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LEON GONDY.

A LEGEND OF GHENT.

X.

The next day, young Karl offered, as far as it was in his power, to do the duty of Leon. The banker, much gratified, accepted, but would not allow Edith to give up her part in the work of his private cabinet.

Edith was by this means thrown forcibly nearly all day into the society of her lover, whom, however, she never spoke to, except as one clerk is compelled to speak to the other—to ask for a piece of information, for the copy of some figures, &c. He, on the contrary, never lost an opportunity of addressing her.

It was two days before the one the banker had fixed for the wedding, and he sat musing and smiling at his table—looking sometimes at one, and sometimes at the other. Young Karl was very serious, but there was a look of triumphant delight about him, which spoke clearly of the conquering hero; while Edith was very silent, and very sad.

'Edith is sad to-day,' observed young Karl in a timid tone. 'You were asking me for the account of Grosheim and Brothers,' answered Edith, handing him a paper.

'Thank you,' said Karl, biting his rather lip with the blood came. 'My dear Edith,' put in the latter gently, 'poor Karl asked you a very polite question.—You have not answered him.'

'My father, this is a place of business, and these are business hours,' replied the girl quietly, but scarcely concealing a curl of contempt on her lip.

'True, my child; but as in two days he will be your husband—'

'God will not allow such a terrible thing to happen!' exclaimed Edith almost wildly.

'Edith!' 'Father,' said the girl more calmly, 'I still wish to please you. I would be his wife, if I could. I intend not to refuse you when the day comes. But I feel that Providence is good;—and that even to grant a kind and good parent, it will not permit me to be sacrificed to a man I despise and hate, while one I love and respect lives to give me hope and life.'

'My child,' said the banker quickly, 'he must be forgotten. He has behaved towards you in a contemptuous manner, and is not—'

'Hush! dear father; your heart tells a different story. You feel that Leon has behaved nobly, generously, and well, if not wisely; and you are naturally glad because you are enabled to carry out your darling plan. But if I marry Karl, the most I can expect from me save the coldest duty.'

The banker was silent, for she had read his heart. He was angry at Leon for walking off in the way he did; but his conscience told him, that the young man had behaved with rare generosity, and that few men would have ever thought of uniting him. He loved, it is true, the memory of his foster brother dearly, and his foster brother's child as a natural consequence; but he had chosen a son for that brother, it would

have been Leon, not Karl; but Karl it was, and Leon it was not. His old affection, therefore, bade him love the one better than the other, and he did so.

The youth remained poring over some accounts, to hide his confusion and annoyance at the conversation; and the old man soon felt that his silence was adding to the discomfort of the peace. He therefore spoke:

'My dear Edith, you must end by loving my foster brother's child; the joy your marriage will give your father is something—'

'It is everything, my father—'

A knock at this moment was heard at the door on the side of young Karl—a gentle knock, which the young man himself answered.

'What is it?' said he to a servant, who presented himself.

'A person wishes to speak with you,' replied the domestic.

'His name?' said Karl impatiently.

At the same moment there was a knock at the door on the side of Edith. She also answered, and another domestic appeared.

'What want you, Marguerite?' said she, surprised at an unusual interruption.

'A girl wishes to speak with you,' replied the servant.

'Who is it?' 'A total stranger,' continued Marguerite.

'Did she give you a name?' 'She said her name was unknown to you; but I was to say Poleska wished to speak with Edith Rosenfelt, from Leon Gondy.'

'I come instantly,' exclaimed Edith in a trembling tone. 'My father, excuse me for a time; I leave your presence on important business;—and then she added, in a low tone, 'I knew that Providence was good!'

Peter Krubingen, said the domestic to the young man.

Young Karl started, turned very pale, and hurried out, leaving the old man alone with his reveries. He did not take much notice of the sudden absence of the young people, but leaned his head upon his hand, and pondered.

The words of Edith, her evident desire to please him at any sacrifice, her undoubted affection for Leon, her aversion to Karl, were all clear to his mind's eye, and yet he did not wish to retreat. There was a feud of obstinacy in his character, which was accustomed to yield only before strong circumstances. The project he was about to carry out was one that had filled his mind for years, and he creased it with all a parent's love for an only child; still he saw floating before his mental vision, reproachfully, the vision of Leon Gondy.

