THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd)

"Look!" said Maxime, laying his hand on the arm of M. Bidard, "do you see those three shadows outlined on the curtain of the salon?"

"Certainly, the woman and the two messieurs, parbleu! Must be that supper isn't ready, or they are expecting some one; they don't appear to be going to the dining-room."

"They are standing though."

"Yes, or bowing and scraping. See! the tallest bows, and the cocotte gives him her hand; it's amusing like any thing, 'pon my word. One might believe himself at Seraphin's Chinese shadows."

"Ah! ah! the one that bowed is going out; there are only two silhouettes to be seen now."

"Likely he's gone to bed. The other is the cocotte's gentleman. The friend who came with them has said good-night."

"No, if that was so they wouldn't have lighted the salon and dining-room. But we shall see."

Five minutes passed without incident. The two stories were brilliantly lighted, but the shadows had disappeared. Suddenly the little door through which Madame Sergest had disappeared the evening of the Rink was opened softly. A man appeared on the threshold followed by a servant bearing a light with two branches. By the brightness of this light Maxime recognized Borisoff and redoubled his attention. He held a short colloquy with the valet de pied which by means of the gestures the observer interpreted for himself.

"He says he will return," thought Maxime, "and the servant explains that he has only to ring and they will open to him."

The door closes again. Borisoff goes toward the Boulevard Malesherbes. And now the fencing-master and the thief reappear behind the window of the salon. From thence they observe the colonel. They are awaiting his return.

"Shall I follow their example or risk a sally to see where he is going?" Maxime determined on the latter.

"Listen," he said to his ally Bidard, "I want to find out what that man is going to do. I am going to follow him to the end of the street and return."

"That is easy. I will open to monsieur and resume my post. Monsieur has only to knock on the window when he returns."

Maxime glided into the street and saw Borisoff fifteen steps in advance, and at the same time a man whose feet were pattering on the square at the entrance of Rue Jouffroy. This was no other than the coachman of his victoria.

"Good!" he thought, "I may let my Russian pass on. My coachman will tell me which way he took." So he disappeared in the shadow of the wall to watch events from afar.

The colonel walking quickly soon reached the Boulevard Malesherbes; there he stopped, and observing the coachman, went straight toward him. This surprised Maxime, who began to look with all his eyes, wondering, with a certain anxiety, what Borisoff had to say to this man. The conversation prolonged itself for an unreasonable length of time, more than could be needed to ascertain from a coachman whether his carriage was free. But at length Borisoff passed on his way and was lost in the darkness. Maxime after waiting awhile went toward the boulevard. Arrived at the end of the street he stopped to look around, then turned to the right and rejoined the coachman, who recognized him immediately and began to laugh.

"Ah, monsieur," he said, "la particuliere's gentleman wanted to pump me, but I turned him off nicely. Fancy that seeing my coach drawn up here he mistrusted me at once and asked if I had brought somebody to Rue Jouffroy. I knew what was up and told him I was waiting for a doctor who hired me by the month, and was on a visit in that big house yonder—on the boulevard."

"Really!" exclaimed Maxime, "you have put him off the track. That was a good idea of yours, and I shall remember it when we settle."

"Oh," said the coachman, "I'm not uneasy about my pourboire; I know my man. That's why I could tell that tall one there was the husband, and a husband jealous as a turkey, and I see well enough that you mean to play him a trick."

"Perhaps, but did he not ask you to drive him somewhere?"

"Yes; it vexed him to see my carriage drawn up at the end of the street where he had just left his particuliere; he knew I wasn't there for nothing. He has a sharp scent. He asked me first if I would drive him home—only two steps,—and I should have a hundred sous. He might have offered me a louis, and I'd have stayed by you. And when he saw I didn't bite, he filed off. I would lay a litre he's already at the Boulevard de Courcelles."

"You did well, mon brave, to send that man off to walk, and I promise you shall lose nothing. He will return, the animal, and as I want to watch him, I am going to station myself as sentry at a place below. You will remain here and keep your eyes open, and when I return tell me what you have seen. If by chance I should need your services, may I count on you?"

"Fully. You have only to call out, Auguste! and I come at a gallop. If any thumping is to be done, I can prove that I am not one-handed."

"Thanks, and au revoir to-night or to-morrow, according as events may determine."

Auguste, flattered by the confidence in him exhibited by his monsieur, made a magnificent gesture, which signified: "Be easy; I am here."

And having thus arranged his affairs, Maxime hastened to regain his ambuscade.

The porter awaited him and opened with great alacrity, anxious to learn the result of the sally.

"Is monsieur satisfied? Has monsieur discovered anything new?"

"The man sped away by the Boulevard Malesherbes, but I am satisfied he means to return."

"Oh, that is clear as day. They are not going to table without him. All is lit up and nothing moves in the house. Proof that they are waiting for him."

"Hush!" said Maxime, in a low voice. At this moment a carriage stopped a hundred metres from Madame Sergent's house.

To Maxime's great amazement, Robert de Carnoel descended from the carriage and advanced toward the house, flanked by two tall men who pressed him closely, but did not hold him as policemen do a prisoner. They had even the appearance of talking with him, and it could be seen he walked of his own free will. The door was open and a valet de pied stood there with a light. Evidently he waited to receive Carnoel.

"Monsieur," said Bidard under his breath, "I believe they are going to commit a crime. They are bringing the young man to the Tour de Nesle. Surely it is to strangle him. I have a mind to call for help."

"Not yet," replied Maxime, quickly, "see first what they will do."

