THE MYSTERY CLEARED UP;

OR, THE HERITAGE OF MADAME YALTA.

CHAPTER IX.—(Cont'd)

She was very pale, less pale, however, than Carnoel who more the impress of the long agony of his captivity. But she walked with a firm step, and the prisoner of Col. Borisoff had lost nothing of his pride. It was plain they had come to ask not pardon, but justice.

They met no one on the great stairway, and were conducted by Georget to the waiting-room attached to M. Dorgeres' office. This hall was empty, but the banker was not alone, for through the door of the office in which he had formerly dismissed Robert de Carnoel could be heard the sound of his voice pitched in a high key. Maxime requested Galopardin to remain in the waiting-room with Georget until called for, opened the door of the office, and moving aside to allow the countess and Robert de Carnoel to pass in, entered immediately after her.

Alice, who was sobbing in the depths of an arm-chair, sprang to her feet. M. Dorgeres uttered a cry of indignation on perceiving the visitors his nephew had brought. He would certainly have burst forth if this former secretary only had been present but he restrained himself, less out of respect for the countess than consideration for his daughter, who was in a condition of extreme nervous excitement.

To vent his anger on some one, he selected Maxime.

"Why do you undertake to bring to my house persons who have no business here?"

"My dear uncle," replied the nephew, quietly, "you will thank me presently for what I have done."

"Thank you! you are mocking me."

"Monsieur," began the countess, calmly, "I beg you to listen to me"

"It is useless, madame. I know what you are going to say. My daughter has already told me, and I do not believe a word of the romance you have invented. As for the man who dares to appear before me when I have driven him away," he added, advancing toward Carnoel, "I am determined not to suffer his presence."

The young man started, and had nearly replied in a manner to cut short all the attempts of his defenders at reconciliation, but his eyes met those of Alice and he was silent.

This proud silence only served to exasperate M. Dorgeres, who resumed in a still sharper tone:

"This assurance is too much, and it is time to put an end to it. My daughter, madame, has repeated what you have told her—that you have attempted to force the safe. You are free to boast of an action at which you should blush, but do not hope to persuade me that your protege is not also your accomplice. I do not wish to pursue him. I even wish to forget your unjustifiable conduct; but I have no use for your explanations. They will not exonerate the man you are bent on upholding. You wished only the papers of Borisoff, that is possible, but M. de Carnoel has taken from me fifty thousand francs. This pretended letter witnesses against him. It has been fabricated in his defence, and I would defy him to present me the so-called debtor who wrote it."

"Do you wish to see him?" asked Maxime, approaching the door.

"To see—whom?" exclaimed M. Dorgeres.

"I ask you," replied Maxime, quietly, "if you wish to see the person who wrote that letter?"

"What stupid joke is this?"

"Nothing is more serious. The person is there in your ante-chamber, and with or without your permission I am going to call him in."

And partly opening the door, Maxime put his head out:

"Be so good, dear monsieur, as to enter," he said to the clerk who was seated beside Georget on a bench; "my uncle wishes to speak with you."

"No, no; not at all," growled the banker.

Maxime took no notice of this denial, and drawing Galopardin after him, ushered him into the office.

The joyous youth, thus forced to appear before an imposing assemblage, thought no more of imitating the cock. He opened his eyes in a scared manner, bowed all around, and turned his hat awkwardly in his hands.

"Who are you?" asked M. Dorgeres, roughly.

"Galopardin," stammered the employee. "Agenor Galopardin, book-keeper at M. Charoule's, wholesale charcoal merchant, Rue de Flandre. If you wished, monsieur, any information about me, my patron would tell you that—"

"I know your patron, but no matter about him. What did you come here for?"

"I—I don't know—"

"But I know," said Maxime. "Come forward, monsieur. Take that paper that is on my uncle's table."

Galopardin obeyed mechanically, and as soon as he had the letter in his hands, exclaimed:

"Hold! this is the letter that I wrote."

"You!" exclaimed the banker, "you wrote that! We shall see pretty soon whether you are telling the truth. Here is a pen and ink. Copy the first sentence."

Galopardin thought perhaps the banker before offering him a situation in his banking house wanted to see if he wrote a good hand. He excused himself from taking the banker's chair, and set to work calligraphing with great pains. He had not written six words before M. Dorgeres seized the paper, and designating Robert de Carnoel, said:

"Enough! I am satisfied. It was certainly you who acted as secretary to monsieur."

