

Chapter 56

THE DOOR OPENS.

On arriving at the door of the house, poor Henri was seized by his usual hesitation.

"Courage!" said he to himself.

But before knocking, he looked once more behind him, and saw the bright light shining through the windows of the hotel.

"There," said he, "enter for love and joy, people who are invited almost without desiring; why have I not a tranquil and careless heart? Perhaps I might enter there also, instead of vainly trying here."

Ten o'clock struck. Henri lifted the knocker and struck once, then again.

"There," said he, listening, "there is the inner door opening, the stairs creaking, the sound of steps approaching, always the same thing."

And he knocked again.

"There," said he, "he peeps through the trellis-work, sees my pale face, and goes away, always without opening. Adieu, cruel house, until

to-morrow."

And he turned to go; but scarcely had he taken two steps, when the key turned in the lock, and, to his profound surprise, the door opened, and a man stood bowing on the threshold. It was the same whom he had seen before.

"Good-evening, monsieur," said he, in a harsh voice, but whose sound appeared to Du Bouchage sweeter than the song of birds.

Henri joined his hands and trembled so that the servant put out a hand to save him from falling, with a visible expression of respectful pity.

"Come, monsieur," said he, "here I am: explain to me, I beg, what you want."

"I have loved so much," replied the young man; "my heart has beat so fast, that I hardly know if it still beats."

"Will it please you, monsieur, to sit down and talk to me?"

"Oh, yes!"

"Speak, then, monsieur, and tell me what you desire."

"My friend, you already know. Many times, you know, I have waited for you and surprised you at the turn of a street, and have offered you gold

enough to enrich you, had you been the greediest of men; at other times I have threatened you, but you have never listened to me, and have always seen me suffer without seeming to pity me. To-day you tell me to speak--to express my wishes; what then has happened, mon Dieu?"

The servant sighed. He had evidently a pitying heart under a rough covering. Henry heard this sigh, and it encouraged him.

"You know," continued he, "that I love, and how I love; you have seen me pursue a woman and discover her, in spite of her efforts to fly me: but never in my greatest grief has a bitter word escaped me, or have I given heed to those violent thoughts which are born of despair and the fire of youth."

"It is true, monsieur; and in this my mistress renders you full justice."

"Could I not," continued Henri, "when you refused me admittance, have forced the door, as is done every day by some lad, tipsy, or in love? Then, if but for a minute, I should have seen this inexorable woman, and have spoken to her."

"It is true."

"And," continued the young count, sadly, "I am something in this world; my name is great as well as my fortune, the king himself protects me; just now he begged me to confide to him my griefs and to apply to him

for aid."

"Ah!" said the servant, anxiously.

"I would not do it," continued Joyeuse; "no, no, I refused all, to come and pray at this door with clasped hands--a door which never yet opened to me."

"M. le Comte, you have indeed a noble heart, and worthy to be loved."

"Well, then, he whom you call worthy, to what do you condemn him? Every morning my page brings a letter; it is refused. Every evening I knock myself at the door, and I am disregarded. You let me suffer, despair, die in the street, without having the compassion for me that you would have for a dog that howled. Ah! this woman has no woman's heart, she does not love me. Well! one can no more tell one's heart to love than not to love. But you may pity the unfortunate who suffers, and give him a word of consolation--reach out your hand to save him from falling; but no, this woman cares not for my sufferings. Why does she not kill me, either with a refusal from her mouth, or some blow from a poniard? Dead, I should suffer no more."

"M. le Comte," replied the man, "the lady whom you accuse is, believe me, far from having the hard, insensible heart you think; she has seen you, and understood what you suffer, and feels for you the warmest sympathy."

"Oh! compassion, compassion!" cried the young man; "but may that heart of which you boast some day know love--love such as I feel, and may they offer her compassion in exchange; I shall be well avenged."

"M. le Comte, not to reply to love is no reason for never having loved. This woman has perhaps felt the passion more than ever you will--has perhaps loved as you can never love."

"When one loves like that, one loves forever," cried Henri, raising his eyes to heaven.

"Did I tell you that she loved no more?"

Henri uttered a doleful cry.

"She loves!" cried he. "Ah! mon Dieu!"

"Yes, she loves; but be not jealous of the man she loves, M. le Comte, for he is no more of this world. My mistress is a widow."

These words restored hope and life to the young man.

"Oh!" cried he, "she is a widow, and recently; the source of her tears will dry up in time. She is a widow, then she loves no one, or only a shadow--a name. Ah! she will love me. Oh! mon Dieu, all great griefs are calmed by time. When the widow of Mausole, who had sworn an eternal grief at her husband's tomb, had exhausted her tears, she was cured.

Regrets are a malady, from which every one who survives comes out as strong as before."

The servant shook his head.

"This lady, M. le Comte, has also sworn eternal fidelity to death; but I know her, and she will keep her word better than the forgetful woman of whom you speak."

"I will wait ten years, if necessary; since she lives, I may hope."

"Oh! young man, do not reckon thus. She has lived, you say; yes, so she has, not a month, or a year, but seven years. You hope that she will console herself; never, M. le Comte, never. I swear it to you--I, who was but the servant of him who is dead, and yet I shall never be consoled."

"This man so much regretted, this husband--"

"It was not her husband, it was her lover, M. le Comte, and a woman like her whom you unluckily love has but one lover in her life."

"My friend," cried Joyeuse, "intercede for me."

"I! Listen, M. le Comte. Had I believed you capable of using violence toward my mistress, I would have killed you long ago with my own hand. If, on the contrary, I could have believed that she would love you, I

think I should have killed her. Now, M. le Comte, I have said what I wished to say; do not seek to make me say more, for, on my honor--and although not a nobleman, my honor is worth something--I have told you all I can."

Henri rose.

"I thank you," said he, "for having had compassion on my misfortunes; now I have decided."

"Then you will be calmer for the future. M. le Comte, you will go away, and leave us to ourselves?"

"Yes, be easy; I will go away, and forever."

"You mean to die?"

"Why not? I cannot live without her."

"M. le Comte, believe me, it is bad to die by your own hand."

"Therefore I shall not choose that death; but there is, for a young man like me, a death which has always been reckoned the best--that received in defending your king and country."

"If you suffer beyond your strength, if you owe nothing to those who survive you, if death on the field of battle is offered to you, die, M.

le Comte; I should have done so long ago, had I not been condemned to live."

"Adieu, and thank you," replied Joyeuse.

"Au revoir in another world."

And he went away rapidly, throwing a heavy purse of gold at the feet of the servant.

Chapter 57

HOW A GREAT LADY LOVED IN THE YEAR 1586.

The whistles which Ernanton had heard were really his signal. Thus, when the young man reached the door, he found Dame Fournichon on the threshold waiting for her customers with a smile, which made her resemble a mythological goddess painted by a Flemish painter, and in her large white hands she held a golden crown, which another hand, whiter and more delicate, had slipped in, in passing.

She stood before the door, so as to bar Ernanton's passage.