

THE BEAUTIFUL PRISONER.

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE.

CHAPTER XII.

A DINNER AMONG FRIENDS.

ROBESPIERRE, since it was manifest that he, more than ever, contemplated great projects, became more intolerable and tried Tallien's devotion. For more than five weeks the president of the committee of the public safety had not attended the meetings of the convention, but he more regularly visited the Jacobin Club. The air was sultry—everyone anticipated that new events were ripening. Everyone dreaded this taciturn, pensive and choleric Robespierre, by whose ambition, everyone that did not serve him, saw himself relentlessly doomed. Tallien, especially, trembled when he felt the breath of this inscrutable man; he heard from his mouth but the signals of death, and saw his hand but write names which were remitted to Fouquier-Tinville, to compose of them the list of the victims. The dictatorship of Robespierre, of which everyone spoke, which everyone dreaded, was already a matter of fact. He beckoned, and the heads fell into the iron basket of the head-man, Samson.

"Tallien," said Robespierre, one morning, coughing, and sipping a cup of camomiles: "Barrère gives a dinner to-day, at Clichy. Are you one of the party?"

"Yes, I am invited," replied Tallien.

"Well, I am glad—I shall also attend. I like to meet once again our friends, and it is high time for me to do so, as the traitors and scoundrels attempt already secretly—"

"What do you mean?" asked Tallien, growing pale with terror at the lurking glance that Robespierre, through his green spectacles, fixed on him.

"Ha, you are perhaps one of them?" he suddenly burst forth. "Why are you growing pale, citizen? I think you, too, are betraying me!"

"What a strange fancy!" answered Tallien. "You are now full of mistrust, Robespierre. You offend your best friends."

Robespierre kept silence for a while, his limbs shaking with the violence of his feelings. "You may be right, friend," he then said in an unpleasant tone; "but, I will soon find out who is my friend, and who desires the happiness of France. Many, however, may learn to their sorrow, that Robespierre has sounded them, and does no more rely on them. So, good-bye, friend, till to-night at Barrère's."

With evil forebodings Tallien left the advocate who, with St. Just and Couthon, were now ruling France. He doubted not that Robespierre intended to strike down his open and secret enemies, and that the dictatorship would be conferred upon him, as soon as he came back to the convention. Had Robespierre not also threatened him? He revolted at the thought that his head might also fall, if this one man wished it, and that he was powerless to protect himself. He resolved to save himself, not by flight, but by bold action. The same morning he had received a letter from Thérèse, who conjured him to hasten Robespierre's fall. But how was this possible? Though he had a great many friends, he saw the difficulty of uniting them. Who would have the courage to direct their thoughts to one common aim, and organize an actual conspiracy against the dreaded and all-powerful man? Tallien recoiled from such an attempt; yet, this idea was ever uppermost in his mind, and accompanied him when he set out to Clichy, where Barrère, the deputy, owning an elegant country-seat, was fond of giving sumptuous dinners to his friends.

When Tallien arrived at this place, his head was confused with thinking; his cheeks were pale, his eyes inflamed, his bristly red hair stood on end. He evidently came too late—the dinner must have already commenced. A servant who had opened the door for him had hastily withdrawn, knowing Tallien to be acquainted in the house. He was alone in the ante-room, and while he was in the act of crossing it, perceived a number of coats hanging on the pegs against the wall. He did not feel surprised, as the month of July was extremely hot, the sun of the Thermidor having no pity for the committee of the public safety—which had induced the guests to rid themselves of their uncomfortable coats. But suddenly, Tallien arrested his steps, gazed timidly around, listened if anyone was coming, and with a wild look rushed to a brown-silk coat which had attracted his attention. Trembling with excitement and evil conscience, he searched for the breast-pocket, dived his hand into it and drew forth a folded paper with a portfolio. For one moment he hesitated, holding them in his hand as though he did not know what to do with his booty. He then quickly turned round to the door and walked out into the garden.

Here also he met no one; all the guests were at dinner in the saloon; but still he searched all the walks before he sat down on a seat in a retired spot of the thicket. He then drew forth the portfolio and paper, unfolded the letter and devoured with eager glances the names it contained. The list was newly written, perhaps within the last few hours. His name was on it, amongst forty others that all belonged to the deputies of the convention, whom Robespierre, no doubt, suspected of not being implicitly devoted to him. They were friends to Danton, friends to Tallien,—as Carnot, Barras, Fréron, Collot d'Herbois, Vadier; even Barrère, by whom Robespierre had been invited to dinner, was marked on the paper, though the name had been struck out again.

"Triumph!" muttered Tallien, whose eyes sparkled with anger and resolution. "This comes at the proper time, Maximilian—this furnishes me with what I required! As my death has been decided upon by you, I will not suffer myself to be slaughtered like a lamb, but will, like a wolf, defend myself." He hastily opened the portfolio, turning over the last written pages. He found nothing but names, names struck out and provided with marks of interrogation, names underlined and twice, even thrice noted down. They were written in rows, one below the other, and above them a cipher indicating the date. The (Th.) alongside of it showed that the dates of the Thermidor were meant. Under "the 9th (Th.," Tallien noticed again his name, and beneath it that of Thérèse Cabarrus. A pencil memorandum was scribbled beside it, which was hard to decipher, but Tallien, after some time, succeeded in finding it out, and read: "Bloody marriage, she shall be his." Then, Tallien's gaze fell on unintelligible notes, about a fête to the Supreme Being, an agrarian law, soldiers' asylums, &c. At the foot of the notes there was written: "20th (Th.) Abolition of capital punishment. Peace. New Empire. Festival of reconciliation." Tallien had read enough. He had found what most interested him. Not only was he and his friends marked on the next list of the victims, but also Thérèse; Robespierre had perhaps already sent the accusation against her to Fouquier-Tinville. No time was to be lost, this day being the seventh of the Thermidor, and the High Priest having fixed the bloody marriage to take place on the ninth.



