

THE GOLDEN DOG

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CHAPTER XXXII.

"ON WITH THE DANCE"

Bigot, a voluptuary in every sense, craved a change of pleasure. He was never satisfied long with one, however pungent. He felt it as a relief when Angelique went off like a laughing sprite upon the arm of De Pean. "I am glad to get rid of the women sometimes, and feel like a man," he said to Cadet, who sat drinking and telling stories with hilarious laughter to two or three boon companions, and indulging in the coarsest jests and broadest scandal about the ladies at the ball, as they passed by the alcove where they were seated.

The eager persistence of Angelique, in her demand for a lettre de cachet to banish the unfortunate Caroline, had wearied and somewhat disgusted Bigot. "I would cut the throat of any man in the world for the sake of her bright eyes," said he to himself, as she gave him a parting salute with her handkerchief; "but she must not ask me to hurt that poor foolish girl at Beaumanoir. No, by St. Picot! she is hurt enough already, and I will not have Angelique tormenting her! What merciless creatures women are to one another, Cadet!" said he, aloud.

Cadet looked up with red, inflamed eyes at the remark of Bigot. He cared nothing for women himself, and never hesitated to show his contempt for the whole sex.

"Merciless creatures, do you call them, Bigot! the claws of all the cats in Caen could not match the finger-nails of a jealous woman—still less her biting tongue."

Angelique des Meloises swept past the two in a storm of music, as if in defiance of their sage criticisms. Her hand rested on the shoulder of the Chevalier de Pean. She had an object which made her endure it, and her dissimulation was perfect. Her eyes transfixed his with their dazzling look. Her lips were wreathed in smiles; she talked continually as she danced, and with an inconsistency which did not seem strange in her, was lamenting the absence from the ball of Le Gardeur de Repentigny.

"Chevalier," said she, in reply to some gallantry of her partner, "most women take pride in making sacrifices of themselves; I prefer to sacrifice my admirers. I like a man, not in the measure of what I do for him, but what he will do for me. Is not that a candid avowal, Chevalier? You like frankness, you know."

Frankness and the Chevalier de Pean were unknown quantities together; but he was desperately smitten, and would bear any amount of snubbing from Angelique.

"If you have something in your mind you wish me to do," replied he, eagerly. "I would poison my grandmother, if you asked me, for the reward you could give me."

"Yes, I have something in my mind, Chevalier, but not concerning your grandmother. Tell me why you allowed Le Gardeur de Repentigny to leave the city?"

"I did not allow him to leave the city," said he, twitching his ugly features, for he disliked the interest she expressed in Le Gardeur. "I would fain have kept him here if I could. The Intendant, too, had desperate need of him. It was his sister and Colonel Philibert who spirited him away from us."

"Well, a ball in Quebec is not worth twisting a curl for in the absence of Le Gardeur de Repentigny!" replied she. "You shall promise me to bring him back to the city, Chevalier, or I will dance with you no more."

Angelique laughed so gaily as she said this that a stranger would have interpreted her words as all jest.

"She means it, nevertheless," thought the Chevalier. "I will promise my best endeavor, Mademoiselle," said he, setting hard his teeth, with a grimace of

dissatisfaction which did not escape the eye of Angelique; "moreover, the Intendant desires his return on affairs of the Grand Company, and has sent more than one message to him already, to urge his return."

"A fig for the Grand Company! Remember, it is I desire his return; and it is my command, not the Intendant's, which you are bound, as a gallant gentleman, to obey," Angelique would have no divided allegiance, and the man who claimed her favors must give himself up, body and soul, without thought of redemption.

She felt very reckless and very wilful at this moment. The laughter on her lips was the ebullition of a hot and angry heart, not the play of a joyous, happy spirit. Bigot's refusal of a lettre de cachet had stung her pride to the quick, and excited a feeling of resentment which found its expression in the wish for the return of Le Gardeur.

"Why do you desire the return of Le Gardeur?" asked De Pean, hesitatingly. Angelique was often too frank by half, and questioners got from her more than they liked to hear.

"Because he was my first admirer, and I never forget a true friend, Chevalier," replied she, with an undertone of fond regret in her voice.

"But he will not be your last admirer," replied De Pean, with what he considered a seductive leer, which made her laugh at him. "In the kingdom of love, as in the kingdom of heaven, the last shall be first and the first last. May I be the last, Mademoiselle?"