"But—no—I do not know him," stammered Galopardin.

By the manner in which he and Robert de Carnoel looked at each other M. Dorgeres could see that they met for the first time, and he began to change his tune.

"Then will you tell me who dictated this letter?"

"Willingly, sir. It was M. Jules Vignory, your cashier."

"You lie!"

"I swear I do not. Vignory was my friend. He came one evening to Cafe Cardinet, bringing me the model of this letter and begging me to copy it—he asserted that he came from you."

"What! he dared—it is impossible. Vignory is an honest man, and you would not repeat what you are saying in his presence."

"I beg your pardon, monsieur, I am all ready, and if you wish to send for him I answer for it, he will not give me the lie."

This answer was made so frankly and naturally that it greatly unsettled the conviction of M. Dorgeres who remained very undecided and much out of countenance.

Carnoel knit his brow. He was not a man to rejoice in being betrayed by a friend, even though the treason should turn to his own profit.

But Alice who had never loved Vignory, and who saw the innocence of Robert made clear—Alice was radiant.

"What do you think now, my dear uncle" Maxime said gently.

"I think," replied the uncle with ill-humor, "that all this is perhaps a play that has been gotten up, and until I have questioned Vignory——"

He did not finish the sentence.

The door opened, and Georget entered just in time to draw on himself M. Dorgeres' ill-temper.

"You rascal! what did you come here for?"

"Why do you come before I called?" asked Maxime, who wished to reserve for the end of the interview the appearance of the groom.

"Do you know, wretched child," resumed the banker, "that I might have you sent to prison? My daughter has told me that you have aided rogues to open my safe with a false key. You are a thief."

"Yes," replied the boy tranquilly, "if to be a thief is to assist brave people to recover papers that a police spy wanted to make use of to their hurt. Have me arrested if you think I deserve it."

"All very well," said Maxime impatiently, "but I forbade you to come in till I called."

"M. Maxime, you need not be angry with me. It was M. Vignory who sent me."

"M. Vignory! Have you lost your mind?"

"He arrived like some one mad. He asked if M. Dorgeres was in the office. I told him that he was with you, with Mlle. Alice, with Madame the Countess, and M. Robert; then he gave me this letter and told me to bring it immediately to the patron, and he has fled."

"A letter!" exclaimed M. Dorgeres; "a letter from Vignory. Give it to me, boy."

Georget handed it to his patron who broke the seal nervously. Each one present understood that the denouement of this family drama was imminent and there was a profound silence.

The banker read, and they could follow on his face the impressions that were created. He turned pale, his features contracted, and soon two big tears rolled down his cheeks.

At length he raised his head and said in a husky voice:

"Listen."

"Monsieur," wrote Jules Vignory, "this is my confession. You doubtless know already the unworthy act of which I have been guilty, for I have just met the friend who unconsciously aided me in it. I understand that you were about to be informed of what I had done, and that I was lost. There remains nothing for me but to quit France never to return. I have deserved my fate; I do not complain, and if I write it is not in the hope to justify myself. But, perhaps, when you have read my full confession you will judge me less severely. The day M. Borisoff came to claim his casket, I arrived at the office several minutes before him and found the safe open. I had to reproach myself with not having warned you of the first attempt at theft. When I saw that the thieves had begun again, and this time had succeeded, I lost my senses to that degree that on ascertaining the deficit of the fifty thousand francs I forgot entirely that the evening before I had put aside these five packages of notes prepared by me to pay a draft. They were in my table drawer, where I found them several days after. At this moment you were accusing M. de Carnoel, and M. Borisoff was engaged in pursuing him to recover his casket. I did not accuse Robert, who honored me with his friendship, but I suspected him. When I placed my hand on the missing sum my first feeling was one of joy. I was happy to be able to prove that my friend had been calumniated, and to do that I only needed to bring you this money. Unfortunately, you had gone out. I did not succeed in getting an interview with you during the evening and was compelled to defer the restitution till the next day. It cost me much to take this step, for you would naturally reproach my heedlessness. A cashier who forgets fifty thousand francs in a drawer is guilty of culpable negligence. I was, however, resolved to confront a blame I deserved only too well, but an evil thought occurred to me. I had sometimes dared to dream of becoming your partner and son-in-law. It was a dream, but you had shown so much interest in me that it did not seem one impossible to realize. However, I spoke to no one of these chimeras which I secretly caressed, and would never have permitted any one to see that I entertained the shadow of such a hope. I resigned myself to love Mlle. Dorgeres in silence, for I did love her with a disinterested love, and would have wished she were poor I might aspire openly to her hand. I suffered the more since she did not—she could not—love me because she was betrothed to Robert de Carnoel, my comrade, my friend. And Robert, wounded by the repulse he had just met with, had gone away swearing that he meant to expatriate himself—that he would never return. The obstacle which rose up between Mlle. Dorgeres and me had disappeared. I carried my delusion so far as to believe the day would come when she would forget the absent one and would come at length to perceive that I adored her.

