

Chapter 86

DOUBT.

Henri descended the staircase, and as he passed through the antechambers, observed many officers of his acquaintance, who ran forward to meet him, and, with many marks of friendship, offered to show him the way to his brother's apartments, which were situated at one of the angles of the chateau. It was the library that the duke had given Joyeuse to reside in during his residence at Chateau-Thierry.

Two salons, furnished in the style of Francois the First, communicated with each other, and terminated in the library, the latter apartment looking out on the gardens.

His bed had been put up in the library. Joyeuse was of an indolent, yet of a cultivated turn of mind. If he stretched out his arm he laid his hand on science; if he opened the windows he could enjoy the beauties of nature. Finer and superior organizations require more satisfying enjoyments; and the morning breeze, the song of birds, or the perfumes of flowers, added fresh delight to the triplets of Clement Marot, or to the odes of Rousard.

Henri determined to leave everything as it was, not because he was influenced by the poetic sybaritism of his brother, but, on the contrary, from indifference, and because it mattered little to him

whether he was there or elsewhere.

But as the count, in whatever frame of mind he might be, had been brought up never to neglect his duty or respect toward the king or the princes of the royal family of France, he inquired particularly in what part of the chateau the prince had resided since his return.

By mere accident, in this respect, Henri met with an excellent cicerone in the person of the young ensign, who, by some act of indiscretion or another, had, in the little village in Flanders where we represented the personages in this tale as having halted for a moment, communicated the count's secret to the prince. This ensign had not quitted the prince's side since his return, and could inform Henri very accurately on the subject.

On his arrival at Chateau-Thierry, the prince had at first entered upon a course of reckless dissipation. At that time he occupied the state apartments of the chateau, had receptions morning and evening, and was engaged during the day stag-hunting in the forest; but since the intelligence of Aurilly's death, which had reached the prince without its being known from what source, the prince had retired to a pavilion situated in the middle of the park. This pavilion, which was an almost inaccessible retreat except to the intimate associates of the prince, was hidden from view by the dense foliage of the surrounding trees, and could hardly be perceived above their lofty summits, or through the thick foliage of the hedges.

It was to this pavilion that the prince had retired during the last few days. Those who did not know him well said that it was Aurilly's death which had made him betake himself to this solitude; while those who were well acquainted with his character pretended that he was carrying out in this pavilion some base or infamous plot, which some day or another would be revealed to light.

A circumstance which rendered either of these suppositions much more probable was, that the prince seemed greatly annoyed whenever a matter of business or a visit summoned him to the chateau; and so decidedly was this the case, that no sooner had the visit been received, or the matter of business been dispatched, than he returned to his solitude, where he was waited upon only by the two old valets-de-chambre who had been present at his birth.

"Since this is the case," observed Henri, "the fetes will not be very gay if the prince continue in this humor."

"Certainly," replied the ensign, "for every one will know how to sympathize with the prince's grief, whose pride as well as whose affections had been so smitten."

Henri continued his interrogatories without intending it, and took a strange interest in doing so. The circumstance of Aurilly's death, whom he had known at the court, and whom he had again met in Flanders; the kind of indifference with which the prince had announced the loss he had met with; the strict seclusion in which it was said the prince had lived

since his death--all this seemed to him, without his being able to assign a reason for his belief, as part of that mysterious and darkened web wherein, for some time past, the events of his life had been woven.

"And," inquired he of the ensign, "it is not known, you say, how the prince became acquainted with the news of the death of Aurilly?"

"No."

"But surely," he insisted, "people must talk about it?"

"Oh! of course," said the ensign; "true or false, you know, people always will talk."

"Well, then, tell me what it is."

"It is said that the prince was hunting under the willows close beside the river, and that he had wandered away from the others who were hunting also, for everything he does is by fits and starts, and he becomes as excited in the field as at play, or under fire, or under the influence of grief, when suddenly he was seen returning with a face scared and as pale as death.

"The courtiers questioned him, thinking that it was nothing more than a mere incident of the hunting-field.

"He held two rouleaux of gold in his hand.

"Can you understand this, messieurs?' he said, in a hard dry voice; 'Aurilly is dead; Aurilly has been eaten by the wolves.'

"Every one immediately exclaimed.

