

Chapter 40. Uncle and Nephew.

The horse and servant belonging to De Winter were waiting for him at the door; he proceeded toward his abode very thoughtfully, looking behind him from time to time to contemplate the dark and silent frontage of the Louvre. It was then that he saw a horseman, as it were, detach himself from the wall and follow him at a little distance. In leaving the Palais Royal he remembered to have observed a similar shadow.

"Tony," he said, motioning to his groom to approach.

"Here I am, my lord."

"Did you remark that man who is following us?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Who is he?"

"I do not know, only he has followed your grace from the Palais Royal, stopped at the Louvre to wait for you, and now leaves the Louvre with you."

"Some spy of the cardinal," said De Winter to him, aside. "Let us pretend not to notice that he is watching us."

And spurring on he plunged into the labyrinth of streets which led to his hotel, situated near the Marais, for having for so long a time lived near the Place Royale, Lord de Winter naturally returned to lodge near his ancient dwelling.

The unknown spurred his horse to a gallop.

De Winter dismounted at his hotel and went up into his apartment, intending to watch the spy; but as he was about to place his gloves and hat on a table, he saw reflected in a glass opposite to him a figure which stood on the threshold of the room. He turned around and Mordaunt stood before him.

There was a moment of frozen silence between these two.

"Sir," said De Winter, "I thought I had already made you aware that I am weary of this persecution; withdraw, then, or I shall call and have you turned out as you were in London. I am not your uncle, I know you not."

"My uncle," replied Mordaunt, with his harsh and bantering tone, "you are mistaken; you will not have me turned out this time as you did in London--you dare not. As for denying that I am your nephew, you will think twice about it, now that I have learned some things of which I was ignorant a year ago."

"And how does it concern me what you have learned?" said De Winter.

"Oh, it concerns you very closely, my uncle, I am sure, and you will soon be of my opinion," added he, with a smile which sent a shudder through the veins of him he thus addressed. "When I presented myself before you for the first time in London, it was to ask you what had become of my fortune; the second time it was to demand who had sullied my name; and this time I come before you to ask a question far more terrible than any other, to say to you as God said to the first murderer: 'Cain, what hast thou done to thy brother Abel?' My lord, what have you done with your sister--your sister, who was my mother?"

De Winter shrank back from the fire of those scorching eyes.

"Your mother?" he said.

"Yes, my lord, my mother," replied the young man, advancing into the room until he was face to face with Lord de Winter, and crossing his arms. "I have asked the headsman of Bethune," he said, his voice hoarse and his face livid with passion and grief. "And the headsman of Bethune gave me a reply."

De Winter fell back in a chair as though struck by a thunderbolt and in vain attempted a reply.

"Yes," continued the young man; "all is now explained; with this key I open the abyss. My mother inherited an estate from her husband, you have assassinated her; my name would have secured me the paternal estate, you have deprived me of it; you have despoiled me of my fortune. I am no longer astonished that you knew me not. I am not surprised that you

refused to recognize me. When a man is a robber it is hard to call him nephew whom he has impoverished; when one is a murderer, to recognize the man whom one has made an orphan."

These words produced a contrary effect to that which Mordaunt had anticipated. De Winter remembered the monster that Milady had been; he rose, dignified and calm, restraining by the severity of his look the wild glance of the young man.

"You desire to fathom this horrible secret?" said De Winter; "well, then, so be it. Know, then, what manner of woman it was for whom to-day you call me to account. That woman had, in all probability, poisoned my brother, and in order to inherit from me she was about to assassinate me in my turn. I have proof of it. What say you to that?"

"I say that she was my mother."

"She caused the unfortunate Duke of Buckingham to be stabbed by a man who was, ere that, honest, good and pure. What say you to that crime, of which I have the proof?"

"She was my mother."

"On our return to France she had a young woman who was attached to one of her opponents poisoned in the convent of the Augustines at Bethune. Will this crime persuade you of the justice of her punishment--for of all this I have the proofs?"

"She was my mother!" cried the young man, who uttered these three successive exclamations with constantly increasing force.

"At last, charged with murders, with debauchery, hated by every one and yet threatening still, like a panther thirsting for blood, she fell under the blows of men whom she had rendered desperate, though they had never done her the least injury; she met with judges whom her hideous crimes had evoked; and that executioner you saw--that executioner who you say told you everything--that executioner, if he told you everything, told you that he leaped with joy in avenging on her his brother's shame and suicide. Depraved as a girl, adulterous as a wife, an unnatural sister, homicide, poisoner, execrated by all who knew her, by every nation that had been visited by her, she died accursed by Heaven and earth."

A sob which Mordaunt could not repress burst from his throat and his livid face became suffused with blood; he clenched his fists, sweat covered his face, his hair, like Hamlet's, stood on end, and racked with fury he cried out:

"Silence, sir! she was my mother! Her crimes, I know them not; her disorders, I know them not; her vices, I know them not. But this I know, that I had a mother, that five men leagued against one woman, murdered her clandestinely by night--silently--like cowards. I know that you were one of them, my uncle, and that you cried louder than the others: 'She must die.' Therefore I warn you, and listen well to my words, that they may be engraved upon your memory, never to be forgotten: this murder, which has robbed me of everything--this murder, which has deprived me of

my name--this murder, which has impoverished me--this murder, which has made me corrupt, wicked, implacable--I shall summon you to account for it first and then those who were your accomplices, when I discover them!"

With hatred in his eyes, foaming at his mouth, and his fist extended, Mordaunt had advanced one more step, a threatening, terrible step, toward De Winter. The latter put his hand to his sword, and said, with the smile of a man who for thirty years has jested with death:

"Would you assassinate me, sir? Then I shall recognize you as my nephew, for you would be a worthy son of such a mother."

"No," replied Mordaunt, forcing his features and the muscles of his body to resume their usual places and be calm; "no, I shall not kill you; at least not at this moment, for without you I could not discover the others. But when I have found them, then tremble, sir. I stabbed to the heart the headsman of Bethune, without mercy or pity, and he was the least guilty of you all."

With these words the young man went out and descended the stairs with sufficient calmness to pass unobserved; then upon the lowest landing place he passed Tony, leaning over the balustrade, waiting only for a call from his master to mount to his room.

But De Winter did not call; crushed, enfeebled, he remained standing and with listening ear; then only when he had heard the step of the horse going away he fell back on a chair, saying:

"My God, I thank Thee that he knows me only."