At this instant, young Karl entered hurriedly; he was very, very pale. His emotion was so great that he fell rather than seated himself on his chair, and, taking up a pen, began to write convulsively. The absence of Edith seemed to surprise him, and every now and then he looked towards the door. In a few minutes the door opened, and in she came. She, too, was very pale; but there was in her eyes such a glance of triumph and joy that young Karl nearly leaped off his chair. She seated herself quickly and gravely, and then prepared to speak.

Karl trembled like a leaf; he seemed to watch for the sound of her voice like a criminal for the verdict of his judge.

'My father,' said she solemnly, 'you have not been careful with your strong-box these last few days. You have been robbed of eighty thousand francs in gold, precious stones, and papers on Paris.'

'What?' cried old Rosenfelt, amazed, 'what mean you?' 'That when you make up your books, you will find yourself so much poorer than you think, as eighty thousand francs can make a rich banker.'

'But how discovered you it got before?' 'Because your books have been falsified; figures erased and altered, as seeming blunders; and because I never doubted the honesty of—'

'Speak, girl!—what mean you?' said the old man, wildly looking first at one and then at the other.

'Look at you trembling colprit; he knew not that he was already discovered; although he suspected it was coming, and had provided against the blazing forth of his villainy. Nay, seek out the door; it is too late.'

As Edith spoke, the young man rose, pale as a flake of snow, tottering, trembling, to make for the door.

'God of Heaven! Karl a thief!' said the old man. At this instant, the door was opened violently; Peter Krubingen was pushed forward head foremost by a party of the city watch; behind came Leon Gondy, Poleska, and an old man, tall, thin, and wan from suffering. Leon ran forward, and kissed the hand of Edith; the old man caught old Karl in his arms; and one of the watch, coloring young Karl, cried—

Rigardin, otherwise Louis Krubingen, falsely calling yourself Karl Woltmann.'

The young man made no resistance, but was placed by his father, Peter Krubingen, without a word.

'Am I dreaming? Where am I? What means this? Who is this stranger who embraces me—speak, say! Why do officers of justice invade the house of the chief magistrate of Ghent?' exclaimed the banker, almost incoherently.

'I am thy foster brother, Paul,' cried the stranger, passionately, 'and I have done all this. When I say all I have suffered from these two monstrous impostors, you will then surely excuse the liberties I have taken. Thank this noble youth, Leon Gondy, that I am alive to tell my tale.'

A scene of confusion almost impossible to be described now took place. Karl sank senseless on a chair, supported by his friend, Edith and Leon rushed forward to aid him; the city watch removed the two prisoners, after the false young Karl had owned that the missing money was in his room up stairs.

XI.

The following was the narrative told by Poleska, and already alluded to, and which from the first sentence deeply interested Leon Gondy:

'I am an orphan; I never knew my parents. Taken by the hand by worthy people, the owners of this inn originally, some thirteen years ago, I was educated by them, and looked forward to being their adopted child; they, however, died suddenly, and, as I now fear, under very suspicious circumstances. The inn was then taken by one who gave himself the name of Peter Krubingen; he was, however, a Frenchman, and, as I afterwards found, his name was Rigardin. He had a son about my own age.—He condescended to accept me as a playmate for his child, and soon, as an assistant in the business. A man of a certain education, he gave me some more ideas than I had before, while teaching his son; but he gave me no principles; his ideas were cynical and bad. I knew not what feeling it was that made his notions repulsive to me; so much so, that when I grew older, and found he was the chief of a nefarious band infesting the forest, using his inn as a trap, I would have fled; but it was too late. I was deeply attached to his son. The boy was weak, and gave into his father's plans; but too readily; I endeavored to resist his parent's teaching, and with some success. The result was, that he did evil with his eyes open, and was miserable. I often reproached his father, who, at first furious, soon bore my fault-finding far too gently; the man, it seemed, liked my spirit, and determined to make me his wife. It appears that he had planned to abandon his comrades and return to France, when he should have realised a certain sum; but a temptation came in his way. A banker, named Rosenfelt, wanted a confidential clerk—'

'Rosenfelt?' exclaimed Leon, astounded.—'Rigardin—'

'You know the name—'

'Yes, yes, go on—'

'If you know him, this is nothing; it is to come to another crime, now being performed, that I tell you all this.'

