

The Duke, the Slipper and Dolores

A Story of France in the Sixteenth Century

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A small dark object was dropped into my hands.

THE GOOD curé has often told me that it is wicked to swear, and truly he keeps his own rule very well for this age, when every man embellishes his language with strange and curious expressions; but never to the sober curé in all his sixty years of placid life came so sweet, so charming, so irresistible an adventure as my bad habit brought me that eventful night.

In the first place I had been foolish enough to go walking in a strange country by moonlight; my friend and host, the Comte de Lausanne, had warned me not to go far from the *château*; but being of a curiously obstinate disposition, I had turned my back to its lighted windows and walked steadily for about an hour. Now, I had counted on the moonlight to find my way home, and was therefore much disconcerted when the black clouds robbed me of its assistance, and, to add to my discomfort, it began to rain.

I was completely lost and I could not perceive that a two hours' walk brought me nearer my goal. I was wet through; at each step the water in my boots made a peculiar swash; my hair—of which, I confess, I am rather vain, for it naturally curls into the love-locks every gentleman craves—my hair was soaked with muddy water; I never remember being more uncomfortable.

I had just leaned against a tree to rest and recover my breath, when a sudden rustle in the bushes behind me made me spring erect again, and at that I felt something soft and warm fly past me, so near that it touched my face. I made a quick step forward into the darkness, and, to my astonishment, struck a stone wall with such violence that I was giddy for a moment—only a moment, however; the next impulse that came to me was irresistible; I straightened up and swore—swore with a vigour, a fluency and variety that I have never since equalled; and, indeed, I do not know when I should have stopped, but when my eloquence was at its height, there came from above my head a peal of feminine laughter, soft and subdued, but so uncanny at that time and place that for an instant I thought I had evoked a demon.

"Who is there?" I demanded, with some anxiety. "What are you doing in this place?"

"That is a question I might ask monsieur," said the most charming voice imaginable. "Why do you thus attack my wall?"

"Your wall!" I cried. "You live here, then; this is inhabited by men; this is a house?"

"Yes, and no, monsieur. I live here, but it is not inhabited by men; this is the convent of St. Gwendolen."

A wave of disappointment swept over me. "A nun!" I said, incredulously; "a nun, and laugh like that?"

"I have not said so," she replied, and I heard a rustle as though she moved in a silken dress, and a faint, delicious perfume floated down to me, bringing suggestions of a court rather than a convent.

"Do not go, madame!" I cried.

"I fear I detain you in the storm," she answered.

"No, no," I declared, earnestly; "I am most comfortable; never have I so enjoyed myself. Remain, I implore you."

"Monsieur has strange tastes; I fancied I heard you object to the weather."

I blushed in the darkness.

"I had not seen you then," I said.

"You have not seen me now," she retorted.

"I have heard you, and I still have hope."

"Monsieur deceives himself; there is no hope. I had better go in."

"No," I called, hastily, as I heard her move again;

"I will not come up; stay and talk to me."

"Then you intended to enter," she exclaimed, triumphantly. "I knew it, monsieur."

"On the honour of a gentleman, madame, I wish to do nothing that would displease you."

"Who are you?" she asked, abruptly.

"Will you exchange names with me, madame?"

"Yes," she said, slowly.

"I am Edouard de Guier," I replied.

"The Chevalier de Guier?" she asked.

"Yes; and you?"

"My name is Dolores, monsieur."

"Madame, you are deceitful," I cried, indignantly.

"I told you all my name."

"You do not appreciate your privilege," she returned, quite unabashed. "I do not permit many men to call me by my first name."

I gasped for a moment. I had not thought of it that way; moreover, I had a new idea, noticing her name, and that she spoke with a slight lisp, a delightful languor, quite foreign to our vivacious French ladies.

"You are a Spaniard, madame?" I asked. She started; I heard her rapid breathing.

"I am going," she said; "adieu, monsieur."

"I have offended," I cried, remorsefully. "Pardon me; I did not know you would object to my question. Consider what my curiosity must be, meeting so charming a companion in the centre of the forest; believe me, my impertinence arises solely from my ardent desire to see you, or hear you, again. Pardon me, and remain."

I heard her musical laugh.

"Monsieur is gallant, but I must go in. Think of the dismay of the good sisters if they found me talking to a man."

"Give me at least a souvenir," I said, despairingly; "tell me where I can see you again."

She paused, then asked, "Where are you going; do you live near here? You cannot, or you would surely know—I would ask if you live in the city."

"Certainly, madame, in Paris."

"In Paris!" she cried, in evident pleasure; "then I will give you a souvenir on one condition; you must give it back when I ask for it."

"Willingly, if you come after it yourself."

"I will, monsieur," she said, and the next moment a small, dark object was dropped into my hands.

"Madame!" I called. "Dolores!" A ripple of laughter answered me and

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She blushed adorably, "I have the honour to be Monsieur de Guier's fiancée."