

Chapter 21

M. Malicorne the Keeper of the Records of France.

Two women, their figures completely concealed by their mantles, and whose masks effectually hid the upper portion of their faces, timidly followed Manicamp's steps. On the first floor, behind curtains of red damask, the soft light of a lamp placed upon a low table faintly illumined the room, at the other extremity of which, on a large bedstead supported by spiral columns, around which curtains of the same color as those which deadened the rays of the lamp had been closely drawn, lay De Guiche, his head supported by pillows, his eyes looking as if the mists of death were gathering; his long black hair, scattered over the pillow, set off the young man's hollow temples. It was easy to see that fever was the chief tenant of the chamber. De Guiche was dreaming. His wandering mind was pursuing, through gloom and mystery, one of those wild creations delirium engenders. Two or three drops of blood, still liquid, stained the floor. Manicamp hurriedly ran up the stairs, but paused at the threshold of the door, looked into the room, and seeing that everything was perfectly quiet, he advanced towards the foot of the large leathern armchair, a specimen of furniture of the reign of Henry IV., and seeing that the nurse, as a matter of course, had dropped off to sleep, he awoke her, and begged her to pass into the adjoining room.

Then, standing by the side of the bed, he remained for a moment deliberating whether it would be better to awaken Guiche, in order to acquaint him with the good news. But, as he began to hear behind the

door the rustling of silk dresses and the hurried breathing of his two companions, and as he already saw that the curtain screening the doorway seemed on the point of being impatiently drawn aside, he passed round the bed and followed the nurse into the next room. As soon as he had disappeared the curtain was raised, and his two female companions entered the room he had just left. The one who entered first made a gesture to her companion, which riveted her to the spot where she stood, close to the door, and then resolutely advanced towards the bed, drew back the curtains along the iron rod, and threw them in thick folds behind the head of the bed. She gazed upon the comte's pallid face; remarked his right hand enveloped in linen whose dazzling whiteness was emphasized by the counterpane patterned with dark leaves thrown across the couch. She shuddered as she saw a stain of blood growing larger and larger upon the bandages. The young man's breast was uncovered, as though for the cool night air to assist his respiration. A narrow bandage fastened the dressings of the wound, around which a purplish circle of extravasated blood was gradually increasing in size. A deep sigh broke from her lips. She leaned against one of the columns of the bed, and gazed, through the apertures in her mask, upon the harrowing spectacle before her. A hoarse harsh groan passed like a death-rattle through the comte's clenched teeth. The masked lady seized his left hand, which scorched like burning coals. But at the very moment she placed her icy hand upon it, the action of the cold was such that De Guiche opened his eyes, and by a look in which revived intelligence was dawning, seemed as though struggling back again into existence. The first thing upon which he fixed his gaze was this phantom standing erect by his bedside. At that

sight, his eyes became dilated, but without any appearance of consciousness in them. The lady thereupon made a sign to her companion, who had remained at the door; and in all probability the latter had already received her lesson, for in a clear tone of voice, and without any hesitation whatever, she pronounced these words: - "Monsieur le comte, her royal highness Madame is desirous of knowing how you are able to bear your wound, and to express to you, by my lips, her great regret at seeing you suffer."

As she pronounced the word Madame, Guiche started; he had not as yet remarked the person to whom the voice belonged, and he naturally turned towards the direction whence it preceded. But, as he felt the cold hand still resting on his own, he again turned towards the motionless figure beside him. "Was it you who spoke, madame?" he asked, in a weak voice, "or is there another person in beside you in the room?"

"Yes," replied the figure, in an almost unintelligible voice, as she bent down her head.

"Well," said the wounded man, with a great effort, "I thank you. Tell Madame that I no longer regret to die, since she has remembered me."