'Another crime—continue in the name of God.'

'By means of confederates in Paris, he got the place, and stayed there twelve months. At the end of that time, having gained the confidence of his employer, he robbed him and fled. The banker, a generous and forgiving man, never pursued him; and he came back here again to resume his old courses. He was almost inclined to leave the country, when another nefarious idea came into his head.

'It was late one evening, when a traveller sought shelter here; he was an old man, who scarcely was aware of his way. He asked if he could reach Ghent that night, and was answered that he could not; the distance was exaggerated to thirty miles, and he, with a deep sigh, intimated his intention to stop. He ordered his horse to the stables, after removing his saddle-bags, and a small travelling sack, with pistol and sabre, and then asked for supper. He seemed a man who had seen much of the world, and who had served. Just as supper was ready, he asked us all to join him, ordering a large jar of wine.

'You have lived long in this place?' said he presently.

'Several years,' replied Peter, with a suspicious glance.

'I ask, because having been abroad many years in America, you may perhaps tell me something of those I left behind.'

'May I call you my master?'

'Were you ever in Ghent?'

'I know a little of it,' replied Peter, again uneasy.

'Have you ever heard of one Karl Rosenfelt?'

'I have heard of him, but I never saw him.'

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felt?' asked the other abruptly, and as if overcome by emotion.

'My master was in the act of raising a cup to his lips. He trembled so violently, that he nearly spilt all his wine; but recovering himself, he answered:

'The richest banker in all Ghent; a man with an enormous fortune, a still greater reputation, and an only daughter.'

'Thank God, my foster-brother lives!' cried the old man.

'Your foster-brother?' exclaimed Peter Krubingen, with a strange look.

'Yes, my foster-brother, I left him a wild youth, and I return to him laden with riches.—But I am weary of a foreign land, and I return home to live the rest of my days in peace. I wonder whether he will remember me?'

'Surely he will,' said Peter, after a moment's thought. 'But I now may tell you, that I lived in his house for years, and I never knew a day pass without his speaking of his long lost foster-brother. It is to his bounty that I owe my present independence.'

'The old man listened with a delighted glance, Louis and I astounded, and not yet aware of the deep cunning of this arch-impostor.

'And so you have seen my brother?' said Karl Woltmann with flashing eyes. 'Good Karl, he was always ready. Would the night was past, that I might press him in my arms.'

'A bed is ready for you at once, if you could sleep in the old mill,' replied Peter, avoiding my eyes.

'Anywhere. I am an old soldier, and have roughed it in the Mexican hills too often not to consider a mill a luxury. Call me early, and I will reward the waiter handsomely.'

With these words, he took up his saddle-bags and sack, with his pistols, and walked away to the mill, Peter Krubingen showing him the road. We remained behind looking at each other in blank silence; we felt that another crime was to be added to those already so familiar to us, and we knew not what to say or do. Presently Peter returned, shut up the inn, and drew near the fire; he was musing, and we dared not interrupt him.

'Louis,' said he at last, 'do you wish to make your fortune at one stroke, to rise to riches and honors in this world, and become even the son of a rich banker?'

'What mean you?' exclaimed both in one breath.

'I know the whole history of the family Rosenfelt. This Paul Woltmann, for whom old Rosenfelt has so much affection, is thought to be dead; let them think so still.'

'What? I said, blanched with terror—'

'Hush, girl! I talk not of murder. But Paul Woltmann leaves out the old mill until my son be married to his friend's daughter.'

'Never!' said I, warmly.

'Louis said nothing.'

'Peter then laid his plan bare before us. He knew intimately the character of his late employer. He intended to seize the papers of Paul, and counterfeit his handwriting. Well instructed and furnished with credentials, Louis would then start and personate the son of the long-lost friend, obtain the good graces of Karl, and marry his daughter.'

'The villain! the monster!' cried Leon, radiant, however, with joy and hope.

