THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER V.—(Cont'd)

"A la bonne heure! That is language that I understand. I believe you, my dear colonel; you are no political agent. The general was a fool, or not a fool either. Perhaps he had reasons for calumniating you. He knew I had observed you and was jealous. Now that I know just what ground we are on, I may pre-- by the chance that has brought us together this evening. I shall be in Paris only a few days, and wish to enliven my dulness as much as possible. If the colonel now had been really the formidable representative of a formidable police, I should be, to my great regret, deprived of the privilege of receiving him."

"You would have had nothing to fear from him, for you do not conspire against our government."

"How do you know?" asked Madame de Garches, with a smile that might have melted all the glaciers of Mont Blanc.

"Eyes like yours do not conspire. They love."

"You are right. Love is better than politics, and I care little about overturning governments. But I can't help pitying the proscribed,—the exiles, and should not wish to live on friendly terms with those who prosecute them."

"If you only knew them — these people whom you compassionate—"

"I do know them, or to speak more exactly, I have known some of them."

"Where In Switzerland?" asked Mouriatine.

"In Switzerland and in Paris," replied Madame de Garches.

"What! at Paris too! I thought the headquarters of these people was Geneva."

"I supposed so, but I met some one here last year who was certainly working for your Nihilists."

"She made you her confidante?" asked Borisoff, with an air of doubt.

"No, chance made me acquainted with a secret which I did not try to penetrate, and this secret I have intentionally forgotten. Let us talk of something more lively."

"Willingly," said Mouriatine, "and we would do well to lower our voices. They are murmuring against us in the neighboring boxes."

The prudent Ivanovitch was, moreover, of the opinion that it was not expedient to attract attention at the theatre when treating of certain subjects.

"You are right," murmured the lady, with eyes of fire; "we are scandalizing our neighbors, and, moreover, not listening to a note of Meyerbeer's music. It is real sacrilege."

"Are you very anxious to listen to this divine music?" asked M. Borisoff, who began to thing Madame de Garches worth more than all the operas in the world.

"Exceedingly, though I know it by heart," replied the incomparable brunette, turning toward the stage.

The change was not acceptable to the two messieurs. Borisoff especially was enticed by the indiscreet words she had let drop; moreover, he thought her ravishing. He could never remember to have met with a woman who charmed him so much, and at the same time excited his curiosity. He was devoted body and soul to the government he served, but he had not given in his resignation as a man of intrigue—this skilful and gallant colonel. To please an adorable creature and make use of his conquest to regain the esteem of the chief of the Third Section, what a dream! But the point was not yet reached. To arrange his batteries so as to profit by the situation, would not be very easy even for diplomatists, and he almost despaired of success. But Ivan Ivanovitch, who had no misgivings, encouraged him by look and gesture; while Madame de Garches, leaning on the front of her box, was absorbed in a musical revery.

The subtle Ivan was unconscious that Maxime Dorgeres was prowling in the corridor like a lion waiting for his prey.

Maxime had decided to come out from the depths of the orchestra, that he might watch more nearly the suspicious creatures who occupied his thoughts. He was revolving in his mind a crowd of contradictory projects. He wished not to lose sight of Madame Sergent, and at the same time to avoid being seen by her. A police agent would have been perplexed how to attain this double end, much more Maxime, complete novice that he was in such matters, who had always come off worsted in his encounters with the thief of the bracelet,—even with Col. Borisoff.

Mouriatine, far from thinking of him, was seeking to recover the thread of an interesting conversation, and the colonel meanwhile admired the Greek profile and golden complexion of Madame de Garches.

Suddenly she changed her attitude and turned toward her adorer.

"Do you know what I am thinking of?" she asked abruptly.

"I only know that I am thinking of you."

"I was thinking of the tragic scene of the fourth act of this play, and that it is sometimes enacted under another form in real life."

"Hum!" sneered Mouriatine, "the passions have much calmed down since the days of St. Bartholemew."

"Do you think so? For my part I fancy nothing has changed. Bring together love and politics, and a tragedy as exciting as "The Huguenots" will be the result. Suppose, for example, one of the Nihilists of your country in love with an officer—an aide-de-camp of the Czar, for instance. She knows of a plot soon to be developed—the palace is mined and is about to be blown up. Her lover is called there on duty. He is with her—is about to leave. She holds him back—he questions her. And there she is reduced to the alternative of leaving him to perish or betraying the secret of the conspirators."