At the words "to die," pronounced by one whose life seemed to hang on a thread, the masked lady could not restrain her tears, which flowed under the mask, and appeared upon her cheeks just where the mask left her face bare. If De Guiche had been in fuller possession of his senses, he would

have seen her tears roll like glistening pearls, and fall upon his bed. The lady, forgetting that she wore her mask, raised her hand as though to wipe her eyes, and meeting the rough velvet, she tore away her mask in anger, and threw it on the floor. At the unexpected apparition before him, which seemed to issue from a cloud, De Guiche uttered a cry and stretched his arms towards her; but every word perished on his lips, and his strength seemed utterly abandoning him. His right hand, which had followed his first impulse, without calculating the amount of strength he had left, fell back again upon the bed, and immediately afterwards the white linen was stained with a larger spot than before. In the meantime, the young man's eyes became dim, and closed, as if he were already struggling with the messenger of death; and then, after a few involuntary movements, his head fell back motionless on his pillow; his face grew livid. The lady was frightened; but on this occasion, contrary to what is usually the case, fear attracted. She leaned over the young man, gazed earnestly, fixedly at his pale, cold face, which she almost touched, then imprinted a rapid kiss upon De Guiche's left hand, who, trembling as if an electric shock had passed through him, awoke a second time, opened his large eyes, incapable of recognition, and again fell into a state of complete insensibility. "Come," she said to her companion, "we must not remain here any longer; I shall be committing some folly or other."

"Madame, Madame, your highness is forgetting your mask!" said her vigilant companion.

"Pick it up," replied her mistress, as she tottered almost senseless towards the staircase, and as the outer door had been left only half-closed, the two women, light as birds, passed through it, and with hurried steps returned to the palace. One of the ascended towards Madame's apartments, where she disappeared; the other entered the rooms belonging to the maids of honor, namely, on the *_entresol_*, and having reached her own room, she sat down before a table, and without giving herself time even to breathe, wrote the following letter:

"This evening Madame has been to see M. de Guiche. Everything is going well on this side. See that your news is equally exemplary, and do not forget to burn this paper."

She folded the letter, and leaving her room with every possible precaution, crossed a corridor which led to the apartments appropriated to the gentlemen attached to Monsieur's service. She stopped before a door, under which, having previously knocked twice in a short, quick manner, she thrust the paper, and fled. Then, returning to her own room, she removed every trace of her having gone out, and also of having written the letter. Amid the investigations she was so diligently pursuing she perceived on the table the mask which belonged to Madame, and which, according to her mistress's directions, she had brought back but had forgotten to restore to her. "Oh, oh!" she said, "I must not forget to do to-morrow what I have forgotten to-day."

And she took hold of the velvet mask by that part which covered the

cheeks, and feeling that her thumb was wet, looked at it. It was not only wet, but reddened. The mask had fallen upon one of the spots of blood which, we have already said, stained the floor, and from that black velvet outside which had accidentally come into contact with it, the blood had passed through to the inside, and stained the white cambric lining. "Oh, oh!" said Montalais, for doubtless our readers have already recognized her by these various maneuvers, "I shall not give back this mask; it is far too precious now."

And rising from her seat, she ran towards a box made of maple wood, which inclosed different articles of toilette and perfumery. "No, not here," she said, "such a treasure must not be abandoned to the slightest chance of detection."

Then, after a moment's silence, and with a smile that was peculiarly her own, she added: - "Beautiful mask, stained with the blood of that brave knight, you shall go and join that collection of wonders, La Valliere's and Raoul's letters, that loving collection, indeed, which will some day or other form part of the history of France, of European royalty. You shall be placed under M. Malicorne's care," said the laughing girl, as she began to undress herself, "under the protection of that worthy M. Malicorne," she said, blowing out the taper, "who thinks he was born only to become the chief usher of Monsieur's apartments, and whom I will make keeper of the records and historiographer of the house of Bourbon, and of the first houses in the kingdom. Let him grumble now, that discontented Malicorne," she added, as she drew the curtains and fell asleep.