

Chapter 87

CERTAINTY.

Henri glided along the hedge on the side which was thrown into deep shade, taking care to make no noise either on the gravel or against the trees.

Obliged to walk carefully, and while walking to watch carefully over every movement he made, he could not perceive anything. And yet, by his style, his dress, his walk, he still fancied he recognized Remy in the man who wore the overcoat.

Mere conjectures, more terrifying for him than realities, arose in his mind with regard to this man's companion.

The road which they were following, and which was bounded by a row of elms, terminated in a high hawthorn hedge, which separated from the rest of the park the pavilion of the Duc d'Anjou, and enveloped it as with a curtain of verdure, in the midst of which, as has been already observed, it entirely disappeared in a remote corner of the grounds of the chateau. There were several beautiful sheets of water, dark underwood, through which winding paths had been cut, and venerable trees, over the summits of which the moon was shedding its streams of silver light, while underneath the gloom was thick, dark, and impenetrable.

As he approached this hedge, Henri felt that his heart was on the point of failing him. In fact, to transgress so boldly the prince's orders, and to abandon himself to a course of conduct as indiscreet as it was rash, was the act, not of a loyal and honorable man, but of a mean and cowardly spy, or of a jealous man driven to extremities. But as, while opening the gate, which separated the greater from the smaller park, the man he followed moved in such a way that his features were revealed, and as he perceived that these features were indeed those of Remy, the count's scruples vanished, and he resolutely advanced at all hazards. Henri found the gate again closed; he leaped over the railings, and then continued his pursuit of the prince's two strange visitors, who still seemed to be hurrying onward. Another cause of terror was soon added; for the duke, on hearing the footsteps of Remy and his companion upon the gravel walk, made his appearance from the pavilion. Henri threw himself behind the largest of the trees, and waited.

He could not see anything, except that he observed that Remy made a very low salutation, that Remy's companion courtesied like a woman, instead of bowing like a man, and that the duke, seemingly transported with delight, offered his arm to the latter, in the same way as he would have done to a woman. Then all three advanced toward the pavilion, disappeared under the vestibule, and the door closed behind them.

"This must end," said Henri, "and I must seek a more convenient place, where I can see everything that may pass without being seen."

He decided in favor of a clump of trees situated between the pavilion

and the wall, from the center of which the waters of a fountain gushed forth, thus forming an impenetrable place of concealment; for it was not likely that in the night-time, with the freshness and humidity which would naturally be found near this fountain, the prince would seek the vicinity of the water and the thickets. Hidden behind the statue with which the fountain was ornamented, and standing at his full height behind the pedestal, Henri was enabled to see what was taking place in the pavilion, the principal window of which was quite open before him.

As no one could, or rather, as no one would, venture to penetrate so far, no precautions had been taken.

A table was laid, sumptuously served with the richest viands, and with rare wines in bottles of costly Venetian glass.

Two seats only at this table seemed to be awaiting two guests.

The duke approached one of the chairs; then, leaving the arm of Remy's companion, and pointing to the other seat, he seemed to request that the cloak might be thrown aside, as, although it might be very serviceable for an evening stroll, it became very inconvenient when the object of the stroll was attained, and when that object was a supper.

Thereupon the individual to whom the invitation had been addressed threw the cloak upon a chair, and the dazzling blaze of the flambeaux lighted up, without a shadow on their loveliness, the pale and majestically-beautiful features of a woman whom the terrified eyes of

Henri immediately recognized. It was the lady of the mysterious house in the Rue des Augustins, the wanderer in Flanders; in one word, it was that Diana whose gaze was as mortal as the thrust of a dagger. On this occasion she wore the apparel of her own sex, and was richly dressed in brocaded silk; diamonds blazed on her neck, in her hair, and on her wrists, and thereby made the extreme pallor of her face more remarkable than ever, and in the light which shone from her eyes, it almost seemed as if the duke had, by the employment of some magical means, evoked the ghost of this woman, rather than the woman herself. Had it not been for the support afforded by the statue round which he had thrown his arms, colder even than the marble itself, Henri would have fallen backward headlong into the basin of the fountain.

The duke seemed intoxicated with delight; he fixed his passionate gaze upon this beautiful creature, who had seated herself opposite to him, and who hardly touched the dishes which had been placed before her. From time to time Francois leaned across the table to kiss one of the hands of his silent guest, who, as pale as death, seemed as insensible to his kisses as if her hand had been sculptured in alabaster, which, for transparency and perfect whiteness, it so much resembled. From time to time Henri started, raised his hand to his forehead, and with it wiped away the death-like sweat which rose on it, and asked himself: "Is she alive, or dead?"

The duke tried his utmost efforts and displayed all his powers of eloquence to unbend the rigid beauty of her face.

Remy, the only attendant, for the duke had sent every one away, waited on them both, and, occasionally, lightly touching his mistress with his elbow as he passed behind her chair, seemed to revive her by the contact, and to recall her to life, or rather to the position in which she was placed.

