THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER VI.—(Cont'd)

These words, taken from the penal code, had a prodigious effect. The two men hoisted on the top of the berlin were about to assist each other in climbing the window, where their companion was holding out his arms to them, when the menace, hurled by an invisible witness, made them hesitate. At the same moment was heard the opening of the casements to all windows of the house guarded by the porter Bidard.

"All my people are astir," he said, rubbing his hands; "the female tenant of the second floor, the druggist of the first, and now we shall have a play for nothing. The druggist raves like anything, and the female tenant dreams of murder every night."

"Ah! a thousand thunders!" vociferated a masculine voice, "what's all that? Robbers pillaging the house over there! Concierge, look for the police—the guard!"

"Murder! fire!" shrieked a female voice.

"Ah! rascals, wait awhile," resumed the man; "my revolver! where is my revolver?"

Maxime determined not to show himself, but to act according to the course Borisoff should take. He never lost sight of the boyard, who showed unmistakable signs of perplexity, even of fright. Evidently his attempt had failed, and nothing remained for him but to beat a retreat. He appeared, however, still to hesitate before decamping with his troops, and moved about uneasily, shaking his fist at the people who threatened him, reassembling his subalterns, and gesticulating violently.

By his order, doubtless, one of the men on the box dismounted hastily, and the other took the whip and reins. The man who had entered the house with Robert de Carnoel jumped from the balcony to the berlin and thence to the sidewalk.

The defeat turned into a rout. At this moment a pistol was fired by the terrible tenant of the first floor. The effect was not deadly—no one fell—but the explosion gave the signal for the rout. Borisoff hustled his men into the carriage, where they crammed themselves with some difficulty, and jumped in after them. The driver struck out his horses in the direction of the Avenue de Villiers.

"They fly, the cowards!" exclaimed Bidard, willingly showing himself now that all danger was past. "They don't get off like that. Come, sir, this is the moment to cry 'Stop thief!' There's a station down there on the avenue. The soldiers will stop the carriage."

As he said this he precipitated himself into the street. Maxime made no effort to abate his ardor, and willingly followed.

He had little hope of capturing the berlin. Indeed, it was a small matter to him whether or not they captured Borisoff, but he was greatly concerned to know what had become of Robert de Carnoel, Madame Sergent, and the countess' fencing-master. They must be in the house, and he counted on the tenants to assist him in forcing them out of their nest.

Just as he put his feet outside the door the victoria arrived at full speed.

Auguste, the faithful coachman, attracted by the pistol-shot, was hastening to the assistance of his monsieur.

"Stop!" cried Maxime, and Auguste stopped short.

"Good!" said Bidard, "we will jump into the milord and follow after the brigands."

"If the brigands are in the berlin which filed away down yonder, it's no use to start my mare after them; she couldn't catch up with ten-thousand-franc horses. I heard a pistol-shot. Was it monsieur that fired it?"

"No, and no one was hurt. I believe it was fired in the air."

"Who is it undertakes to say I [illegible] e air?" cried a rough [illegible] axime found himself [illegible] with a grotesque per- [illegible] rse, little old man en- [illegible] a dressing-gown, and [illegible] rmed with a cavalry revolver.

"I beg pardon, monsieur," said Maxime. "I thought you wished simply to give the alarm."

"No, sir; I aimed for the chief of the robbers, and am sure I touched him. If I'd had cartridges I would have killed them all, but unfortunately I had only one load."

"Fortunately, Papa Pincornet," said a young man who had just come out of the house; "if you had fired oftener you would have done mischief. I was at my window, just above you, with my friend Galopardin, and your ball passed right under our noses."

"Monsieur Falot, I have told you before that it doesn't suit me to joke with you."

"Upon my word it is true. Ask Galopardin."

"I swear it," replied the clerk who answered to this absurd name. "I swear it by the concierge and by this house; and here is Mlle. Saint Gres who will bear witness to having heard the hissing of this projectile."