"You will certainly be the last, De Pean; I promise that," Angelique laughed provokingly. She saw the eye of the Intendant watching her. She began to think he remained longer in the society of Cadet than was due to herself.

"Thanks, Mademoiselle," said De Pean, hardly knowing whether her laugh was affirmative or negative; "but I envy Le Gardeur his precedence."

Angelique's love for Le Gardeur was the only key which ever unlocked her real feelings. When the fox praised the raven's voice and prevailed on her to sing, he did not more surely make her drop the envied morsel out of her mouth than did Angelique drop the mystification she had worn so coquettishly before De Pean.

"Tell me, De Pean," said she, "is it true or not that Le Gardeur de Repentigny is consoling himself among the woods of Tilly with a fair cousin of his, Heloise de Lotbiniere?"

De Pean had his revenge, and he took it. "It is true; and no wonder," said he. "They say Heloise is, without exception, the sweetest girl in New France, if not one of the handsomest."

"Without exception!" echoed she, scornfully. "The women will not believe that, at any rate, Chevalier. I do not believe it, for one." And she laughed in the consciousness of beauty. "Do you believe it?"

"No, that were impossible," replied he, "while Angelique des Meloises chooses to contest the palm of beauty."

"I contest no palm with her, Chevalier; but I give you this rosebud for your gallant speech. But tell me, what does Le Gardeur think of this wonderful beauty? Is there any talk of marriage?"

"There is, of course, much talk of an alliance," De Pean lied, and the truth had been better for him.

Angelique started as if stung by a wasp. The dance ceased for her, and she hastened to a seat. "De Pean," said she, "you promised to bring Le Gardeur forthwith back to the city; will you do it?"

"I will bring him back, dead or alive, if you desire it; but I must have time. That uncompromising Colonel Philibert is with him. His sister, too, clings to him like a good angel to the skirt of a sinner. Since you desire it,"—De Pean spoke it with bitterness,—"Le Gardeur shall come back, but I doubt if it will be for his benefit or yours, Mademoiselle."

"What do you mean, De Pean?"

asked she, abruptly, her dark eyes alight with eager curiosity, not unmingled with apprehension. "Why do you doubt it will not be for his benefit or mine? Who is to harm him?"

"Nay, he will only harm himself, Angelique. And, by St. Picot! he will have ample scope for doing it in this city. He has no other enemy but himself." De Pean felt that she was making an ox of him to draw the plow of her scheming.

"Are you sure of that, De Pean?" demanded she, sharply.

"Quite sure. Are not all the associates of the Grand Company his fastest friends? Not one of them will hurt him, I am sure."

"Chevalier de Pean!" said she, noticing the slight shrug he gave when he said this, "you say Le Gardeur has no enemy but himself; if so, I hope to save him from himself, nothing more. Therefore I want him back to the city."

De Pean glanced towards Bigot. "Pardon me, Mademoiselle. Did the Intendant never speak to you of Le Gardeur's abrupt departure?" asked he. "Never! He has spoken to you, though. What did he say?" asked she, with eager curiosity.

"He said that you might have detained him had you wished, and he blamed you for his departure."

De Pean had a suspicion that Angelique had really been instrumental in withdrawing Le Gardeur from the clutches of himself and associates; but in this he erred. Angelique loved Le Gardeur, at least for her own sake if not for his, and would have preferred he should risk all the dangers of the city to avoid what she deemed the still greater dangers of the country,—and the greatest of these, in her opinion, was the fair face of Heloise de Lotbiniere. While, from motives of ambition, Angelique refused to marry him herself, she could not bear the thought of another getting the man whom she had rejected.

De Pean was fairly puzzled by her caprices; he could not fathom, but he dared not oppose them.

At this moment Bigot, who had waited for the conclusion of a game of cards, rejoined the group where she sat.

Angelique drew in her robe and made room for him beside her, and was presently laughing and talking as free from care, apparently, as an oriole warbling on a summer spray. De Pean courteously withdrew, leaving her alone with the Intendant.

Bigot was charmed for the moment into oblivion of the lady who sat in her secluded chamber at Beaumanoir. He forgot his late quarrel with Angelique in admiration of her beauty. The pleasure he took in her presence shed a livelier glow of light across his features. She observed it, and a renewed hope of triumph lifted her into still higher flights of gaily.

