

Chapter 89

LES HOSPITALIERES.

The count had passed a terrible night, in a state bordering on delirium and verging on death.

Faithful, however, to his duty, as soon as he had heard the king's arrival announced, he rose and received him at the gate, as we have described; but no sooner had he presented his homage to his majesty, saluted respectfully the queen-mother, and pressed the admiral's hand, than he shut himself up in his own room, not to die, but to carry determinedly into execution his long cherished project, which nothing could any longer interfere with.

Toward eleven o'clock in the morning, therefore--that is to say, as soon as, immediately after the terrible news had circulated that the Duc d'Anjou's life was in imminent danger, every one had dispersed, leaving the king completely bewildered by this fresh event--Henri went and knocked at his brother's door, who, having passed a part of the previous night traveling, had just retired to his own room.

"Ah! is that you?" asked Joyeuse, half asleep; "what is the matter?"

"I have come to bid you farewell, my brother," replied Henri.

"Farewell! What do you mean? Are you going away?"

"Yes, I am going away, brother, and nothing need keep me here any longer, I presume."

"Why nothing?"

"Of course, since the fetes at which you wished me to be present will not take place, I may now consider myself as freed from my promise."

"You are mistaken, Henri," replied the grand-admiral; "I have no greater reason for permitting you to leave to-day than I had yesterday."

"I regret that it is so; but in that case, for the first time in my life, I shall have the misfortune to disobey your orders, and to fail in the respect I owe you; for from this very moment I declare to you, Anne, that nothing shall restrain me any longer from taking religious vows."

"But the dispensation which is expected from Rome?"

"I can await it in a convent."

"You must positively be mad to think of such a thing." exclaimed Joyeuse, as he rose, with stupefaction depicted on his countenance.

"On the contrary, my dear and honored brother, I am the wisest of you

all, for I alone know what I am about."

"Henri, you promised us a month."

"Impossible."

"A week, then, longer."

"Not an hour."

"You are suffering so much, then, poor boy?"

"On the contrary, I have ceased to suffer, and that is why the evil is without a remedy."

"But, at all events, this woman is not made of bronze; her feelings can be worked upon; I will undertake to persuade her."

"You cannot do impossibilities, Anne; besides, even were she to allow herself to be persuaded now, it is I who could no longer consent to love her."

"Well, that is quite another matter."

"Such is the case, however, my brother."

"What! if she were now willing, would you be indifferent? Why, this is

sheer madness."

"Oh! no! no!" exclaimed Henri, with a shudder of horror, "nothing can any longer exist between that woman and myself."

"What does this mean?" inquired Joyeuse, with marked surprise; "and who can this woman really be? Come, tell me, Henri; you know very well that we have never had any secrets from each other."

Henri trembled lest he had said too much, and that, in yielding to the feeling which he had just exhibited, he had opened a channel by means of which his brother would be able to penetrate the terrible secret which he kept imprisoned in his breast. He therefore fell into an opposite extreme; and, as it happens in such cases, and in order to recall the imprudent words which had escaped him, he pronounced others which were more imprudent still.

"Do not press me further," he said; "this woman will never be mine, since she belongs to Heaven."

"Folly!--mere idle tales! This woman a nun! She has deceived you."

"No, no, this woman has not spoken falsely; she is now an Hospitaliere. Do not let us speak any further of her, but rather let us respect those who throw themselves at the feet of Heaven."

Anne had sufficient power over himself not to show the delight this

revelation gave him.

He continued: "This is something new, for you have never spoken to me about it."

"It is indeed quite new, for she has only recently taken the veil; but I am sure that her resolution, like my own, is irrevocable. Do not therefore seek to detain me any longer, but embrace me, as you love me. Permit me to thank you for all your kindness, for all your patience, and for your unceasing affection for a poor heart-broken man, and farewell!"

Joyeuse looked his brother full and steadily in the face; he looked at him like one whose feelings had overcome him, and who relied upon a display of feeling to work upon the feelings of others. But Henri remained unmoved at this exhibition of emotion on his brother's part, and replied in no other way but by the same mournful smile.

Joyeuse embraced his brother, and allowed him to depart.

"Go," he said to himself, "all is not yet finished, and, however great your hurry may be, I shall not be long before I shall have overtaken you."

He went to the king, who was taking his breakfast in bed, with Chicot sitting by his side.

"Good-day! good-day!" said the king to Joyeuse. "I am very glad to see

you, Anne; I was afraid you would lie in bed all day, you indolent fellow. How is my brother?"

"Alas! sire, I do not know; I am come to speak to you about mine."

"Which one?"--"Henri."

"Does he still wish to become a monk?"

"More so than ever."

"And will he take the vows?"

"Yes, sire."

"He is quite right, too."

"How so, sire?"

"Because men go straight to heaven that way."

"Oh!" said Chicot to the king, "men go much faster still by the way your brother is taking."

"Will your majesty permit me to ask a question?"

"Twenty, Joyeuse, twenty. I am as melancholy as I can possibly be at

Chateau-Thierry, and your questions will distract my attention a little."