Mlle. Saint Gres was a person of ripe years, of a spare figure, and a pimpled face; the femals tenant of the second floor.

Maxime was not sorry to see all the tenants collected together.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I have not the honor to be known to you, and since chance has led me to be present at a singular spectacle—"

"I beg pardon, monsieur, who are you?" asked the old druggist, gravely.

Maxime was wishing to send to the devil this ridiculous individual who assumed the airs of a magistrate interrogating a prisoner. But his situation was one in which he had need of everybody, and he did not disdain to conciliate the good-will of Signor Pencornet.

"I entered," he said, "to make some inquiries of the concierge, when I saw arrive, in carriage and on foot, the bandits who have attempted to climb into that house. Naturally, I remained to give assistance to honest people. I am the nephew of M. Claude Dorgeres, banker."

"Good house, monsieur," said the bass voice of the old druggist. "House favorably known on chang."

"Wait," said one of the young tenants of the third, "I know your uncle's cashier."

"Really?" asked Maxime, a little surprised.

"I was quite intimate with him before he was such a grandee. We ate in the same restaurant; soup, two dishes, half a bottle and dessert, thirty-six sous. His name is Jules Vignory. Galopardin knows him too."

"Yes," affirmed clerk number two, "would you like a description of him? Vignory (Jules), called the rosiere of the Upper Saone, because he was born at Vesoul and because he is virtuous, twenty-six years old, round chin, oval face—"

"I know the rest," said Maxime, laughing. "Vignory is my intimate friend, and I am pleased to meet two of his comrades. But suffer me to remind you that we all have a duty to fulfil, that of warning the occupants of that house that rogues have attempted to force an entrance."

"Not worth the trouble. The box is empty. The Prussian has gone home."

"His friends have come back, M'sieu Falot," said the porter. "For a quarter of an hour a woman and two men have been there, without counting the servants. If you hadn't stayed so long at Cafe Cardinet, you'd have seen 'em go in as we did—monsieur and me."

"And me, too," cried the coachman. "I wasn't so near, but I've a pair of good eyes. And the husband offered me a hundred sous to take him to his house. I'd lay my life on it, he's just murdered his wife."

"A murder! Ah, mon dieu!" groaned the female tenant.

"The tragedies of jealousy," sneered Galopardin.

"It would be well to enter and search the house," said Maxime. "If a crime has been committed the victim has need of assistance perhaps."

"Enter! How? The doors are locked."

"By the window, then," said Falot "Bidard must have a ladder; who hasn't?"

"What's a ladder for?" asked Auguste. "I'm going to put my carriage under the casement."

"Like the berlin a while ago? It's a good idea," said Maxime.

"Good!" cried Galopardin. "There is, perhaps, a corpse or two in there, and we are called upon to make a search. Falot and I will climb in with you. Bidard and Pincornet will guard the door, and Mlle. Saint Gres will pray for us."

This programme was laid off in so decided a tone that no one objected, and Auguste hastened to lead his horse by the bridle to the spot indicated. It was less adapted for the purpose than Borisoff's berlin, but the intrepid Falot found that by standing on tiptoe he could lay hold of the window with his hands, and Maxime, following the example of the two clerks, raised himself of the strength of his wrists and leaped the balcony after them.

"We can't see a jot here," said Falot. "Wait, I have some matches in my pocket."

He struck a light which was sufficient to enable them to discern on a table a candelabra filled with wax candles, and in another minute the darkness gave place to an illumination.

It was, as Bidard had said, the dining-room. The cloth was laid on a table, in the middle of which was a chalice of old Saxony filled with rare flowers. But it did not appear that any guests had been seated at the table, and in the great empty hall the silence was profound.

"One might suppose it was the castle of the Sleeping Beauty of the woods," murmured Falot.

"Let us search," said Maxime. "First let us see what way this door leads—hold—it is locked on the outside."

"Let us begin by calling," exclaimed Falot, striking with his feet against the door.

"Hallo!"