"Angelique," said he, offering his arm to conduct her to the gorgeous buffet, which stood loaded with golden dishes of fruit, vases of flowers, and the choicest confectionery, with wine fit for a feast of Cyprus, "you are happy to-night, are you not? But perfect bliss is only obtained by a judicious mixture of earth and heaven; pledge me gaily now in this golden wine, Angelique, and ask me what favor you will."

"And you will grant it?" asked she, turning her eyes upon him eagerly.

"Like the king in the fairy tale, even to my daughter and half of my kingdom," replied he, gaily.

"Thanks for half the kingdom, Chevalier," laughed she, "but I would prefer the father to the daughter."

Angelique gave him a look of ineffable meaning. "I do not desire a king to-night, however. Grant me the lettre de cachet, and then—"

"And then what, Angelique?" He ventured to take her hand, which seemed to tempt the approach of his.

"You shall have your reward. I ask you for a lettre de cachet, that is all." She suffered her hand to remain in his.

"I cannot," he replied sharply to her urgent repetition. "Ask her banishment from Beaumanoir, her life if you like, but a lettre de cachet to send her to the Bastille I cannot and will not give!"

"But I ask it, nevertheless!" replied the wilful, passionate girl. "There is

no merit in your love if it fears risk or brooks denial! You ask me to make sacrifices, and will not lift your finger to remove that stumbling-block out of my way! A fig for such love, Chevalier Bigot! If I were a man, there is nothing in earth, heaven, or hell I would not do for the woman I loved!"

Angelique fixed her blazing eyes full upon him, but magnetic as was their fire, they drew no satisfying reply. "Who in heaven's name is this lady of Beaumanoir of whom you are so careful or so afraid?"

"I cannot tell you, Angelique," said he, quite irritated. "She may be a runaway nun, or the wife of the man in the iron mask, or—"

"Or any other fiction you please to tell me in the stead of truth, and which proves your love to be the greatest fiction of all!"

"Do not be so angry, Angelique," said he, soothingly, seeing the need of calming down this impetuous spirit, which he was driving beyond all bounds. But he had carelessly dropped a word which she picked up eagerly and treasured in her bosom. "Her life! He said he would give me her life! Did he mean it?" thought she, absorbed in this new idea.

Angelique had clutched the word with a feeling of terrible import. It was not the first time the thought had flashed its lurid light across her mind. It had seemed of comparatively light import when it was only the suggestion of her own wild resentment. It seemed a word of terrible power heard from the lips of Bigot, yet Angelique knew well he did not in the least seriously mean what he said.

"It is but his deceit and flattery," she said to herself, "an idle phrase to cozen a woman. I will not ask him to explain it, I shall interpret it in my own way! Bigot has said words he understood not himself; it is for me to give them form and meaning."

She grew quiet under these reflections, and bent her head in seeming acquiescence to the Intendant's decision. The calmness was apparent only.

"You are a true woman, Angelique," said he, "but no politician; you have never heard thunder at Versailles. Would that I dared to grant your request. I offer you my homage and all else I have to give you to half my kingdom."

Angelique's eyes flashed fire. "It is a fairy tale after all!" exclaimed she; "you will not grant the lettre de cachet?"

"As I told you before, I dare not grant that, Angelique; anything else—"

"You dare not! You, the boldest Intendant ever sent to New France, and say you dare not! A man who is worth the name dare do anything in the world for a woman if he loves her, and for such a man a true woman will kiss the ground he walks on, and die at his feet if he need be!" Angelique's thoughts reverted for a moment to Le Gardeur, not to Bigot, as she said this, and thought how he would do it for her sake if she asked him.

"My God, Angelique, you drive this matter hard, but I like you better so than when you are in your silkiest humor."

"Bigot, it were better you had granted my request," Angelique clenched her fingers hard together, and a cruel expression lit her eyes for a moment. It was like the glance of a lynx seeking a hidden treasure in the ground; it penetrated the thick walls of Beaumanoir! She suppressed her anger, however, lest Bigot should guess the dark imaginings and half-formed resolution which brooded in her mind.

With her inimitable power of transformation she put on her air of gaily again and exclaimed: "Pshaw! Let it go, Bigot. I am really no politician, as you say; I am only a woman almost stifled with the heat and closeness of this horrid ballroom. Thank God, day is dawning in the great eastern window yonder; the dancers are beginning to depart! My brother is waiting for me, I see, so I must leave you, Chevalier."

"Do not depart just now, Angelique! Wait until breakfast, which will be prepared for the latest guests."

"Thanks, Chevalier," said she, "I cannot wait. It has been a gay and