THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER V.—(Cont'd)

"By suffering myself to be seduced by this woman?" asked the colonel, ironically.

"Yes, and in profiting by your superiority over her. You can read her hand and she cannot read yours. You will go only so far as it suits you, and, however great her cunning, she will at last let you find out her vulnerable point. Besides, you have an ally in me. When I met her last summer in Switzerland I took care to assume the appearance of a liberal Russian, and it would be easy to make my liberalism still more pronounced until I have gained completely her confidence."

"If she saw you with me she would scarcely be ready to recognize you as a thorough partisan of her own."

"Oh, I shall not speak extravagantly. I shall be governed by circumstances. What I want is to discover whether this young man was really concerned in the theft, and if not, I have an easy way out of the situation, which will compromise no one."

"And you propose to begin operations this evening at the opera?" said Borisoff.

"Yes, if we meet the lady, as I hope. But, tell me, don't you think that young man looks at us rather oftener than is necessary—the one who came to ask you about M. de Carnoel?"

"He is a madcap, not worth occupying our attention."

"So be it, but if you take my advice we will raise the siege before he is through his dinner. The youth annoys me, and under other circumstances I should like to make him feel the point of my sword," grumbled Mouriatine, outlining the lunge with which he would be pleased to gratify Maxime.

At the same instant Maxime was struck by a sudden recollection:

"Ah! parbleu! I recognize him now; this man is the fencing-master of the countess. Yet no—I must be mistaken,—but that cast of feature. When once I have seen a face I don't forget it—it was the change of costume that perplexed me. I even remember her calling him by his name—a Polish name."

While Maxime Dorgeres thus gathered up his recollections, Mouriatine shrugged his shoulders and said to Col. Borisoff: "Bah! I need not be disturbed about him. The young man is not thinking of us. Let us ask for coffee and light our cigars. We will take a smoke on the boulevard."

"You said you expected to meet this woman at the opera. May I ask on what you found this hope, having come straight from St. Petersburg?"

"I could not be expected to be so well informed as to the disposition a Parisian demoiselle will make of her evening. All I can affirm is that Wednesday is her day for the opera; there are then chances that we will meet her there—if not, we will find her somewhere to-morrow or next day."

"You are bent on presenting me, then?" asked the colonel, after a pause employed in sipping the coffee that had just been served.

"I am—in your interest."

There was silence for several moments. The two were observing each other. At the other end of the hall was one who observed them both while apparently absorbed in a partridge which had just been served.

"The more I look at that man," thought Maxime, "the more am I satisfied of having seen him, foil in hand, fencing with Mme. Yalta. How does it happen that I find him here dressed in the last extreme of fashion and dining at the dearest restaurant in Paris This fencing-master must love good wines and have money in his pocket, and the countess must pay her professors better than generals are paid in France. But that he should be on terms of intimacy with Borisoff is indeed inexplicable."

Whilst Maxime was holding this monologue, conversation was renewed at the table of the two Russians.

"If you could succeed," said Mouriatine, "in suppressing this creature without disturbance, you would regain the reputation for skill which the affair of the casket has somewhat impaired. It is the damsel in question who must be sent to Siberia, not M. de Carnoel."

"Parbleu!" exclaimed Borisoff, "I begin to believe you are right. Let us settle and leave. It seems to me this Frenchman is watching us surreptitiously, and I want to throw him off the track."

Mouriatine was of the same opinion. He called the waiter to settle his bill.

"It is unheard of," growled Maxime, cramming down his truffles to make an end of them. "Borisoff and the countess' fencing-master are intimate friends. And this Borisoff is a secret agent of Russian diplomacy; a spy, to call things by the right name. She is no conspirator that I know of; but she knows, perhaps, those who are, or at least those whom Georget assisted to steal the casket. Is this pretty professor betraying his mistress? She also has secrets, perhaps. Who knows if she is not selling them to this man whom we believe confined Robert de Carnoel? Parbleu! I know what to be at. She made me promise not to act against Borisoff, but I am not engaged to shut my eyes when I meet him. I have the right to go where he goes, and even to follow a monsieur of his acquaintance.'

He would gladly have sacrificed the remainder of his dinner, but he could not break off abruptly from his partridge, scarcely yet touched, and precipitate himself into the street, without being remarked by the very persons whom he wished to watch unobserved.

So he resigned himself to suffer their departure, determining at the same time to cut short his sitting, and with that view taking double mouthfuls. He ascertained at a glance that they went toward the boulevard, and promised himself to follow them from afar up to the moment of separation, when he would give all his attention to the fencing-master. The colonel was now the countess' business, but he might and must study the proceedings of a hireling of the countess surprised in familiar intercourse with Borisoff.

It never occurred to him that this fencing-master acted, perhaps, on behalf of the countess, and in truth there appeared little probability that a subaltern of this class would be entrusted with the private confidence of a great lady of the Avenue de Friedland.

"The Frenchman is distanced," said Borisoff, on reaching the boulevard. "We have time to finish our cigars before going to the theatre."

"Especially," replied Mouriatine, "as I have taken the precaution to procure chairs just below the lady's box."

