

guerre. For me it served as an incentive, and with an enthusiasm borne of hope, I originated a plan of escape which needed only a favorable opportunity to prove successful.

V.

You may be sure my observations were made in much less time than it takes to record them. Montluc was not many minutes resuming his seat, and I was in such a turmoil of foreboding that I had little time for anything beyond the present aspect of affairs.

That my uncle had been foully dealt with; that Montluc had attempted to usurp my inheritance; that soon I might be in even a worse situation, were presentiments which I could not turn aside, and the mystery of it all was more than I could solve. Nevertheless, I was not without hope, and ready for the first favorable opportunity to set my plan working.

Considering the fact, however, that I was unarmed, and locked in a room with a desperado, at whose elbow lay a loaded pistol, and who would hesitate at nothing, my chances of escape were small indeed. Never before was I so completely at anyone's mercy, and Montluc, as if realizing the fact, sat, with complacent smile, eyeing me as a cat would a mouse.

"Monsieur du Morney," said he, presently, "it was unwise of you to return to France."

"Have I interrupted some of your rascality?" I asked with virulence.

"You have put yourself in my way," he answered, petulantly, "and I am undecided how to dispose of you."

"Were you so nonplussed before disposing of monsieur my uncle?" I retorted with a sneer.

He shrugged his shoulders and allowed his features to light up with a smile that would have done justice to Satan himself. He was apparently acting his true character now, and he seemed the most complete villain imaginable. I hope I may be forgiven for misjudging my uncle.

"Monsieur le Baron died very suddenly," he replied, doggedly.

"At your hands, or at the hands of Leloup?" was my savage rejoinder.

"The Emperor's downfall affected him greatly," said Montluc, calmly. "Monsieur le Baron committed suicide by taking poison."

"Suicide, indeed!" I cried. "Monsieur, my uncle may have died from poison, as you say, but I am satisfied that it was administered to him by as great a rascal as ever lived."

His eyes flashed fire at me, and his brows lowered into a scowl. For a moment we eyed each other defiantly, then, to my surprise, he resumed his old position of leaning back with hands clasped behind his head and feet stretched out. Apparently his temper was not hard to control.

"The temptation was great, monsieur," he admitted, "but—"

"The treachery was greater," I interrupted.

It was with difficulty that I restrained the impulse to seize a dagger, and then and there avenge my uncle's death. Only the presence of that loaded pistol on the desk at Montluc's elbow prevented me.

"As you please, monsieur," was my captor's unmollified reply. "At any rate, Monsieur le Baron is out of the way. When he died I took the precaution to suppress all news of his death, and assisted by Leloup, placed his body in the family vault at night time, that the secret might never be known. Since then I have continued here as if nothing had happened."

He told this with the self-complacent garrulity of an egotist, and appeared to believe that he had done a clever thing.

"But what right had you here in the first place?" I asked, with no little curiosity.

"I was Monsieur le Baron's steward," he answered, with a show of pride. "Since your uncle's recovery from the wounds received at Salamanca, he has been a recluse, and has not shown himself to anyone but me. His mind has been so affected that I have had to transact his entire business for him, and the people understood it. Under these circumstances I conceived the plan of securing the baron's riches for myself. It