"You know all the religious houses in the kingdom, sire, I believe?"

"As well as I do a coat of arms."

"Is there one which goes by the name of Les Hospitalières, sire?"

"It is a very small, highly distinguished, excessively strict, and severe order, composed of twenty ladies, canonesses of Saint Joseph."

"Do they take the vows there?"

"Yes, as a matter of favor, and upon a presentation from the queen."

"Should I be indiscreet if I were to ask your majesty where this order is situated?"

"Not at all; it is situated in the Rue de Chevet Saint-Laudry, in the Cité, behind Le Cloitre Notre-Dame."

"At Paris?"--"Yes."

"Thank you, sire."

"But what the devil do you ask me that for? Has your brother changed his

mind, and, instead of turning a Capuchin friar, does he now wish to become one of the Hospitalieres?"

"No, sire, I should not think he would be so mad, after what your majesty has done me the honor to tell me; but I suspect he has had his head turned by some one belonging to that order, and I should consequently like to discover who this person is, and speak to her."

"Par la mordieu!" said the king, with a self-satisfied expression, "some seven years ago I knew the superior of that convent, who was an exceedingly beautiful woman."

"Well, sire, it may perhaps be the very one."

"I cannot say; since that time, I too, Joyeuse, have assumed religious vows myself, or nearly so, indeed."

"Sire," said Joyeuse, "I entreat you to give me, at any rate, a letter to this lady, and my leave of absence for a couple of days."

"You are going to leave me!" exclaimed the king; "to leave me all alone here?"--"Oh! ungrateful king," said Chicot, shrugging his shoulders, "am I not here?"

"My letter, if you please, sire," said Joyeuse. The king sighed, but wrote it notwithstanding.

"But you cannot have anything to do at Paris?" said Henri, handing the note to Joyeuse.

"I beg your pardon, sire, I ought to escort, or at least, to watch over, my brothers."

"You are right; away with you, but return as quickly as you can."

Joyeuse did not wait for this permission to be repeated; he quietly ordered his horses, and having satisfied himself that Henri had already set off, galloped all the way until he reached his destination.

Without even changing his dress, the young man went straight to the Rue de Chevet Saint-Laudry. At the end of this street was the Rue d'Enfer, and parallel with it the Rue des Marmouzets.

A dark and venerable-looking house, behind whose walls the lofty summits of a few trees could be distinguished, the windows of which were few, bad, barred, and a wicket at the side, completed the exterior appearance of the Convent des Hospitalières.

Upon the keystone of the arch of the porch an artisan had rudely engraved these Latin words with a chisel:--

MATRONÆ HOSPITES.

Time had partially destroyed both the inscription and the stone.

Joyeuse knocked at the wicket, and had his horses led away to the Rue des Marmouzets, fearing that their presence in the street might attract too much attention.

Then, knocking at the entrance gate, he said, "Will you be good enough to go and inform Madame la Supérieure that Monsieur le Duc de Joyeuse, Grand Amiral de France, is desirous of speaking to her on behalf of the king."

The face of the nun who had made her appearance behind the gate blushed beneath her veil, and she shut the gate.

Five minutes afterward a door was opened, and Joyeuse entered a room, set apart for the reception of visitors. A beautiful woman, of lofty stature, made Joyeuse a profound reverence, which the admiral returned gracefully and respectfully.

"Madame," said he, "the king is aware that you are about to admit, or that you have already admitted, among the number of the inmates here, a person with whom I require to speak. Will you be good enough to place me in communication with that person?"

"Will you tell me the name of the lady you wish to see, monsieur?"

"I am not aware of it."

"In that case, then, how can I possibly accede to your request?"

"Nothing is easier. Whom have you admitted during the last month?"

"You either tell me too precisely, or with not sufficient precision, who this person is," said the superior, "and I am unable to comply with your wish."

"Why so?"

"Because, during the last month I have received no one here until this morning."

"This morning?"

"Yes, Monsieur le Duc, and you can understand that your own arrival, two hours after hers, has too much the appearance of a pursuit to enable me to grant you permission to speak to her."

"I implore you, madame."

"Impossible, monsieur."

"Will you merely let me see this lady?"

"Impossible, I repeat. Although your name was sufficient for the doors of this house to be thrown open before you, yet in order to speak to

any one here, except indeed to myself, a written order from the king is necessary."

"Here is the order you require, madame," replied Joyeuse, producing the letter that Henri had signed.

The superior read it and bowed.

"His majesty's will shall be obeyed," she said, "even when it is contrary to the will of Heaven."

And she advanced toward the courtyard of the convent.

"You now perceive, madame," said Joyeuse, courteously stopping her, "that I have right on my side; but I fear I may be under a mistake, and therefore may be abusing the permission I have received from the king. Perhaps the lady may not be the one I am in search of; will you be kind enough to tell me how she came here, why she came, and by whom she was accompanied?"