"Look, sir! above there—in the salon—those two shadows behind the windows—"

"It is the lady and her friend, the one who remained—they are expecting the other. They heard the carriage and have come to the window."

"I lay a wager they don't open it. My two tenants of the third story have opened theirs, and the brigands don't care to show themselves."

"See! the shadows disappear! It is the street we must watch."

Nothing extraordinary occurred. The carriage did not move—neither did the three men who had come as scouts. They had well chosen their places, for they seemed to make part of the wall, and to discern them it was necessary to know they were there.

The coachman remained motionless on his seat. Robert de Carnoel reached the little door escorted by two persons suitably attired, and followed by a third who left the berlin after him. A chance passer-by, whom a nocturnal promenade had led to Rue Jouffroy would have thought it all quite natural. Four gentlemen, arriving in a beautiful carriage before a house whose master gives a soiree is to be seen often and anywhere; but this very ordinary spectacle excited Maxime to the highest pitch. Robert de Carnoel falling in the midst of these people was stranger than all the rest.

"Where did he come from? Had he been the colonel's prisoner, and if so, why had he let him come out? Why did he bring him to the so-called Madame Sergent's?"

Just as the ci-devant secretary reached the door, where a servant armed with a torch awaited him, a strange noise pierced through the silence of the night. It was the crowing of a cock, or rather the counterfeit of it, proceeding from a human throat.

"It's up there," whispered the porter; "the clerks on the third floor are at the window. One is a comical fellow—likely he'll make us laugh."

Maxime had little inclination of that sort, and the persons on the street still less. They looked up to see who had uttered this mocking appeal—all, including the coachman on the box, this singular coachman with a tall hat on. The one who paid least attention to this successful imitation of the reville chant was undoubtedly Robert de Carnoel. He appeared in haste to enter, and the valet who held the candelabra made way for him to pass.

One of the three escorts passed the threshold immediately after the prisoner, and the two others were about to do the same, but the torch-bearer held a brief colloquy with them, during which they paused, standing on each side of the door their comrade had just entered. The coachman in citizen's dress tied the reins, left his seat precipitately and handed his whip to one of the individuals pressed against the wall. This man left his post and placed himself at the head of the horses.

"Monsieur," said the porter in a low voice, "look! the lights are put out in the salon. Droll idea that! to blow out the candles just as the guests arrive—the dining-room, too! They must intend to spend the night playing hide-and-seek. Look! it seems to confound the man who has just gotten down from the box—he looks at the windows—he retreats a little to get a better view—yes, ogle as you will, my child, all is black up there; you must go in without a light."

Borisoff standing in the middle of the street appeared to hesitate. He turned and looked up, probably to see if the persons who had imitated the cock were still at the windows. He then went straight to the door guarded by two of his subalterns. They moved aside to make way, and just as he was about to push it open, it was closed violently by some one on the inside.

"Ah! they have slammed the door in his face," exclaimed M. Bidard; "what was that coachman after? Did he suppose himself invited too?"

"It is no coachman," said Maxime, who had recognized Borisoff.

"He is queerly dressed for holding the reins, that's a fact. But if he is a monsieur, why was he on the box? Oh, oh! he is angry; he knocks at the door,—beats with his feet and fists. Good! there are the two others taking part in it. If the door was not pretty firm they would break it down. What an uproar they make! They will rouse the neighborhood. I am astonished the two clerks up there haven't cried out wolf."

"Hush! the dining-room window opens; a man appears there. It is one of the two who entered a minute ago. I recognize his square shoulders. Ah! there is the amateur coachman approaching; they are having a talk. I want to hear what they say. Open the casement a little way—softly."

"It is imprudent, perhaps—but if monsieur wishes it—"

The complaisant Bidard ended his sentence by opening the window with great caution, and Maxime listened.

A lively colloquy was taking place between the person who had appeared at the window and the colonel in the street. Both spoke loud enough to be heard, but at the first words that reached his ear, Maxime discovered that they spoke in Russian.

Bidard, who was listening, said: "What a language! It must be Chinese. I thought those scamps were not French. Dame! the friends of the Prussian! and see how they are carrying on,—what gestures they make."

The talkers were making signals, which Maxime strove to interpret. Evidently the question was one of mounting or descending.

The dining-room was on the ground-floor, an elevated ground-floor, it is true, but the window was not more than ten feet from the ground. An adroit man might risk the leap, nor did it seem impossible to scale it. The valet leaned on the balcony, measuring with his eye the distance from top to bottom. The master, on the pavement, measured it from bottom to top. The men who guarded the door, and those placed against the wall, approached the colonel and formed a circle around him. The little troop disposed itself as if for assault. The man who held the horses brought forward the berlin and placed it under the window.

"They are about to invade the house," Maxime cried out; "two of them are climbing on the box; the carriage is to serve them for a ladder."

"Ah! verily," exclaimed Bidard, "that is too much. Right here, in the finest neighborhood in Paris, to have these brigands acting like they believed it was the forest of Bondy. I am going to give the alarm—if monsieur does not oppose it."

At this moment the cock-crowing sounded out still more clearly, accompanied by a rattling noise. A falsetto voice cried out: "Cut-throat!" A base voice roared: "Scaling a wall—in the night—occupied house—band of malefactors—galleys for life."

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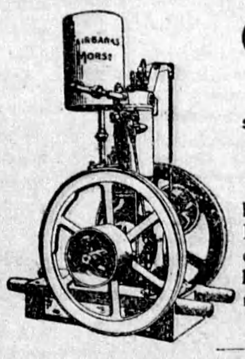

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