"But the day after I discovered the missing sum I received from Carnoel a letter, through which I learned that after a short journey to Brittany he had returned to Paris; that he would remain there some days in the hope of making arrangements for going to America, and menat to attempt a meeting with Mlle. Dorgeres. He gave me his address and asked to see me. This letter overwhelmed me. All my plans crumbled away, for I felt that Carnoel could easily justify himself if he was in a situation to make explanations. Then despair seized me and jealousy suggested an infernal thought. This money, which I should have reported to you, I would not keep it, and dreaded, in returning it, well-merited reproaches. The loss of fifty thousand francs affected you very little and you had ceased to think of it. It occurred to me to send it to Carnoel, feigning an anonymous restitution. I said to myself that this money would enable him to live in foreign parts and even make his fortune there; that in sending it to him without his suspecting whence it came, I should acomplish a reparation in saving from poverty the friend whose flight left the field open to my ambition.

"I said this, but I lied to myself; I forced myself to hide from my own eyes the base feeling which prompted me, and I begin to-day to expiate my crime by confessing the truth. At heart I had only one object. To ruin Robert de Carnoel forever if he should venture to reappear. I knew M. Borisoff was searching for him; that if he succeeded in discovering him he would find on him the missing sum; that you would be informed of this discovery, and that Mille. Dorgeres could never marry a dishonored man. It was an odious calculation—cowardly, infamous, and I thank God that he has baffled it by means of your nephew. Now you know all. I am ignorant what has become of M. de Carnoel, and I earnestly hope my confession will arrive in time to prevent an atrocious injustice. I have done. There only remains for me to ask, not that you will pardon, but that you will forget me. Adieu, you who have overwhelmed me with benefits. Adieu all you whom I have loved. I go, and you shall never hear of me again. Adieu, and pray God for one who is desperate."

It was all, and it was enough. Maxime wept, he who never shed tears, and looked at the Countess Yalta.

Georget bounded with joy. Galopardin smiled to keep himself in countenance.

Suddenly the countess turned pale and staggered. Maxime came forward to support her.

(To be continued.)

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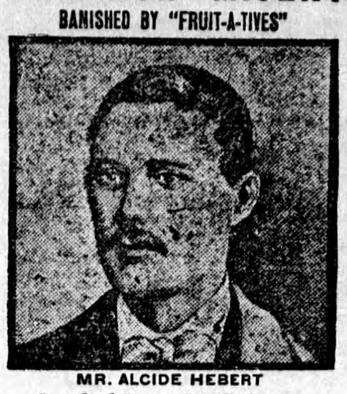

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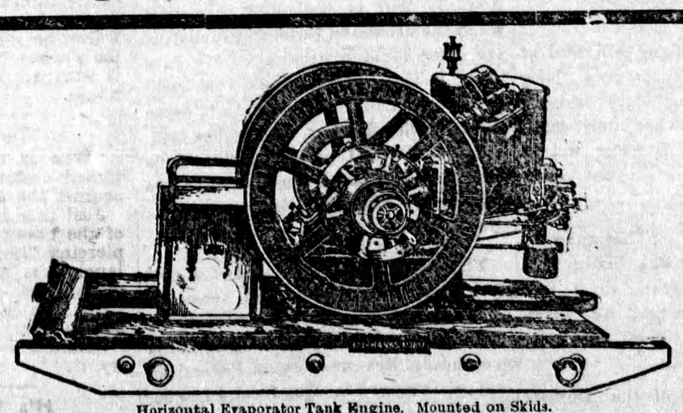

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