No one answered to this appeal, but a murmur of voices in the street attracted the attention of the explorers. They hastened to the window and saw the tenants and porter in conference with two policemen, who had been attracted by the report of the pistol.

Maxime saw that the moment had come for his intervention. Together with the two clerks, he had in a few seconds joined the group, and was in a position to add his word to the somewhat confused conversation between the occupants of the house opposite and the guardians of the peace. He recounted briefly what had taken place, and so told his story as to lead the policemen to believe that a crime had in all probability been committed, and that it was imperative to search the house immediately.

All the doors were locked. The commissary of police alone had the right to have them opened, and one of the policemen went in search of him.

This magistrate resided in the neighborhood, and in twenty minutes he arrived, followed by a locksmith armed with all the implements of his profession. He listened attentively to Maxime's recital, the discourse of M. Pincornet, and, above all, the report of M. Bidard, who, in his quality of concierge of the house opposite, was in a position to certify to what had taken place for six months past; and finally concluded it was expedient to have a legal search of this singular abode, whose occupants showed themselves at intervals and disappeared like phantoms. By his order one of the policemen rang several times, and no one answering, he commanded the locksmith to operate.

It was the work of a moment, and they found themselves at the foot of a stairway, plunged in complete darkness. But the knowing Bidard had foreseen this case, and arrived with a lantern, which he hastened to place in the hands of the policeman, for he was not bent upon being the first to penetrate this dangerous castle.

The stairway led the visitors to a billiard-hall, an apartment which had three doors, including the one which opened from the stairway. One of them was locked, but the key was in the lock, and it was only necessary to turn it to pass into the dining-room, where the wax candles, lit by Galopardin, were still burning. The third communicated with a cabinet containing a large amount of plate and glass. The commissary remarked that the window of this cabinet was open, a window which opened on a stairway composed of six steps, descending into a garden or rather court.

"I see a ladder there placed against the wall!" exclaimed Maxime.

A policeman mounted the ladder and saw that there was one also on the other side. The two portable ladders joined at the top. To mount and descend by this route was easy enough. This precaution proved that the inmates of the house anticipated the necessity of taking flight. At the foot of the ladder the moist earth preserved the prints of their feet. They were many and of all sizes. Five or six persons had passed that way. The fugitives who arrived pell-mell had pattered their feet several minutes before ascending the ladder in file, and Maxime could recognize the boots with sharpened heels, which marked the passage of Madame ergent.

Maxime acompanied the commissary to the end of his search.

The house underwent a thorough inspection from garret to cellar, as well as the grounds adjoining. They found nothing.

The commissary contented himself with taking down the names of those present, in case they should be required as witnesses, a case that appeared very improbable, for he began to believe in a hoax.

Maxime had to give his address, and mounted immediately in the vehicle of the faithful Auguste, not without having generously rewarded Bidard and taken leave of the two clerks, whom he even invited to dine with him, an invitation which they accepted in chorus.

(To be continued.)

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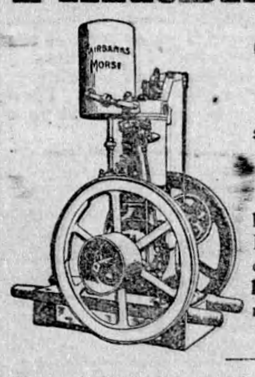

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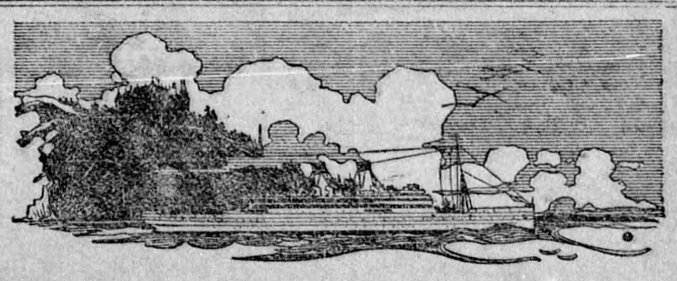

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