"All that is useless, Monsieur le Duc," replied the superior, "you are under no misapprehension for the lady, who arrived only this morning, after having been expected for the last fifteen days; this lady, I say, who was recommended by one who possesses the greatest authority over me, is indeed the very person with whom Monsieur le Duc de Joyeuse must wish to speak."

With these words the superior made another low courtesy to the duke and disappeared.

Ten minutes afterward she returned, accompanied by an hospitaliere, whose veil completely covered her face. It was Diana, who had already assumed the dress of the order.

The duke thanked the superior, offered a chair to her companion, himself sat down, and the superior quitted the room, closing with her own hands the doors of the deserted and gloomy-looking apartment.

"Madame," said Joyeuse, without any preface, "you are the lady of the Rue des Augustins; that mysterious person with whom my brother, Monsieur le Comte du Bouchage, is so passionately and madly in love."

The hospitaliere bowed her head in reply, but did not open her lips.

This affectation appeared to Joyeuse almost like an act of rudeness; he was already very indifferently disposed to his companion, and continued:

"You cannot have supposed, madame, that it is sufficient to be beautiful, or to appear beautiful; to have no heart lying hidden beneath that beauty, to inspire a wretched and despairing passion in the heart and mind of a young man of my name, and then one day calmly to tell him, 'So much the worse for you if you possess a heart. I have none; nor do I

wish for any."

"That was not my reply, monsieur, and you have been incorrectly informed," said the hospitalière, in so noble and touching a tone of voice that Joyeuse's anger was in a moment subdued.

"The actual words are immaterial, madame, when their sense has been conveyed. You have rejected my brother, and have reduced him to despair."

"Innocently, monsieur: for I have always endeavored to keep Monsieur du Bouchage at a distance."

"That is termed the art of coquetry, madame; and the result proves the fault."

"No one has the right to accuse me, monsieur; I am guilty of nothing. Your feelings of irritation are aroused against me; I shall say no more."

"Oh, oh!" said Joyeuse, gradually working himself into a passion, "you have been the ruin of my brother, and you fancy you can justify yourself with this irritating majesty of demeanor. No, no! the steps I have taken must show you what my intentions are. I am serious, I assure you, and you see by the trembling of my hands and lips that you will need some good arguments to move me."

The hospitaliere rose.

"If you come here to insult a woman," she said, with the same calm self-possession, "insult me, monsieur; if, however, you have come to induce me to change my opinion, you are wasting your time, and can withdraw."

"Ah! you are no human creature!" exclaimed Joyeuse, exasperated. "You are possessed by an evil spirit."

"I have answered already; I will reply no further. Since that is not sufficient, I shall withdraw." And the hospitaliere advanced toward the door.

Joyeuse stopped her.

"One moment! I have sought you for too long a period to allow you to leave me in this manner; and, since I have succeeded in meeting with you--since your insensibility has confirmed me in the idea which had already occurred to me, that you are possessed by the foul fiend himself, sent hither by the enemy of mankind to destroy my brother--I wish to see that face whereon the bottomless pit has written its blackest traces; I wish to behold the fire of that fatal gaze which bewilders men's minds. Avaunt thee, Satan!"

And Joyeuse, making the sign of the cross with one hand, as if he were exorcising her, with the other tore aside the veil which covered the

face of the hospitalière; the latter, silent and impassible, free from anger or ill-feeling, fixed her sweet and gentle gaze upon him who had so cruelly outraged her, and said: "Oh! Monsieur le Duc, what you have just done is unworthy a gentleman."

Joyeuse's heart was smitten by her reply.

"Oh! madame," he murmured after a long silence, "you are indeed beautiful, and truly must Henri have loved you. Surely Heaven can only have bestowed upon you loveliness such as you possess to cast it like perfume upon an existence devoted to your own."

"Monsieur, have you not conversed with your brother? or, if you have done so, he cannot have thought it expedient to make you his confidant; had not that been the case, he would have told you that I have done what you say--I have loved; I shall never love again; I have lived and must die."

Joyeuse had never taken his eyes from Diana's face, and the soft and gentle expression of her gaze penetrated the inmost recesses of his being.

Her look had destroyed all the baser material in the admiral's heart: the pure metal was alone left, and his heart seemed rent asunder, like a crucible which had been riven by the fusion of metal.

"Yes, yes," he repeated, in a still lower voice, and continuing to fix

upon her a gaze from which the fire of his fierce anger had disappeared--"yes, yes, Henri must have loved you. Oh! madame, for pity's sake, on my knees I implore you to love my brother."

Diana remained cold and silent.

"Do not reduce a family to despair, do not sacrifice the future prospects of our race; be not the cause of the death of one from despair, of the others from regret."

Diana, still silent, continued to look sorrowfully on the suppliant bending before her.

"Oh!" exclaimed Joyeuse, madly pressing his hand against his heart, "have mercy on my brother, have mercy on me!"

He sprung to his feet like a man bereft of his senses, unfastened, or rather tore open the door of the room where they had been conversing, and, bewildered and almost beside himself, fled from the house toward his attendants, who were awaiting him at the corner of the Rue d'Enfer.