"'Nay, indeed,' said the prince; 'may the foul fiend take me if it be not so; the poor lute-player had always been a far better musician than a horseman. It seems that his horse ran away with him, and that he fell into a pit, where he was killed; the next day a couple of travelers who were passing close to the pit discovered his body half eaten by the wolves; and a proof that the affair actually did happen, as I have related it, and that robbers have nothing whatever to do with the whole matter is, that here are two rouleaux of gold which he had about him, and which have been faithfully restored.'

"However, as no one had been seen to bring these two rouleaux of gold back," continued the ensign, "it is supposed that they had been handed to the prince by the two travelers who, having met and recognized his highness on the banks of the river, had announced the intelligence of Aurilly's death."

"It is very strange," murmured Henri.

"And what is more strange still," continued the ensign, "is, that it is said--can it be true, or is it merely an invention?--it is said, I repeat, that the prince was seen to open the little gate of the park

close to the chestnut trees, and that something like two shadows passed through that same gate. The prince then introduced two persons into the park--probably the two travelers; it is since that occasion that the prince has retired into his pavilion, and we have only been able to see him by stealth."

"And has no one seen these two travelers?" asked Henri.

"As I was proceeding to ask the prince the password for the night, for the sentinels on duty at the chateau, I met a man who did not seem to me to belong to his highness's household, but I was unable to observe his face, the man having turned aside as soon as he perceived me, and having let down the hood of his cloak over his eyes."

"The hood of his cloak, do you say?"

"Yes; the man looked like a Flemish peasant, and reminded me, I hardly know why, of the person by whom you were accompanied when we met out yonder."

Henri started; the observation seemed to him in some way connected with the profound and absorbing interest with which the story inspired him; to him, too, who had seen Diana and her companion confided to Aurilly, the idea occurred that the two travelers who had announced to the prince the death of the unfortunate lute-player were acquaintances of his own.

Henri looked attentively at the ensign.

"And when you fancied you recognized this man, what was the idea that occurred to you, monsieur?" he inquired.

"I will tell you what my impression was," replied the ensign; "however, I will not pretend to assert anything positively; the prince has not, in all probability, abandoned all idea with regard to Flanders; he therefore maintains spies in his employ. The man with the woolen overcoat is a spy, who, on his way here, may possibly have learned the accident which had happened to the musician, and may thus have been the bearer of two pieces of intelligence at the same time."

"That is not improbable," said Henri, thoughtfully; "but what was this man doing when you saw him?"

"He was walking beside the hedge which borders the parterre--you can see the hedge from your windows--and was making toward the conservatories."

"You say, then, that the two travelers, for I believe you stated there were two--"

"Others say that two persons were seen to enter, but I only saw one, the man in the overcoat."

"In that case, then, you have reason to believe that the man in the overcoat, as you describe him, is living in the conservatories."

"It is not unlikely."

"And have these conservatories a means of exit?"

"Yes, count, toward the town."

Henri remained silent for some time; his heart was throbbing most violently, for these details, which were apparently matters of indifference to him, who seemed throughout the whole of this mystery as if he were gifted with the power of prevision, were, in reality, full of the deepest interest for him.

Night had in the meantime closed in, and the two young men were conversing together without any light in Joyeuse's apartment.

Fatigued by his journey, oppressed by the strange events which had just been related to him, unable to struggle against the emotions which they had aroused in his breast, the count had thrown himself on his brother's bed, and mechanically directed his gaze toward the deep blue heavens above him, which seemed set as with diamonds.

The young ensign was seated on the ledge of the window, and voluntarily abandoned himself to that listlessness of thought, to that poetic reverie of youth, to that absorbing languor of feeling, which the balmy freshness of evening inspires.

A deep silence reigned throughout the park and the town; the gates were

closed, the lights were kindled by degrees, the dogs in the distance were barking in their kennels at the servants, on whom devolved the duty of shutting up the stables in the evening.

Suddenly the ensign rose to his feet, made a sign of attention with his head, leaned out of the window, and then, calling in a quick, low tone to the count, who was reclining on the bed, said:

"Come, come!"

"What is the matter?" Henri inquired, arousing himself by a strong effort from his reverie.

"The man! the man!"

"What man?"

"The man in the overcoat, the spy!"

"Oh!" exclaimed Henri, springing from the bed to the window, and leaning on the ensign.

"Stay," continued the ensign; "do you see him yonder? He is creeping along the hedge; wait a moment, he will show himself again. Now look toward that spot which is illuminated by the moon's rays, there he is; there he is."

"Yes."

"Do you not think he is a sinister-looking fellow?"

