we shall sleep there to-night; you will come, will you not?"

"Yes, madame."

"Come, that is already a step towards the happiness I promised you."

"And the baron, what sort of a man is he?"

"A perfect gentleman, a preux chevalier, who, had he lived in King Arthur's time, would have had a place at his round table."

"And," said Bussy, steadying his voice, "to whom is his daughter married?"

"Diana married?"

"Would that be extraordinary?"

"Of course not, only I should have been the first to hear of it."

Bussy could not repress a sigh. "Then," said he, "you expect to find Mademoiselle de Méridor at the château with her father?"

"We trust so."

They rode on a long time in silence, and at last Jeanne cried:

"Ah! there are the turrets of the castle. Look, M. de Bussy, through that great leafless wood, which in a month, will be so beautiful; do you not see the roof?"

"Yes," said Bussy, with an emotion which astonished himself; "and is that the château of Méridor?"

And he thought of the poor prisoner shut up in the Rue St. Antoine.