"That would recall to mind the famous fourth act," said the colonel, smiling, "but permit me to say that you have much too romantic an idea of these partisans in petticoats. They are the most prosaic people in the world on all subjects, and would sacrifice every sentiment to their interest or their pleasure. You are not aware, perhaps, that they have gone so far as to steal. The Russian papers gave only yesterday an account of the condemnation of half a dozen young and pretty women who took part last winter in an expedition directed against a banking-house. Their friends had made an underground passage-way to reach the vaults of this bank, and obtained possession of four or five million of francs. All these rascals of both sexes will end their days in Siberia, and the men no more resemble Raoul than the women do the Valentine of Meyerbeer's opera."

"It is true," murmured Madame de Garches dreamily, "they do steal—but only on behalf of their cause."

"What do you know about it?"

"One of them told me so."

"Had she a lover?"

"Yes, and I think there passed between them something analogous to the great scene of 'The Huguenots.'"

"Really? If you would let me have the story I should be glad to know if I have slandered these people in declaring them incapable of elevated sentiments."

"Oh, the situation was not the same as in the opera. He was not a conspirator, nor had his brothers been massacred. But his mistress exacted of him the sacrifice of his honor, and he yielded."

"In other words, to make himself agreeable to her, he stole."

"Something of that sort, and the unfortunate young man was cruelly punished. He was compelled to flee, or at least he has disappeared, and the woman concerns herself no more about him."

"Was he a Russian?" asked Mouriatine with an indifferent air.

"No, he is French. But I left Paris and do not know the end of the story. I should be glad to hear the denouement."

"Nothing prevents you from instituting inquiries now that you have returned."

"The woman has probably left France. Besides, it was a sorrowful adventure, and I came to Paris for amusement. I should like for a few days to lead the life of a young man. You laugh? I am quite serious. I have an insane desire to sup, to get intoxicated, to frequent public balls."

"Not alone, I hope?"

"Why not? It would be the true way to amuse myself. But I do not know that I shall venture."

"Should you like to be accompanied by two discreet cavaliers?"

"You and your friend, you mean?"

"Precisely. I assure you, you could not do better. We seek only amusement and will act as your escorts, with that view only."

"If I was sure of it—"

"Doubt nothing. When shall we begin? This evening?"

"This evening there is no masked ball anywhere."

"We may sup, nevertheless, and if it suits you to sup in that house in Rue de Vigny, that you have observed—"

"Thanks. I sup only at a restaurant or at home."

"At home? I thought you were only here in passing."

"That is true, but I have a house furnished as if I resided in it all the year round. It is not far from yours. Are you familiar with Rue Jouffroy?"

"Rue Jouffroy?" repeated Borisoff.

"Yes, between the Boulevard Malesherbes and the Avenue de Villiers. I have there a lodging not equal to your palace in Rue de Vigny but which suffices for me, alone as I am."

"And the general?" asked Mouriatine, laughing.

"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 Mauriatine, "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."

(To be continued.)

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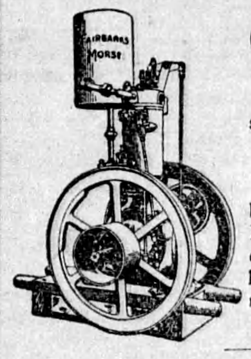

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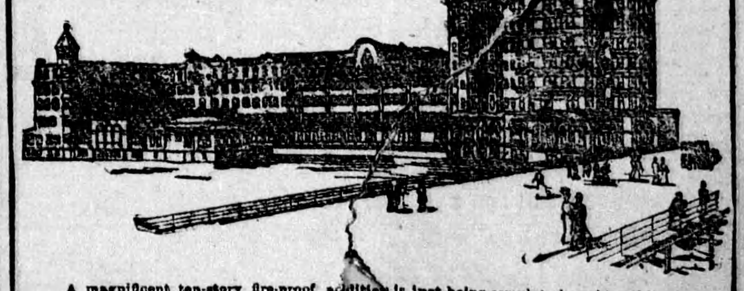

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