"Sinister is the very word," replied Du Bouchage, in a gloomy voice.

"Do you believe he is a spy?"

"I believe nothing, and yet I believe everything."

"See, he is going from the prince's pavilion to the conservatories."

"The prince's pavilion is in that direction, then?" inquired Du Bouchage, indicating with his finger the direction from which the stranger appeared to be proceeding.

"Do you see that light whose rays are trembling through the leaves of the trees."--"Well?"

"That is the dining-room."

"Ah!" exclaimed Henri, "see, he makes his appearance again."

"Yes, he is no doubt going to the conservatories to join his companion? Did you hear that?"

"What?"

"The sound of a key turning in the lock."

"It is singular," said Du Bouchage; "there is nothing unusual in all this, and yet--"

"And yet you are trembling, you were going to say?"

"Yes," said the count; "but what is that?"

The sound of a bell was heard.

"It is the signal for the supper of the prince's household; are you going to join us at supper, count?"

"No, I thank you, I do not require anything; and, if I should feel hungry, I will call for what I may need."

"Do not wait for that, monsieur; but come and amuse yourself in our society."

"Nay, nay, it is impossible."

"Why so?"

"His royal highness almost directed me to have what I should need served to me in my own apartment; but do not let me delay you."

"Thank you, count, good-evening; do not lose sight of our phantom."

"Oh! rely upon me for that; unless," added Henri, who feared he might have said too much, "unless, indeed, I should be overtaken by sleep, which seems more than probable, and a far more healthy occupation than that of watching shadows and spies."

"Certainly," said the ensign, laughingly, as he took leave of Henri du Bouchage.

Hardly had he quitted the library than Henri darted into the garden.

"Oh!" he murmured, "it is Remy! it is Remy! I should know him again in the darkness of hell itself."

And the young man, as he felt his knees tremble beneath him, buried his burning forehead in his cold damp hands.

"Great Heaven!" he cried, "is not this rather a phantasy of my poor fevered brain, and is it not written that in my slumbering and in my waking moments, day and night, I should ever see those two figures who have made so deep and dark a furrow in my life?"

"Why," he continued, like a man aware of the need that exists of convincing himself, "why, indeed, should Remy be here in this chateau, while the Duc d'Anjou is here? What is his motive in coming here? What

can the Duc d'Anjou possibly have to do with Remy? And why should he have quitted Diana--he, who is her eternal companion? No; it is not he."

Then, again, a moment afterward, a conviction, thorough, profound, almost instinctive in its nature, seemed to overcome all the doubts he had entertained.

"It is he! it is he!" he murmured, in utter despair, and leaning against the wall to save himself from falling. As he finished giving utterance to this overpowering, overwhelming thought, which seemed to crush all others in his mind, the sharp sound of the lock was again heard, and, although the sound was almost imperceptible, his overexcited senses detected it instantly. An indefinable shudder ran through the young man's whole frame; again he listened with eager attention. So profound a silence reigned around him on every side that he could hear the throbbings of his own heart. A few minutes passed away without anything he expected making its appearance. In default of his eyes, however, his ears told him that some one was approaching, for he heard the sound of the gravel under the advancing footsteps. Suddenly the straight black line of the hedge seemed broken; he imagined he saw upon this dark background a group still darker moving along.

"It is he returning again," murmured Henri. "Is he alone, or is some one with him?"

The objects advanced from the side where the silver light of the moon had illuminated a space of open ground. It was at the very moment when,

advancing in the opposite direction, the man in the overcoat crossed this open space, that Henri fancied he recognized Remy. This time Henri observed two shadows very distinctly; it was impossible he could be mistaken. A death-like chill struck to his heart, and seemed to have turned it to marble.

The two shadows walked quickly along, although with a firm step; the former was dressed in a woolen overcoat, and at the appearance of the second apparition, as at that of the first, the count fancied he recognized Remy.

The second, who was completely enveloped in a large man's cloak, seemed to defy every attempt at recognition.

And yet, beneath that cloak, Henri fancied he could detect what no human eye could have possibly seen.

He could not control a deep bitter groan of despair, and no sooner had the two mysterious personages disappeared behind the hedge than the young man darted after them, and stealthily glided from one group of trees to another, in the wake of those whom he was so anxious to discover.

"Oh!" he murmured, as he stole along, "do I not indeed deceive myself? Oh! Heaven, can it really be possible?"

