

THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER V. —(Cont'd)

"The general has never set foot there, thank heaven. I tolerated him as a travelling companion. I should not endure him in Paris."

"And you have given him no successor?"

"Never. I have declared my independence and wish no master even temporarily. I am alone, I repeat, and if you doubt it, I invite you to supper this evening at my house."

"Do you know that I have a great mind to accept?" said the colonel, laughing.

"If you refused, you would disoblige me exceedingly. I should think you were distrustful of my cuisine. I assure you it is excellent, and the wines I shall offer you will not be improvised. I am expected every evening and arrangements are made to include a few friends. I must add that I am a horrible gourmande."

"Then you are perfect," said Mouriatine; "a pretty woman who loves a good table is so rare."

"I am going to excite your enthusiasm. Know that I have a cellar of the first order. I hope you will no longer hesitate to come and try my wines."

Borisoff said not a word, though his companion consulted him with his eyes. He desired nothing better than to sup with the incomparable brunette, but would have preferred it should be at his own house.

"Well," she said, after a short silence, "I see that my proposition does not please you. We will say nothing more about it."

"But if," said Mouriatine, "I should agree to accept it and gladly?"

"Your friend is not so inclined, and I cannot resent his reserve. He scarcely knows me, and considering the progress Nihilism is making he does well to be prudent."

"What has Nihilism to do with the pleasant party you propose?"

"How do you know I am not one of that sect? Have I not just acknowledged that I know a woman who is—and a thief if you please. From thence to conspiring is but one step."

"Why do you take pleasure in making game of us?"

"I speak very seriously."

"Then you wish to convince us that if we want to pass our evening with you we should run the risk of falling into a den of revolutionary bandits?" said Mouriatine, with a burst of laughter. "Why not try to persuade us that we should share the fate of those who sat down to the table of Lucrezia Borgia?"

"The Nihilists in petticoats are capable of anything—the colonel himself has said so—anything—even to serving their enemies with poisoned wines."

"Dear madame," said Borisoff, who had just determined on his line of action, "you attribute ideas to me that have never entered my head. I am yours too entirely for discretion. I should be delighted to follow you anywhere, and for the pleasure of supping with you, no matter where, would sup with all the conspirators in the universe were they guilty of the blackest crimes."

"Good! I take you at your word."

"It is I who take you at your word, and to prove that I do not fear the company with which you are trying to frighten me, I will declare that I should be delighted to have you invite this evening your thief and her young associate."

"Come, I give you back my esteem, and if I knew where to find the persons you speak of I would beg them to join us. Unfortunately they are fled I know not where. The woman, perhaps, has fallen into the claws of the Russian police, who have most likely sent her to Siberia. The lover must have crossed the seas, if he has not blown his brains out. We need think no more of them and will sup without them."

"At what hour?" asked Mouriatine.

"After the theatre—is it not, colonel?"

"Certainly," said Borisoff, bowing.

"You will think me very indiscreet," said Mouriatine, "but I

have just asked a very insidious question. You must know I am nearly famished. I arrived this evening at five, and had only time to make my toilette and look for my friend Borisoff at his club. We found so much to talk about that we forgot our dinner."

"To come to the opera? What a lover of music you are!"

"I had telegraphed from St. Petersburg to reserve two seats,—the fancy of one at a distance who wishes to enjoy a thorough Parisian life without losing a minute. I counted on the company of my faithful Borisoff, but did not calculate on the train being two hours late."

"Good! I understand, and it would be a poor reward for your frankness to compel you to suffer the tortures of hunger till midnight. We will leave whenever it pleases you, messieurs."

"What! you would sacrifice to our appetites the remainder of this play?"

"Willingly. The act is about to conclude. We will leave before the third."

"You are as good as you are beautiful. But it will not be for your house, I suppose? You will not be expected so early as this?"

"My servants expect me always. I have sent away my coupe, it is true."

"And I have not given orders to my coachman," said Borisoff.