Tallien discovers Robespierre's list of the victims.

Concealing the portfolio and paper in his pocket, he went back to the ante-room. Everything appeared unchanged, no one seemed to have entered during his absence. Tallien replaced his plunder, and mastering his emotion, stepped into the dining-saloon. Barrère received him with reproaches at his long absence; he excused himself with having been unwell.

"Indeed," said Robespierre to him, as he took his seat at the table, which was laid for fifteen persons: "you look very pale, Tallien. Now you are crimson—oh, friend, you have the fever!"

"The fever?" asked St. Just, in his apparently and indifferent way. "Why should he have the fever?"

"He has the fever of cowardice," remarked the crippled Couthon, whose angelic features and lovely, clear voice, did not bespeak his gloomy, unrelenting spirit.

Tallien felt easier, more courageous and daring, than of late. His old nature, suddenly freed from fear and hypocrisy, appeared again.

"What do you mean, Couthon?" replied he. "Is there any danger threatening me?"

"You may guess rightly," said Carnot, at whose side Tallien purposely had taken his seat. "The air smells of blood."

"And the general staff is here assembled, drawing up the plan

of the campaign," put in Barras, a beautiful and elegant figure, showing in its military bearing, that he had once been an officer in the army.

"Well, I do not care," remarked Tallien, shaking hands with Fréron and Billaud.

"If it comes to a battle, victims will fall on both sides."

"But there will also be victors and vanquished," uttered Lebas, across the table.

"Zounds, friends," cried the amiable host; "fill your glasses. We are here assembled to enjoy a pleasant evening. We are all adorers of liberty—hurrah, friends, long live liberty, long live the republic, long live France!"

Enthusiastically they clinked their glasses. Tallien raised his glass and violently striking it against Robespierre's exclaimed arrogantly:

"Long live terror!"

Robespierre's glass broke to pieces, and the wine was spilled on the cloth. An angry look punished the awkward offender.

"Parbleu!" cried Fréron, "this is a bad omen! Ah, Robespierre, you are betrayed. You will now establish your new reign of peace and permit terror to fall asleep."

"Truly, he has prepared himself well for it," mocked Collot d'Herbois.

"What is the import of your words?" asked Robespierre, endeavouring to suppress his annoyance.

"Eh, have you not for more than a month been absent from the convention?"

"Yes, Maximilian," said Tallien. "You are suspected of being a moderate. You withdraw from your duties, and the report says that you intend on the 20th Thermidor to abolish capital punishment."

Robespierre sprang up as if bitten by a viper.

"What are you prattling, Tallien? What do you know of the 20th Thermidor?"

His eyes flashed fire at the young man, who slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Do you not often tell me of your ideas?"

"I never spoke to you of the 20th Thermidor."

"Well, dear friends," added Billaud-Varennes, "do not tire us again with a fête to the Supreme Being. It cannot be endured a second time."

"Perhaps," remarked St. Just, "some may not have occasion to endure it a second time."

"Ah, friends, mother Thiot, the pious mother, whom Robespierre anointed as the new prophetess, bears the whole blame," jested the merry Barrère, filling again Robespierre's glass.

"How they are mocking!" whispered Couthon to the latter.

"Let them!" replied he; "we are of good cheer."

"The capon! the capon!" cried now the first at the table, to whom the servants were presenting the dishes with the fowls. For a few minutes the conversation was interrupted to do honour to the capon.

"Carnot," whispered Tallien to his neighbour: "I have important communications to make to you. Your head is at stake. But do not be agitated."

Carnot nodded his head, and replied:

"I felt that something of the kind was in the wind."

And on the other side of the table, Robespierre whispered to St. Just, at his side:

"We will not remain much longer, but will go to the Jacobins. Let Lebas and Collinval know."

"Friends and citizens!" now said Barrère, rising. "Often you have favoured me with the honour of having you for my guests. I thank you for it. We are all men of politics, of liberty; we all love France, and are proud of being witnesses and co-operators of the great work of the revolution. As men are different, so are their minds and thoughts; we cannot all think alike of political questions, though we render homage to a political principle. Let us comprehend this, and be friends, although unanimity does not always rule among us."

He stopped for one moment. The guests seemed to be almost painfully touched by his words, they had become perfectly silent.

"What nonsense is this?" whispered Couthon to St. Just.

Barrère continued:

"Passion and dissension have caused us many sorrows. Friends, I know that there exists again secret enmities in the convention. You can suppress them if you wish, if you vow friendship to each other. You, who are here assembled, have a decisive influence in the convention, from the Plain to the Mountain. Therefore, I have to-day offered you this friendly dinner. Long live friendship!"

"Long live friendship!" cried Barras, Tallien and Fréron, with several others, clinking their glasses. Robespierre, with his faction, were silent and did not stir.

"Well, Robespierre, you do not join?" asked Barrère.

"And still, at other times, his mouth overflows with the honey of friendship!" added the sharp tongue of Tallien.

Robespierre measured him with a look of amazement and indignation; he seemed to search for the cause of the remarkable change in Tallien, who so boldly attacked and mocked him, whilst in the morning he had trembled and bent before him.

"I have something to add that you have forgotten," replied Robespierre, after some hesitation. He raised his glass, and with his creaking, gasping voice, cried, fixing his eyes on Tallien:

"Death to the traitors!"

"Yes, death to them, the traitors!" repeated St. Just, Cou-