

Chapter 66

THE TRAVELERS.

While these disasters, the forerunners of a still greater one, were taking place, two travelers, mounted on excellent horses, left Brussels on a fine night, and rode toward Mechlin. They rode side by side, without any apparent arms but a large Flemish knife, of which the handle appeared in the belt of one of them. They rode on, each occupied with thoughts perhaps the same, without speaking a word. They looked like those commercial travelers who at that time carried on an extensive trade between France and Flanders. Whoever had met them trotting so peaceably along the road would have taken them for honest men, anxious to find a bed after their day's work. However, it was only necessary to overhear a few sentences of their conversation to lose any such opinion suggested by their appearance. They were about half a league from Brussels, when the tallest of them said:

"Madame, you were quite right to set off to-night; we shall gain seven leagues by it, and shall probably arrive at Mechlin by the time the result of the attack on Antwerp is known. In two days of short marches, and you must take easy stages, we shall reach Antwerp."

The person who was called madame, in spite of her male costume, replied in a voice calm, grave, and sweet:

"My friend, believe me, God will tire of protecting this wicked prince, and will strike him cruelly; let us hasten to put our projects into execution, for I am not one of those who believe in fatality, and I think that men have perfect freedom in will and deed. If we leave his punishment to God, and do not act ourselves, it was not worth while living so unhappily until now."

At this moment a blast of north wind, cold and biting, swept across the plain.

"You shiver, madame," said the other traveler; "take your cloak."

"No, thank you, Remy; I no longer feel pain of body or mind."

Remy rode on silently, only now and then stopping and looking back.

"You see no one behind us?" asked she, after one of these halts.

"No one, madame."

"That cavalier whom we met at Valenciennes, and who inquired about us, after looking at us so curiously?"

"He is not here, madame."

"But I fancied I saw him again near Mons."

"And I, madame, am sure I saw him just before we entered Brussels."

"Brussels?"

"Yes; but he must have stopped there."

"Remy," said Diana, drawing near him, as if even on that lonely road she feared to be overheard, "did he not seem to you like (in figure, at least, for I did not see his face) that unhappy young man?"

"Oh! no, madame, not at all; and besides, how could he have guessed that we had left Paris, and were traveling along this road?"

"But he found us out when we changed our house in Paris."

"No, madame, I am sure he did not follow us; and, indeed, I believe he had resolved on a desperate course as regards himself."

"Alas! Remy, every one has his own share of suffering. I trust God will console this poor youth."

Remy replied with a sigh, and they went on with no other sound than that of their horses' feet on the hard road. Two hours passed thus. Just as they were about to enter Vilvoide, Remy turned his head, for he heard the sound of horses' feet behind them. He stopped and listened, but could see nothing. His eyes uselessly tried to pierce through the darkness of the night, and as he no longer heard any sounds, they rode

on and entered the town.

"Madame," said he, "if you will take my advice, you will stay here; daylight will soon appear, the horses are tired, and you yourself need repose."

"Remy, you are anxious about something."

"Yes, about your health, madame. Believe me, a woman cannot support so much fatigue; I can scarcely do so myself."

"As you please, Remy."

"Well, then, enter that narrow street. I see a light at the end of it, which must proceed from an inn. Be quick, I beg you."

"You have heard something?"

"I thought I heard a horse's feet. I am not sure, but I will stay behind a minute to find out."

The lady, without replying, went on, and Remy got off his horse and let him follow her, while he hid himself behind an immense post and waited. The lady knocked at the door of the inn, behind which, according to the hospitable custom of the country, watched, or rather slept, a maid servant. The girl woke up and received the traveler with perfect good-humor, and then opened the stable-door for the two horses.

"I am waiting for my companion," said Diana; "let me sit by the fire; I shall not go to bed until he comes."

The servant threw some straw to the horses, shut the stable door, then returned to the kitchen, put a chair by the fire, snuffed the candle with her fingers, and went to sleep again.

Meanwhile Remy was watching for the arrival of the traveler whose horse he had heard. He saw him enter the town and go on slowly, and seeming to listen; then, seeing the inn, he appeared to hesitate whether to go there or to continue his journey. He stopped close to Remy, who laid his hand on his knife.

"It is he again," thought Remy, "and he is following us. What can he want?"

After a minute the traveler murmured in a low voice, "They must have gone on, and so will I," and he rode forward.

"To-morrow we will change our route," thought Remy.

And he rejoined Diana, who was waiting impatiently for him.

"Well," said she softly, "are we followed?"

"There is no one, I was wrong; you may sleep in perfect safety, madame."

"I am not sleepy, Remy."

"At least have supper, madame; you have scarcely eaten anything."

"Willingly, Remy."

They reawakened the poor servant, who got up as good-humoredly as before, and hearing what they wanted, took from the cupboard a piece of salt pork, a cold leveret, and some sweets, which she set before them, together with a frothing jug of Louvain beer.

Remy sat down with Diana, who drank half a glass of beer, and ate a piece of bread. Remy did the same, and then they both rose.

"Are you not going to eat any more?" asked the girl.

"No, thank you, we have done."

"Will you not eat any meat? it is very nice."

"I am sure it is excellent, but we are not hungry."

The girl clasped her hands in astonishment at this strange abstinence; it was not thus she was used to see travelers eat.

Remy threw a piece of money on the table.

"Oh!" said the girl, "I cannot change all that; six farthings would be all your bill."

"Keep it all, my girl," said Diana; "it is true my brother and I eat little, but we pay the same as others."

The servant became red with joy.

"Tell me, my girl," said Remy, "is there any cross-road from here to Mechlin?"

"Yes, monsieur, but it is very bad, while the regular road is a very fine one."

"Yes, my child, I know that, but we wish to travel by the other."

"Oh! I told you, monsieur, because, as your companion is a lady, the road would not do for her."

"Why not?"

"Because to-night a great number of people will cross the country to go to Brussels."--"To Brussels?"

"Yes; it is a temporary emigration."

"For what reason?"

"I do not know; they had orders."

"From whom--the Prince of Orange?"

"No; from monseigneur."

"Who is he?"

"I do not know, monsieur."

"And who are the emigrants?"

"The inhabitants of the country and of the villages which have no dykes or ramparts."

"It is strange."

"We ourselves," said the girl, "are to set out at daybreak, as well as all the other people in the town. Yesterday, at eleven o'clock, all the cattle were sent to Brussels by canals and cross-roads; therefore on the road of which you speak there must be great numbers of horses, carts, and people."

"I should have thought the great road better for all that."

"I do not know; it was the order."

"But we can go on to Mechlin, I suppose?"

"I should think so, unless you will do like every one else, and go to Brussels."

"No, no, we will go on at once to Mechlin," said Diana, rising; "open the stable, if you please, my good girl."

"Danger every way," thought Remy; "however, the young man is before us." And as the horses had not been unsaddled, they mounted again, and the rising sun found them on the banks of the Dyle.