"No matter. A hack will take us to Rue Jouffroy in twenty minutes, and in ten other minutes, my furnished messieurs, you will sit down to table."

"Adopted unanimously," cried Mouriatine, gaily.

The colonel thought no more of opposition. He approved of the fable of the neglected dinner, for his opinion now was that it was expedient to penetrate at the earliest possible moment the house of this woman who deserved to be studied more closely.

She turned toward the stage and appeared to be absorbed in the last airs of the act that was concluding.

Suddenly, however, she took up her opera-glass and directed it toward one of the boxes on the same side. Two women occupied the front of this box, in the back of which was a gentleman who was scarcely visible.

"Strange!" cried Madame de Garches. "I could swear it was he."

"Ah!" said Mouriatine, jocosely. "is your general of last winter here?"

"I am not thinking about that personage, but I fancied I recognized a young man whom I little expected to see here."

"The friend of your Nihilist, perhaps?" said Mouriatine, still in a bantering tone. "Nothing can be seen of him but the end of his nose; and as for the two women, I can only say they are neither young nor pretty."

"They are bourgeois," said Borisoff, "very rich and very common, who have taken a box for the winter in the hope of being seen and espoused by some ruined prince."

"The resemblance is strange," continued the brunette to herself, "but if it were he it would be stranger still."

"Surely, madame, this youth may flatter himself with having inspired an interest on your part. If he knew you were at so much pains to identify him, no doubt he would hasten to show himself."

"I doubt it very much," murmured Madame de Garches.

"You think then he has a reason for concealing himself?"

"My dear sir, you are too curious."

"I confess it and am silent."

"You would do better to wait until he leans on the front of the box, and then tell me if you have ever seen him."

"Me! I come to Paris too rarely to know the habitués of the Opera."

"It would in truth be better to ask the colonel if he has ever met with the young man whom I fancied I saw in that box. His name is M. de Carnoel."

At this name spoken by the charming mouth of Madame de Garches, the colonel involuntarily

started. Anything might sooner have been expected than inquiries from her concerning M. de Carnoel.

Nevertheless he must answer without evasion, must reply by yes or no. His professional instinct suggested the thought that it were better not to cut short all possibility of further investigation by a negative reply.

"Is not M. de Carnoel the son of a former attaché of the embassy?" he asked.

"Yes, I think his father was formerly engaged in diplomacy. Then you have met with the young man?"

"Often enough to recognize him if he were here."

"Do you suppose it possible that he could be at the Opera in company with the widows in that box?"

"I should see nothing surprising in it. He has, I believe, no fortune, and seeks, no doubt, an advantageous marriage."

"He! marry one of those vulgar upstarts! I could not believe him capable of such a thing. Besides, I was insane to imagine he would appear at the opera in an uncovered box."

"Why?" asked the colonel, assuming an astonished air.

"Because he cannot be in Paris."

"One would infer from your words," said Mouriatine, "that the gentleman in question was forced to hide himself. Has he been guilty of any crime?"

"Madame," resumed Borisoff, who began to get a clear view of the situation, "I can certify that you are mistaken. M. de Carnoel has not left Paris as far as I know."

"He may have done so without your knowledge."

"Then he must have left this morning, for I saw him yesterday."

In acknowledging that he held intercourse with M. de Carnoel, the colonel was burning the bridge behind him, but it had become apparent that Madame de Garches knew a great deal about the prisoner, and the best means of extracting what she knew appeared to be to assume the attitude of a friend of the young man who interested her.

"You have spoken to him?" she exclaimed.

"Yes; I met him on the street this morning."

"And he did not try to avoid you?"

"Not at all. We have not been intimate, but have held the most courteous relations. Why should he have avoided me?"

"I thought he must have reasons for not wishing to meet with former acquaintances, and am delighted to learn that I was mistaken. Did he speak to you of his present circumstances?"

"Yes; but with considerable reserve. He told me, however, that he had abandoned a situation he had held and proposed to embark for America. I offered him a recommendation to our consul-general at New York."