Thereupon, a bright flush spread over her whole face, her eyes sparkled, she smiled as if some magician had touched a spring unknown to this automaton-like figure, seemingly endowed with intelligence, and the mechanism of which had drawn the lightning glance from her eyes, the glowing flush on her cheek, and the sparkling smile to her lips. The moment after, she again subsided into her calm and statue-like stillness. The prince, however, approached her, and by the passionate tone of his conversation, seemed as if he had succeeded in warming into animation his new conquest. Thereupon Diana, who occasionally glanced at the face of a magnificent clock suspended over the prince's head, against the opposite side of the wall to where she was seated, seemed to make an effort over herself, and with her lips bedecked with smiles took a more active part in the conversation.

Henri, concealed in his leafy covert, wrung his hands in despair, and cursed the whole creation in the utter wretchedness of his sore distress. It seemed to him monstrous, almost iniquitous, that this woman, so pure and rigidly inflexible, should yield herself so unresistingly to the prince, because he was a prince, and abandon herself to love because it was offered within the precincts of a palace. His horror at Remy was so extreme that he could have slain him without

remorse, in order to see whether so great a monster had the blood and heart of a man in him. In such paroxysms of rage and contempt did Henri pass the time during the supper, which to the Duc d'Anjou was so full of rapture and delight.

Diana sang. The prince, inflamed by wine, and by his passionate discourse, rose from the table for the purpose of embracing Diana. Every drop of blood seemed to curdle in Henri's veins. He put his hand to his side to see if his sword were there, and then thrust it into his breast in search of a dagger. Diana, with a strange smile, which most assuredly had never, until that moment, had its counterpart on any face, stopped the duke as he was approaching her.

"Will you allow me, monseigneur," she said, "before I rise from the table, to share with your royal highness one of those tempting-looking peaches."

And with these words she stretched out her hand toward a basket of gold filagree work, in which twenty peaches were tastefully arranged, and took one.

Then, taking from her girdle a beautiful little dagger, with a silver blade and a handle of malachite, she divided the peach into two portions, and offered one of them to the prince, who seized it and carried it eagerly to his lips, as though he would thus have kissed Diana's.

This impassioned action produced so deep an impression on himself, that a cloud seemed to obscure his sight at the very moment he bit into the fruit. Diana looked at him with her clear steady gaze, and her fixed immovable smile.

Remy, leaning his back against a pillar of carved wood, also looked on with a gloomy expression of countenance.

The prince passed one of his hands across his forehead, wiped away the perspiration which had gathered there, and swallowed the piece that he had bitten.

This perspiration was most probably the symptom of a sudden indisposition; for while Diana ate the other half of the peach, the prince let fall on his plate what remained of the portion he had taken, and with difficulty rising from his seat, seemed to invite his beautiful companion to accompany him into the garden in order to enjoy the cool night air.

Diana rose, and without pronouncing a single word, took the duke's arm, which he offered her.

Remy gazed after them, particularly after the prince, whom the air seemed completely to revive.

As she walked along, Diana wiped the small blade of her knife on a handkerchief embroidered with gold, and restored it to its shagreen

sheath.

In this manner they approached the clump of trees where Henri was concealed.

The prince, with a passionate gesture, pressed his companion's arm against his heart.

"I feel better," he said, "and yet I hardly know what heavy weight seems to press down on my brain; I love too deeply, madame, I perceive."

Diana plucked several sprigs of jasmine and of clematis, and two beautiful roses which bordered the whole of one side of the pedestal of the statue behind which Henri was shrinking terrified.

"What are you doing, madame?" inquired the prince.

"I have always understood, monseigneur," she said, "that the perfume of flowers was the best remedy for attacks of giddiness; I am gathering a bouquet with the hope that this bouquet, if presented by me, will have the magical influence which I wish it to possess."

But, while she was arranging the flowers, she let a rose fall from her hand, which the prince eagerly hastened to pick up.

The movement that Francois made was rapid, but not so rapid, however, but that it gave Diana sufficient time to pour upon the other rose a few

drops of a liquid contained in a small gold bottle which she drew from her bosom.

She then took from his hand the rose which the prince had picked up, and placing it in her girdle, said--

"That one is for me, let us change."

And in exchange for the rose which she received from the prince's hand, she held out the bouquet to him.

The prince seized it eagerly, inhaled its perfume with delight, and passed his arm around Diana's waist. But this latter action, in all probability, completely overwhelmed the already troubled senses of the prince, for his knees trembled under him, and he was obliged to seat himself on a bank of green turf, beside which he happened to be standing.

Henri did not lose sight of these two persons, and yet he had a look for Remy also, who in the pavilion awaited the termination of this scene, or rather seemed to devour every minute incident of it.

When he saw the prince totter, he advanced toward the threshold of the pavilion. Diana, on her side, perceiving Francois stagger, sat herself down beside him on the bank.

