THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER V.—(Cont'd)

"Ah! she ceases to inspect. See her now in all her splendor.'

The new-comer now appeared in the forepart of the box, and her striking beauty attracted all eyes. Maxime, hiding himself in the depths of the orchestra, had taken no note of the star that had just risen. It was only when the lady set down the double opera-glass which had concealed the upper part of her face, that he recognized her. He still hesitated, unable to believe his eyes.

"She!" he murmured, "she here!"

"Madame Sergent! ah! it is too much. After the trick she played me this rogue dares to appear openly at the opera—and in the first boxes still! And here have I been searching for her in vain for a month! She doubtless returned to Paris supposing I would think no more of her. Only she has not brought with her the Carpathian bear. She has left him in his own country and replaced him by another animal of the same species. Certainly," concluded the young man, "I was happily inspired this evening. At the restaurant I surprised one of the countess' hirelings in great intimacy with Borisoff, and here, at the opera, I discover a rogue who has tricked and robbed me. The thing is to determine what I had best do. Parbleu! my choice cannot be doubtful. It doesn't matter very much how this man finishes his evening with Borisoff, whilst if I let slip the occasion for laying hold on Madame Sergent, it will never present itself again. The safest plan would be to go up to her box and have an immediate explanation with her."

It was a favorable moment. The three strokes had just announced the second act.

Giving a last glance at the box before going out, the most surprising spectacle presented itself.

Col. Borisoff and his companion, both standing, were preparing to leave their places, and Madame Sergent was smiling to them.

Maxime fancied he must be mistaken, but as the two foreigners passed near her box he saw distinctly that they bowed to her, and that she returned the bow.

"They know her!" he murmured, and he stopped in utter consternation.

On one side, the countess' fencing master exchanging gracious looks with the accomplice of those who had taken the casket, and, by excess of marvels, the owner of this casket on pleasant terms with the friend of the thieves, and these two personages with one accord going to join her.

"I was astonished awhile ago," thought Maxime, "but this is beyond belief."

The more he reflected, the more the reunion appeared to him monstrous. He seemed to see in it mysteries of iniquity, criminal alliances, unfathomable abysses of dissimulation.

He asked himself whether all these people were banded together to play a wicked comedy to the prejudice of Robert de Carnoel and himself. He even went so far as to suspect the intentions of Madame Yalta—this countess who knew so many things, and loved secret intrigues.

"Is this man betraying her, or is she fooling me?"

He answered this question by a violence which he formulated thus:

"Au diable! the Russians, the Poles, and the great foreign ladies. I have enough of their intrigues, and can trample on their spider's webs. I am afraid of not one after all and have the right to call Madame Sergent to account."

This was a project easier to conceive than to execute. One does not rush into a lady's box in the midst of a performance to summon her to answer for her past conduct in the presence of two men who are not responsible for the doings and exploits of this woman. An inroad of this sort could end only in a quarrel, and quarrels never elucidate anything.

There was nothing for him but to observe and wait.

Whilst from the passage-way of the orchestra the invisible witness followed up the movements of the three whom some inexplicable chance had brought together, the adventure sketched by Mouriatine began to take shape.

The lady recently from Geneva, the ex-marvel of the Rink, had at length deigned a glance at the spectators nearest her.

Her sparkling eyes had encountered the gray eyes of Mouriatine, and smiles were exchanged.

Then ensued a pantomine which invited him to her box, followed by a movement on his part indicating his neighbor in the stall, answered by a sign from the lady which might be interpreted thus:

"No matter; bring your friend. I shall be pleased to see him as well as yourself."

Nothing more was needed to induce the acceptance of an invitation repeated with such gracious persistency.

The box-keeper ushered them in, and the lady, with eyes of fire, began thus, extending her hand to Mouriatine:

"You can't think how happy I am to meet you. I arrived from Monaco alone, and have not yet seen a familiar face. You recognized me immediately, did you not?"

"You are not of the number of those whom one forgets," replied Ivanovitch.

"Oh, after six months' absence one has the right to forget anybody. But be good enough to present to me monsieur, who has been so kind as to accompany you."

"Col. Borisoff, one of my compatriots. My dear colonel, we are in the box of Madame de Garches."

"True; it is very necessary that you should present me also, for your friend does not know me, I presume."

"No, madame, and I am truly astonished not to have remarked you, however brief may have been your sojourns in Paris. Beauty such as yours cannot pass unobserved anywhere."

"You flatter me, colonel, and I warn you that I do not love compliments. Sit down, and we will talk of everything you please except myself. Your friend will tell you that last summer, in Switzerland, I had established this rule, and that all my little world submitted to it. I seek friends, but flee from lovers."

"It seems to me that last year—excuse my frankness—one of my compatriots knew how to please you."

"Who! Ah! that blockhead of a general. That doesn't count. It was one of my errors. Only think, he gained my confidence by proposing extraordinary ascensions; he talked about climbing Mont Blanc, scaling the Yung Frau, and I could never induce him to leave the Royal Hotel of Chamounix or the promenades of Interlaken. I don't like prudent people, so I disposed of him."

"My friend Borisoff is temerity itself," said Mouriatine, with a burst of laughter.

"Take care," said the lady, "you will set me to putting his temerity to the proof."