"I see you have thought of everything. However, if you had not found me, which might easily have been, since I was not anticipating your visit——"

"In that case I should have gone to the opera alone, for I am bent upon making use of this opportunity to meet the lady in question. But on going to your house I was told you would dine at your club, so I found you without difficulty. It is in that beautiful Rue de Vigny mansion that you have shut up your prisoner?"

"Yes," said Borisoff, "and I beg you to believe that he is out of the reach of all pursuit. The house is large and completely isolated. I have made interior arrangements to facilitate watchfulness and prevent flight. My prisoner is as well guarded as if he were shut up in a fortress at St. Petersburg."

"But," resumed Mouriatine, "you have been obliged to take your domestics into your confidence."

"Oh, my servants are all old soldiers or subalterns attached to a lower order of the Third Section, and accustomed to passive obedience. They are as mute as fish, and always ready to act promptly. Had I wished to get rid of the Frenchman, I had but to speak the word."

"But you have contented yourself with shutting him up in a cellar."

"That would have been useless. I have installed him in a large hall which serves me for a library. The doors of this apartment are all made fast and guarded. The windows look out on a garden, and are thirty feet from the ground. To fly, or to communicate with any one would be impossible. I have no neighbors."

They had just arrived at the Place de l'Opera. Had either of the two turned back, he would have seen Maxime, who had just set foot on one of the shelters illuminated by the electric light. Having finished his dinner, he had darted off in a chance pursuit of the two Russians. He had sped in every direction and perceived them at last, just as they were turning the corner of the Place de l'Opera.

"They are going to the opera," he murmured. "Decidedly they are intimate. I am not dressed and shall be taken for a provincial or usher, but I must know what these foreigners are about."

Maxime was a subscriber to the opera, and did not need to provide himself with a ticket. He suffered the couple he was in pursuit of to pass on in advance, and, five minutes after they had entered the door, presented himself at the comptroller's office, not without having pulled up the collar of his overcoat to disguise his black cravat.

The dress he wore suggested to him an idea.

Instead of taking his seat as usual, he would remain in the passage-way of the orchestra until he discovered the colonel and his companion, and when he had ascertained in what part of the hall they were seated, would place himself so as not to lose sight of them.

This manoeuvre was successful. From his ambuscade he discerned them installed in the orchestra, and he would remain in the post he had chosen till the curtain rose.

The two were engaged in inspecting the boxes with their glasses, and, having taken a rapid view, Mouriatine said to the colonel:

"She has not yet arrived."

"Are you certain she will come?" retorted Borisoff, not sorry to find his companion's sagacity at fault.

"Certain? no. One is never certain what a woman will do; above all, a woman of this sort. But it is not late, and I do not despair of seeing her appear during the second act."

"And you think she will come alone?"

"Very likely. At Geneva she went everywhere without a cavalier. They called her the Solitaire."

"Does the lady understand Russian?"

"She pretends not, but I do not believe it. And I need hardly say that I shall not make use of our national tongue to speak to you confidentially in her presence."

"Ah!" said Borisoff, "there is a woman entering, on our left, and a pretty woman, truly."

"It is she, my dear sir," murmured Mouriatine. "I should recognize her anywhere, were it only by her eyes."

"They are wonderful, truly; I have never seen such before."

"Then you have not met with her"

"Never; and it astonishes me. If this marvel is a femme galante, I do not understand why I have not remarked her, or why she has not been pointed out to me."

"I have already said that she is an apparition that only appears in Paris now and then, and is not disposed to exhibit herself."

"She is examining the orchestra chairs with extraordinary persistency,—now she is directing her glass to the passage-way on our left."

(To be continued.)

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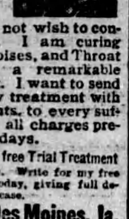

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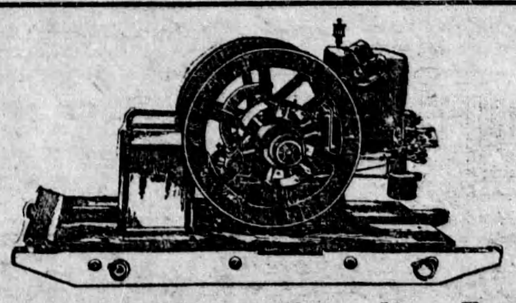

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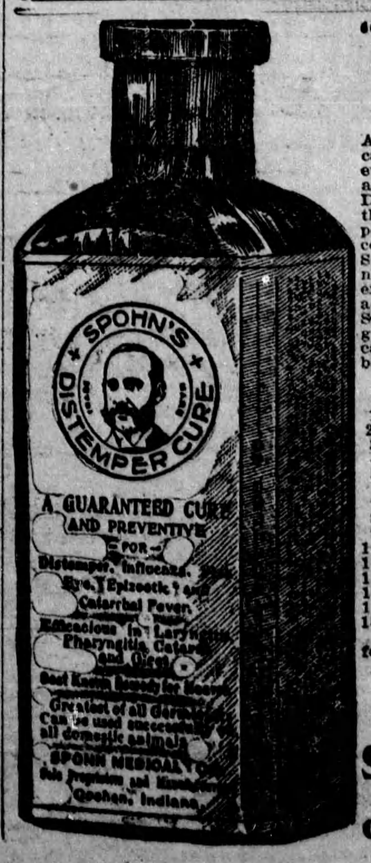

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