The giddiness from which Francois suffered continued on this occasion

longer than on the former; the prince's head was resting on his chest. He seemed to have lost all connection in his ideas, and almost the perception of his own existence; and yet the convulsive movement of his fingers on Diana's hand seemed to indicate that he was instinctively pursuing his wild dream of love. At last he slowly raised his head, and his lips being almost on a level with Diana's face, he made an effort to touch those of his lovely guest, but as if unobservant of the movement, she rose from her seat.

"You are suffering, monseigneur," she said; "it would be better if we were to go in."

"Oh! yes, let us go in," exclaimed the prince in a transport of joy.

And he arose, staggering, to his feet; then, instead of Diana leaning on his arm, it was he who leaned on Diana's arm; and thanks to this support, walking with less difficulty, he seemed to forget fever and giddiness too, for suddenly drawing himself up, he, in an unexpected manner, pressed his lips on her neck. She started as if, instead of a kiss, she had received the impression of a red hot iron.

"Remy!" she exclaimed, "a flambeau, a flambeau!"

Remy immediately returned to the *salle-a-manger*, and lighted, by the candle on the table, a flambeau which he took from a small round table, and then, hurrying to the entrance to the pavilion, and holding the torch in his hand, he cried out:

"Here is one, madame."

"Where is your highness going to?" inquired Diana, seizing hold of the flambeau and turning her head aside.

"Oh! we will return to my own room, and you will lead me, I venture to hope, madame?" replied the prince, in a frenzy of passion.

"Willingly, monseigneur," replied Diana, and she raised the torch in the air, and walked before the prince.

Remy opened, at the end of the pavilion, a window through which the fresh air rushed inward, in such a manner that the flame and smoke of the flambeau, which Diana held, were carried back toward Francois' face, which happened to be in the very current of the air. The two lovers, as Henri considered them to be, proceeded in this manner, first crossing a gallery to the duke's own room, and disappeared behind the fleur-de-lized hangings, which served the purpose of a portière.

Henri had observed everything that had passed with increasing fury, and yet this fury was such that it almost deprived him of life. It seemed as if he had no strength left except to curse the fate which had imposed so cruel a trial upon him. He had quitted his place of concealment, and in utter despair, his arms hanging by his side, and with a haggard gaze, he was on the point of returning, with life ebbing fast, to his apartment in the chateau, when suddenly the hangings behind which he had seen

Diana and the prince disappear were thrown aside, and Diana herself rushed into the supper-room, and seized hold of Remy, who, standing motionless and erect, seemed only to be waiting her return.

"Quick! quick!" she said to him; "all is finished."

And they both darted into the garden as if they had been drunk, or mad, or raging with passion.

No sooner did Henri observe them, however, than he seemed to have recovered all his strength; he hastened to place himself in their way, and they came upon him suddenly in the middle of the path, standing erect, his arms crossed, and more terrible in his silence than any one could ever have been in his loudest menaces. Henri's feelings had indeed arrived at such a pitch of exasperation, that he would readily have slain any man who would have ventured to maintain that women were not monsters sent from hell to corrupt the world. He seized Diana by the arm, and stopped her suddenly, notwithstanding the cry of terror which she uttered, and notwithstanding the dagger which Remy put to his breast, and which even grazed his flesh.

"Oh! doubtless you do not recognize me," he said furiously, gnashing his teeth; "I am that simple-hearted young man who loved you, and whose love you would not return, because for you there was no future, but merely the past. Ah! beautiful hypocrite that you are, and you, foul liar, I know you at last--I know and curse you. To the one I say, I despise and condemn you: to the other, I shrink from you with horror."

"Make way!" cried Remy, in a strangled voice; "make way, young fool, or if not--"

"Be it so," replied Henri; "finish your work, and slay my body, wretch, since you have already destroyed my soul."

"Silence!" muttered Remy, furiously, pressing the blade of his dagger more and more against Henri's breast.

Diana, however, violently pushed Remy aside, and seizing Du Bouchage by the arm, she drew him straight before her. She was lividly pale; her beautiful hair streamed over her shoulders; the contact of the hand on Henri's wrist seemed to the latter cold and damp as the dews of death.

"Monsieur," she said, "do not rashly judge of matters of which Heaven alone can judge. I am Diana de Meridor, the mistress of Monsieur de Bussy, whom the Duc d'Anjou miserably allowed to perish when he could have saved him. Eight days since Remy slew Aurilly, the duke's accomplice, and the prince himself I have just poisoned with a peach, a bouquet, and a torch. Move aside, monsieur--move aside, I say, for Diana de Meridor, who is on her way to the Convent des Hospitalieres."

With these words, and letting Henri's arm fall, she took hold of that of Remy, as he waited by her side.

Henri fell on his knees, following the retreating figures of the two

assassins, who disappeared behind the thick copse, as though it had been a vision from hell. It was not till fully an hour afterward that Du Bouchage, overpowered with fatigue and overwhelmed with terror, with his brain on fire, was able to summon sufficient strength to drag himself to his apartment, nor was it until after he had made the attempt nearly a dozen times that he succeeded in escalating the window. He walked to and fro in his room several times, and then staggered toward the bed, on which he threw himself. Every one was sleeping quietly in the chateau.