These words, addressed directly to the colonel, embarrassed him visibly. He had, in truth, since his entrance into the lady's box, cut an awkward enough figure, though ordinarily it was not assurance that he lacked. Presented to a strange lady by a friend fallen from the skies like an aerolite, Borisoff did not feel certain of his ground. He was a skilful diplomatist, but accustomed to proceed methodically without trusting anything to chance. Furthermore, and above all, he was submitting, in spite of himself, to the ascendency of a pair of beautiful eyes; eyes the like of which he had never seen before, and which were fixed on him with a disquieting persistency.

Mouriatine came to his assistance.

"To what proof would you subject my friend? What peaks do you mean to require him to scale?"

"Oh," replied the ex-marvel of the Rink, "the question is not of perilous ascensions now. We are not in Switzerland; we are in Paris, in a city where courage consists in mocking prejudices and braving public opinion. You both entered my box in the midst of the opera. That was a fine example of it."

"One which cost me very little," replied Mouriatine. "I am proud of being seen with you."

"My dear friend, you are a bird of passage. You come to France simply for amusement. You owe no account to any one and may act as you please, while with Col. Borisoff, not being in the same situation, there is more merit in attaching himself to a declassee."

"What do you call declassee? Do you suppose I confound you with the demoiselles who make the tour of the lakes every day?"

"No, but neither do you take me for a woman of the true world, and you are right. I was born in that world, and it is perhaps in my power to return to it, for I am free, and better still, I am rich; but it was my choice to leave it, and it is my choice to live as an irregular. Therefore it is that you met me last summer exploring the glaciers and lakes in company with a lord, whom I dismissed when the fancy took me; and thus, that having passed a fortnight at Monte Carlo, where I broke the bank, I arrived in Paris alone and unoccupied, uncertain whether I shall remain all winter or leave to-morrow."

"Your programme is charming—nothing fixed, everything to caprice—that is the motto of us Russians."

"Let your friend speak," said Madame de Garches, fixing her eyes on the colonel.

"I agree with my compatriot," said the colonel, who could no longer remain silent. "Pleasure is the great concern, and I also am free to choose my associations.'

"Really"

"Do you doubt it?"

"I doubt it no longer since you say so, but they have assured me that you are entrusted by your government with a secret mission. 'They' means this general by whom I was nearly bored to death last year. Don't ask me his name; I don't wish to recall it.'

"You remember at least what he told you about me?" asked Borisoff.

"Oh, perfectly. I am glad you should know how it happened that you occupied my attention whilst exploring the beautiful valleys of Helvetia. I had inhabited in Paris the same neighborhood with yourself and do still."

"You know where I live?"

"Yes. In going to the Bois I have often passed your house in Rue de Vigny. I have seen you sometimes driving yourself in a beautiful phaeton, and being curious, naturally I made inquiries about you. I learned that you were a Russian gentleman, very rich, and very agreeable."

"Why did I not know that you condescended to think of me?" said Borisoff, gallantly.

"Oh, I was only passing through Paris. I came from London and was going to Geneva, where the most tiresome of generals awaited me. It came into my mind to ask information about you, because I had remarked you. You see, I am frank."

"You overwhelm me. But I fancy my illustrious compatriot took the trouble to dispel your illusions."

"He tried to do so. After having intrenched himself in prudent circumspection, he ended by a mysterious revelation that you belonged to the political police."

"It was a joke, I suppose," said the colonel, a little disconcerted by this abrupt declaration.

"A silly joke," seconded Mouriatine. "Did he accuse me also of being enrolled in the secret service?"

"No," replied the lady, somewhat scornfully, "but I can assure you he was not joking at all. He explained the colonel's mission to me, and entered into a number of details."

"Then I have a mission?" inquired Borisoff, forcing a smile. "I am charmed to know it. It has enhanced my importance in my own eyes."

"You are, it appears, charged with watching over the Nihilists."

"Diable! I execute my mission very imperfectly, then, for they have created much talk of late."

"In Russia; but you are concerned only with those who reside in France, at least according to the general."

"I believe," said Mouriatine, "my friend Borisoff has really a mission in Paris, and no very difficult one. He has a revenue of a hundred thousand roubles which he consecrates to the study of the pretty women of this country, where all types are to be met with."

"If I were certain you were telling me the truth," murmured the incomparable brunette, "I—but your friend should be the one to protest, and it is you only who speak."

"To protest!" exclaimed Borisoff, who had recovered his sang froid. "I shall do nothing of the sort. I should be glad to have you believe me the grand master of the police of all the Russias, and to prove to you that my greatness would not hinder me from following wherever you might lead."

(To be continued.)

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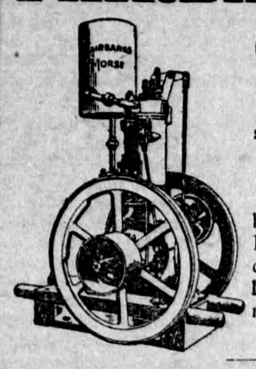

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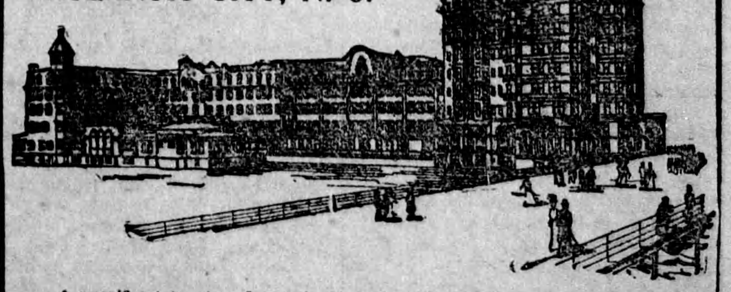

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