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CHAPTER XXXVI.—Continued.

The pile of papers upon the table gradually diminished as they were opened and disposed of. The Council itself was getting weary of a long sitting, and showed an evident wish for its adjournment. The gentlemen of the law did not get a hearing of their case that day, but were well content to have it postponed, because a postponement meant new fees and increased cost for their clients. The lawyers of Old France, whom La Fontaine depicts in his lively fable as swallowing the oyster and handing to each litigant an empty shell, did not differ in any essential point from their brothers of the long robe in New France, and differed nothing at all in the length of their bills and the sharpness of their practice.

The breaking-up of the Council was deferred by the Secretary opening a package sealed with the royal seal, and which contained other sealed papers marked "special" for His Excellency the Governor. The Secretary handed them to the Count, who read over the contents with deep interest and a changing countenance. He laid them down, and took them up again, perused them a second time, and passed them over to the Intendant, who read them with a start of surprise and a sudden frown on his dark eyebrows. But he instantly suppressed it, biting his nether lip, however, with anger which he could not wholly conceal.

He pushed the papers back to the Count with a nonchalant air, as a man who had quite made up his mind about them, saying, in a careless manner:

"The commands of Madame la Marquise de Pompadour shall be complied with," said he. "I will order strict search to be made for the missing demoiselle, who, I suspect, will be found in some camp or fort, sharing the couch of some lively fellow who has won favor in her bright eyes."

Bigot saw the danger of these despatches, and in the look of the Governor, who would be sure to exercise the utmost diligence in carrying out the commands of the court in this matter.

Bigot for a few moments seemed lost in reflection. He looked round the table, and, seeing many eyes fixed upon him, spoke boldly, almost with a tone of defiance.

"Pray explain to the councillors the nature of this despatch, your Excellency!" said he to the Count. "What it contains is not surprising to anyone who knows the fickle sex, and no gentleman can avoid feeling for the noble Baron de St. Castin."

"And for his daughter, too, Chevalier!" replied the Governor. "It is only through their virtues that such women are lost. But it is the strangest tale I have heard in New France!"

The gentlemen seated at the table looked at the Governor in some surprise. La Corne St. Luc, hearing the name of the Baron de St. Castin, exclaimed, "What, in God's name, your Excellency, what is there in that despatch affecting my old friend and companion in arms, the Baron de St. Castin?"

"I had better explain," replied the Count: "it is no secret in France, and will not long be a secret here."

"This letter, gentlemen," continued he, addressing the councillors, and holding it open in his hand, "is a pathetic appeal from the Baron de St. Castin, whom you all know, urging me, by every consideration of friendship, honor, and public duty, to aid in finding his daughter, Caroline

de St. Castin, who has been abducted from her home in Acadia, and who, after a long and vain search for her by her father in France, where it was thought she might have gone, has been traced to this Colony, where it is said she is living concealed under some strange alias or low disguise."

"The other despatch," continued the Governor, "is from the Marquise de Pompadour, affirming the same thing, and commanding the most rigorous search to be made for Mademoiselle de St. Castin. In language hardly official, the Marquise threatens to make stockfish—that her phrase—of whosoever has had a hand in either the abduction of the concealment of the missing lady."

The attention of every gentleman at the table was roused by the words of the Count. But La Corne St. Luc could not repress his feelings, striking the table with the palm of his hand until it sounded like the shot of a petronel.

"By St. Christopher the Strong!" exclaimed he, "I would cheerfully have lost a limb, rather than heard such a tale told by my dear old friend and comrade, about that angelic child of his, whom I have carried in my arms like a lamb of God many and many a time!"

"You know, gentlemen, what befell her!" The old soldier looked as if he could annihilate the Intendant with the lightning of his eyes. "I affirm and will maintain that no saint in Heaven was holier in her purity than she was in her fall! Chevalier Bigot, it is for you to answer these despatches! This is your work! If Caroline de St. Castin be lost, you know where to find her!"

Bigot started up in a rage mingled with fear, not of La Corne St. Luc, but lest the secret of Caroline's concealment at Beaumanoir should become known. The furious letter of La Pompadour repressed the prompting of his audacious spirit to acknowledge the deed openly and defy the consequences, as he would have done at any less price than the loss of the favor of his powerful and jealous patroness.

The broad, black gateway of a lie stood open to receive him, and angry as he was at the words of St. Luc, Bigot took refuge in it—and lied.

"Chevalier La Corne!" said he, with a tremendous effort at self-control, "I do not affect to misunderstand your words, and in time and place will make you account for them! but I will say, for the contentment of His Excellency and of the other gentlemen at the council-table, that whatever in times past have been my relations with the daughter of the Baron de St. Castin, and I do not deny having shown her many courtesies, her abduction was not my work, and if she be lost, I do not know where to find her!"

"Upon your word as a gentleman," interrogated the Governor, "will you declare you know not where she is to be found?"

"Upon my word as a gentleman!" The Intendant's face was suffused with passion. "You have no right to ask that! Neither shall you, Count de La Galissoniere! But I will myself answer the despatch of Madame la Marquise de Pompadour! I know no more, perhaps, loss, than yourself or the Chevalier La Corne St. Luc, where to look for the daughter of the Baron de St. Castin; and I proclaim here that I am ready to cross swords with the first gentleman who shall dare breathe a syllable of doubt against the word of Francois Bigot!"

Varin and Penisault exchanged a rapid glance, partly of doubt, partly of surprise. They knew well, for Bigot had not concealed from his intimate associates the fact that a strange lady, whose name they had not heard, was living in the secret chambers of the Chateau of Beaumanoir. Bigot never told any who she was or whence she came. Whatever suspicion they might entertain in their own minds, they were too wary to express it. On the contrary, Varin, ever more ready with a

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