'The lad accepted, for he never cared much for me; his character was too weak for any sentiment to last long. We set up a portion of the night, they laying their plans, I devouring my rage and despair for I loved Louis then, and even now would welcome him back if he came. At dead of night they entered the mill, overpowered Paul in his sleep, and took away his sack and saddle-bags; but they found no single trace of the old man's wealth. They found letters and papers, and a journal of his life; these were invaluable, and during a whole month were the daily and hourly study of them both. Threatened by my threats of exposure, they did give him proper food, and forbore from any thought of serious ill-usage. The lad never had any, but the father thought it would be wiser to get rid of a troublesome evidence against them; he, however, conceived his intentions carefully; and when at last the day came for the departure of his son, solemnly pledged himself, that once his plans carried out, the old man should have his freedom.'

'Louis started, and reached Ghent, where it appears he played his part with consummate skill, deceiving father, daughter, and accepted lover.'

'Yes, all!' exclaimed Leon.

'How know you?'

'How know I? Because I am that lover; because during a whole month this audacious impostor has made me wretched; because I have for him given up her I love. The old man thought him the son of his friend, and wished to unite him with his daughter. But the hand of

providence is upon him and Edith is saved!'

'You Leon Gondy?' exclaimed Poleska, amazed; 'then I need say no more. Take this key, rescue Paul Woltmann, and then for all reward I ask you to spare Louis. He is a boy—weak and bad, it is true, but spare him.'

'So far as I am concerned he shall be spared,' replied Leon; 'but the key, the key.'

XII.

When the young man found himself violently pushed inside the prison of Paul Woltmann, his first impulse was to look around him. On a bed lay the old man, his hands and feet so tied that to rise was impossible. The room was large, with iron-barred windows, almost in the roof; the walls were of heavy stone, the door of massive wood. It was a solid and secure prison, and the heart of the young man sank within him. He was so overcome, that he sat on a stool by the bedside before speaking.

'Well, what new villainy, good Master Krubingen?' said the old man, in a faint but sneering tone.

'O sir, I am not Peter Krubingen, but one who, coming to save you, has fallen into a trap, and now shares your prison.'

'The voice is new to me, but you are of the gang; you seek to trick me out of some secret. Go; I can die here, but I will not speak.'

'In the name of God, listen to me: I come to save you, your friend, and Edith from an awful worse than death. Listen, and then judge who I am.'

And Leon Gondy spoke, after cutting the bonds of the other which bound him to his bed.

'I believe you, my noble young friend,' said the old man, sitting up after several vain efforts, 'and bless you from my soul. I thought that girl Poleska was a good girl. But how escape from hence?'

'My hope is in Poleska,' said Leon Gondy, at last. 'The girl detests the crime that grows rank around her; she loves Louis, and would prevent his marriage with Edith. This feeling will keep her intelligence alive, and at the first moment when the watch is careless, she will act.'

'But in the meantime the evil may be done, boy?' said Paul, with an expression of deep passion, terrible in his weak state. 'Hush! one hour is come when our jailors bring food. Speak us a word, but listen and mark.'

A little window in the very summit of the mill opened, a cord was let down with a basket attached; Leon fastened it, and the basket was instantly taken up again by an unseen hand.

'Twice every day this has been done, since I have been here,' said the old man; 'it has been the only relief to the dull monotony of my existence.'

'But it cannot be that we are to wear out our lives here?' exclaimed Leon. 'But what do we? We are helpless, powerless; we cannot move hands or feet. To think of the evil that is being done while we are confined here; it is enough to drive me mad.'

'Young man,' said Paul Woltmann, solemnly, 'repine not thus; we are in the hands of a merciful God. During my life, I have been in much trouble, but Providence has taken me out at last. Something will occur to relieve us, to be sure.'

Leon shook his head, and replied not; his thoughts—thoughts of poignant anguish—were far away.

One day, when their food, supplied always abundantly, had been let down, they noticed that when the basket was drawn up, the window remained open, and a bundle followed.

'Listen! said the voice of Poleska, coming, as it was from the chimney.'

'I think I replied the old man, solemnly.

'I will go. There is danger to him, it seems. Young Louis has robbed the banker of eighty thousand francs, to be ready in case his marriage project fails. In the bundle you will find a saw, chisel, a hammer, and a file; use them quickly, obtain your freedom, and remember—'

'Do you remain here alone?' said Leon.

'I will go. There is a horse in the stable; I will reach Ghent as soon as Peter. God speed you. If you cannot get out of yourselves, you will soon be released.'

The window closed, and the girl was heard descending the old ladder of the mill. The instant she reached the inn, she locked the door,