"And he accepted?"

"With gratitude. That reminds me that I have not sent him the promised letter. I shall repair my negligence to-morrow."

"It is very singular," said Madame de Garches, still directing her glass to the box occupied by the matrimonially-inclined widows. Then suddenly laying it down, she said aloud: "I was sure of it. The young man has just risen, and his full face does not resemble M. de Carnoel in the least."

"He is very fortunate, this M. de Carnoel," laughed Mouriatine; "he absorbs all your thoughts. Might we know when and where he made your conquest?"

"Dear monsieur," said the brunette, with eyes of fire, dryly, "your question is an impertinence. No one has made my conquest. If I am interested about this young man it is because one of my best friends, who is residing in Florence, has charged me to find out what has become of him, and to deliver a box—"

"Containing love tokens?"

"I know nothing about that, but I know that you are insupportable, and I beg you not to interrupt my conversation with the colonel."

"Madame," said Borisoff, "I will with pleasure undertake to forward the box to M. de Carnoel."

"He has given you his address?"

"It was necessary he should do so that I might send him the letter, and if you would like at the same time to have my valet deliver the box—"

"Thank you; I promised to place it in his hands myself. I confess it embarrassing me a little, for I can scarcely go to him; but I can write, and suppose he will not refuse to come to see me at my house."

"Assuredly not, but it would be well not to delay too long, for he may leave Paris at any moment."

"True; he must be in haste to depart," murmured Madame de

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Garches to herself. "What is to be done, then?"

"Is it really important that you should see M. de Carnoel?" said Borisoff, after a short silence.

"Undoubtedly."

"Will you receive him this evening?"

"Why not? Our interview would not be long and need not interrupt our supper."

"Well, I can pass by his lodging. If I find him there, as is quite likely, I will bring him to you; if not, I will leave my card, with a word to signify that I am awaiting him in Rue Jouffroy. He will suppose it to be on account of the letter and will certainly come."

"My dear colonel, if you would do that you would be the most amiable of men."

"There is a compliment which I hasten to deserve. Permit me to leave you for an instant. We must make sure of a carriage. The sooner we arrive at your house, the sooner I may go in quest of M. de Carnoel."

"Perfect. I shall be ready on your return."

The two Russians hastened from the box and reclaimed their overcoats, without having perceived Maxime, who was promenading at the end of the corridor.

"Hey!" said Mouriatine in his companion's ear, "was I right in advising you to approach this lady? I caught your idea of confronting the Carnoel with this jade. It is bold, but a masterly stroke."

"A stroke in which I might be the loser, did I not take precautions. I must first see the house, how it is guarded, and what servants she has under her orders. If I scent a trap, I shall make a feint of going in search of Carnoel, and shall return saying I have not found him. The affair will be ended for to-night, but I shall resume it after

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another method. If, on the contrary, I find that force could be employed with any chance of success, I shall bring Carnoel in a carriage with an escort of three good blades. I shall drive myself and will conduct him to the mistress of the house. That will be the psychological moment, as M. Bismarck says. With a glance we may detect whether there has been any complicity between them. My three old soldiers will enter with me; three others will guard the door and the street. We will search the house from top to bottom, and I hope will make many discoveries."

"Your casket very likely," said Mouriatine, "and as to this pretended Madame de Garches—"

"We will bring her to my house with the Carnoel, the femme de chambre, the cook, and the men servants, if there are any. We will empty the house in a few trips, and will then see what is to be done with our prisoners."

"It is spirited, but if well conducted it must succeed, and in that case the great chief will approve it."

"It will succeed. I shall not act without being sure of my ground."

"Oh, I feel confident of it! Chance has been on our side; let us make the most of it."

"Come, let us look for a hack," said the colonel, pushing Mouriatine toward the great stairway.

(To be continued.)

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She (half crying)—Now that horrid Mrs. Comeup will crow over me!

He—How can she do that?
She—She has a bigger rooster on her hat than I have!