

Chapter 23

THE OLD MAN.

Two hours after they reached the castle. Bussy had been debating within himself whether or not to confide to his friends what he knew about Diana. But there was much that he could tell to no one, and he feared their questions, and besides, he wished to enter Méridor as a stranger.

Madame de St. Luc was surprised, when the report sounded his horn to announce a visit, that Diana did not run as usual to meet them, but instead of her appeared an old man, bent and leaning on a stick, and his white hair flying in the wind. He crossed the drawbridge, followed by two great dogs, and when he drew quite near, said in a feeble voice,--

"Who is there, and who does a poor old man the honor to visit him?"

"It is I, Seigneur Augustin!" cried the laughing voice of the young woman.

But the baron, raising his head slowly, said, "You? I do not see. Who is it?"

"Oh, mon Dieu!" cried Jeanne, "do you not know me? It is true, my disguise-
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"Excuse me," said the old man, "but I can see little; the eyes of old men are not made for weeping, and if they weep too much, the tears burn them."

"Must I tell you my name? I am Madame de St. Luc."

"I do not know you."

"Ah! but my maiden name was Jeanne de Cosse-Brissac."

"Ah, mon Dieu!" cried the old man, trying to open the gate with his trembling hands. Jeanne, who did not understand this strange reception, still attributed it only to his declining faculties; but, seeing that he remembered her, jumped off her horse to embrace him, but as she did so she felt his cheek wet with tears.

"Come," said the old man, turning towards the house, without even noticing the others. The château had a strange sad look; all the blinds were down, and no one was visible.

"Is Diana unfortunately not at home?" asked Jeanne. The old man stopped, and looked at her with an almost terrified expression. "Diana!" said he. At this name the two dogs uttered a mournful howl. "Diana!" repeated the old man; "do you not, then, know?"

And his voice, trembling before, was extinguished in a sob.

"But what has happened?" cried Jeanne, clasping her hands.

"Diana is dead!" cried the old man, with a torrent of tears.

"Dead!" cried Jeanne, growing as pale as death.

"Dead," thought Bussy; "then he has let him also think her dead. Poor old man! how he will bless me some day!"

"Dead!" cried the old man again; "they killed her."

"Ah, my dear baron!" cried Jeanne, bursting into tears, and throwing her arms round the old man's neck.

"But," said he at last, "though desolate and empty, the old house is none the less hospitable. Enter."

Jeanne took the old man's arm, and they went into the dining-hall, where he sunk into his armchair. At last, he said, "You said you were married; which is your husband?"

M. de St. Luc advanced and bowed to the old man, who tried to smile as he saluted him; then, turning to Bussy, said, "And this gentleman?"

"He is our friend, M. Louis de Clermont, Comte de Bussy d'Amboise, gentleman of M. le Duc d'Anjou."

At these words the old man started up, threw a withering glance at Bussy, and then sank back with a groan.

"What is it?" said Jeanne.

"Does the baron know you, M. de Bussy?" asked St. Luc.

"It is the first time I ever had the honor of seeing M. de Méridor," said Bussy, who alone understood the effect which the name of the Duc d'Anjou had produced on the old man.

"Ah! you a gentleman of the Duc d'Anjou!" cried the baron, "of that monster, that demon, and you dare to avow it, and have the audacity to present yourself here!"

"Is he mad?" asked St. Luc of his wife.

"Grief must have turned his brain," replied she, in terror.

"Yes, that monster!" cried he again; "the assassin who killed my child! Ah, you do not know," continued he, taking Jeanne's hands; "but the duke killed my Diana, my child--he killed her!"

Tears stood in Bussy's eyes, and Jeanne said:

"Seigneur, were it so, which I do not understand, you cannot accuse M. de Bussy of this dreadful crime--he, who is the most noble and generous gentleman living. See, my good father, he weeps with us. Would he have come had he known how you would receive him? Ah, dear baron, tell us how this catastrophe happened."

"Then you did not know?" said the old man to Bussy.

"Eh, mon Dieu! no," cried Jeanne, "we none of us knew."

"My Diana is dead, and her best friend did not know it! Oh, it is true! I wrote to no one; it seemed to me that everything must die with her. Well, this prince, this disgrace to France, saw my Diana, and, finding her so beautiful, had her carried away to his castle of Beaugé to dishonor her. But Diana, my noble and sainted Diana, chose death instead. She threw herself from the window into the lake, and they found nothing but her veil floating on the surface." And the old man finished with a burst of sobs which overwhelmed them all.

"Oh, comte," cried St. Luc, "you must abandon this infamous prince; a noble heart like yours cannot remain friendly to a ravisher and an assassin!"

But Bussy instead of replying to this, advanced to M. de Méridor.

"M. le Baron," said he, "will you grant me the honor of a private interview?"

"Listen to M. de Bussy, dear seigneur," said Jeanne; "you will see that he is good and may help you."

"Speak, monsieur," said the baron, trembling.

Bussy turned to St. Luc and his wife, and said:

"Will you permit me?"

The young couple went out, and then Bussy said: "M. le Baron, you have accused the prince whom I serve in terms which force me to ask for an explanation. Do not mistake the sense in which I speak; it is with the most profound sympathy, and the most earnest desire to soften your griefs, that I beg of you to recount to me the details of this dreadful event. Are you sure all hope is lost?"

"Monsieur, I had once a moment's hope. A noble gentleman, M. de Monsoreau, loved my poor daughter, and interested himself for her."

"M. de Monsoreau! Well, what was his conduct in all this!"

"Ah, generous; for Diana had refused his hand. He was the first to tell me of the infamous projects of the duke; he showed me how to baffle them, only asking, if he succeeded, for her hand. I gave my consent with joy; but alas! it was useless--he arrived too late--my poor Diana had saved herself by death!"

"And since then, what have you heard of him?"

"It is a month ago, and the poor gentleman has not dared to appear before me, having failed in his generous design."

"Well, monsieur," said Bussy, "I am charged by the Duc d'Anjou to bring you to Paris, where his highness desires to speak to you."

"I!" cried the baron, "I see this man! And what can the murderer have to say to me?"

"Who knows? To justify himself perhaps."

"No, M. de Bussy, no, I will not go to Paris; it would be too far away from where my child lies in her cold bed."

"M. le Baron," said Bussy firmly, "I have come expressly to take you to Paris, and it is my duty to do so."

"Well, I will go," cried the old man, trembling with anger; "but woe to those who bring me. The king will hear me, or, if he will not, I will appeal to all the gentlemen of France. Yes, M. de Bussy, I will accompany you."

"And I, M. le Baron," said Bussy, taking his hand, "recommend to you the patience and calm dignity of a Christian nobleman. God is merciful to noble hearts, and you know not what He reserves for you. I beg you also, while

waiting for that day, not to count me among your enemies, for you do not know what I will do for you. Till to-morrow, then, baron, and early in the morning we will set off."

"I consent," replied the old baron, moved by Bussy's tone and words; "but meanwhile, friend or enemy, you are my guest, and I will show you to your room."