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THE STORY OF A PIN.

(Continued.)

This was a discouraging position for George. To know his prot ges to be without defence, in the hold of powerful adversaries, to imagine poor Jeanne exhausted by work, and all patient, resisting by her sole energy to an extent of which he knew not, and hiding even from her most intimate friend, Madame Blancheman, the sufferings which she experienced; he could no longer endure such treatment. He found himself relieved from his promise by Jeanne's very peril. He was about to set out for Saint Germain, when the pleasant and kind person of Mademoiselle Borghese encountered him on the threshold.

'You will always be my guardian angel, dear Borghese,' he said to her upon her entrance.—'You alone can save me. I am unhappy, and you are the only one whom I can make a confidante, kind and indulgent friend.'

'You are in love, George,' said Mademoiselle Borghese, coldly. 'It is not necessary to watch you long to guess that. But if you will calm yourself a little, and not have that cast-down appearance, there will be nothing lost. That picture—ah well, what is it? It is something which some one has sent you. And these occasional letters! what are they all about? I do not know you any longer, George, you who were formerly so forward and affable, have become silent, and seem to seek solitude. No more music! no more agreeable chats! Monsieur Wolff himself is disturbed. I have come to hear your complaints, and to comfort you. I could not have come more seasonably. But conceal at least a little of your agitation, since you wish me to be your only confidante. If you do not take care, your secret will be read in your face.'

'Dear Borghese, take pity on me. I will still listen to your wise counsels; but now, you who have given me sufficient marks of friendship for me to depend upon you, I entreat you to go immediately on a mission for me. Here is the address of the one who is in trouble, and whom I cannot assist. Endeavor to learn the cause of her trouble, and give me the means of remedying it.'

And he wrote, upon the same letter which Jeanne had sent with the pictures, these few words:

'Dear Jeanne: Have all confidence in the devoted friend who will present you this letter; she comes to your assistance.'

'GEORGE.'

He gave this pass-word to Mademoiselle Borghese, who promised him to set out immediately, and to return as soon as possible.

Two hours afterward, Mademoiselle Borghese, accompanied by a waiting-maid, was in Saint Germain. The little white house had been plainly described to her, and she found it easily.—She was shortly in the presence of Jeanne, who, wholly occupied with her painting, and absorbed in her thoughts, scarcely saw her entrance.

'Mademoiselle Jeanne,' said Mademoiselle Borghese, who remained in astonishment, believing she had discovered a face which was not unknown to her; 'do you know this writing?'

And she presented her the letter with the few words which George had added.

Jeanne thanked her warmly, and said that she greatly regretted the trouble and pains which this lady really wished to take, but that she had no need of assistance.

'Oh, Mademoiselle Jeanne, you can tell that to whom else you please, but not to a friend like me. I like too well to execute my errands conscientiously and completely, to be satisfied with such an answer. My name is Borghese, I am an old friend of Monsieur Wolff. We are all in great trouble at seeing the alteration which has been taking place for some time in the looks, health, and character of George, whom we all love, and who is so honest and worthy a lad.—Now all his trouble comes from uneasiness which he has on your account, and as I have been fortunate enough to render him some services, and as he knows that he can depend upon my devotedness and discretion, it is I to whom he has entrusted the charge of representing him here, and I thank him for it, because I have no trouble to see all the interest which you deserve. Then, if you bear any friendship for this poor George, who, it seems, is prevented from appearing here, though I know not why, you must at least tell him your trouble. If you could see him, the poor child, you would pity him. If you keep him in exile, it is, perhaps, to try his patience and prove his love. I know nothing about it;—but give him at least some way of occupying himself with you.'

And she offered her hand as an evidence of her sincerity.

'Madame,' said Anna, 'we are grateful for your care; nevertheless, how can we, upon a

first interview, recount to a person who doubtless honors us by her presence, but, in short, who is a stranger to us, the secret of our troubles? Is it not exposing ourselves uselessly to a still harder shock?'

'It is very true, Mademoiselle; I have no right to your confidence; therefore I beg for it only that I may aid this poor George, who you esteem without doubt, and in whose behalf I have really the right of interesting myself. And then this trouble which is overwhelming you, it may be some money affair, and in that case with friends there is always some resource; or, from some words which George let me hear in his anxiety, it may be some enmity operating against you; but it can be combated against. I entreat you, Mademoiselle Jeanne, you who appear already to have suffered so much, do not let yourself be overwhelmed by a silence which is the mark of a very honorable pride, but which will bring unhappiness to everybody, if you do not take care. Have I the appearance of an inquisitive person who has introduced herself into your house to disturb its repose? If my sentiments are written upon my forehead, you should read my desire of serving you and of saving George, who can no longer live in this anxiety.'

'Ah, well, madame,' said Jeanne, convinced by Mademoiselle Borghese's frank and kind air, 'I cannot make any one suffer; and if a relation of our misfortune is absolutely something it is necessary for you to know, that your mission may be accomplished, I will submit to this necessity.'

She wiped her blushing forehead, and, making an effort, hesitatingly continued:

'We have lost our mother,' said she, taking the hand of her sister, 'and with her we have lost everything! She owed a sum of ten thousand francs to a relative, with whom she afterward deposited the sum of thirty thousand francs, accumulated in the inheritance from our father. This amount covered her former debt, and left at our disposal in the hands of this distant relative a surplus of twenty thousand francs, which was all our heritage. The receipt was carefully preserved by our mother, who spoke of it every day during her sickness, and said to us: 'My children, I will tell you, when the time shall arrive, where you will find it, for I am afraid of some fraud.' Now we have lost this poor mother, and we are having too much trouble to remember about this unfortunate receipt. We have never found it. Shortly after, this relative died, and his obstinate heirs have come to present us the bill for ten thousand francs which our mother formerly owed.'

'To tell the whole, we have agreed to pay this sum, for we wish to keep in tact the honor and name of our mother; but by the utmost economy, we have yet laid by only a small part of this amount. In vain we claim that there is upon their part a debt of thirty thousand francs, and that twenty thousand francs should return to us; we are not able to produce any other proof than our word, and, by means of the title by which we have accepted the responsibility, they can compel us—'

'But it is an enormity! And have you no one for confidante, for counsel? Now I must first tell you, my children, that the title that you have accepted and signed is the same as null, for you were not of age when you lost your mother, and there is concerned in it some perfidy and some dark plot. It is necessary that I should have the name of the heirs who are tormenting you; believe me, we have reason for it; but, above all, sign nothing.'

Mademoiselle had such an air of frankness, so much energy and conviction shone in all her words, that she commanded their confidence.—Anna looked at Jeanne as if to seek counsel in her eyes, and wrote several addresses, which she gave to Mademoiselle Borghese, with other marks and some stamped documents.'

'You desire it, madame,' said she, 'and we yield to your zeal, and we recommend ourselves to your discretion, for no one yet knows our secret.'

'That wants no explanation,' said Borghese. 'But now let us speak of this poor George. Do you hold him in punishment much longer? Have you at least any consolation, anything to give me for him, that I have received from your hand, Mademoiselle Jeanne, and that I shall place in his own? He is so unhappy.'

'If I dared, madame, I would ask you to take charge of a little picture; it is the portrait of our mother, which George has long desired to copy for himself. It seems to me that this occupation would please him, and that it would be of use at this time.'

And she took down the portrait, which she reverently kissed.

'Give it to me,' said Mademoiselle Borghese, 'it is a good thought.'

'But it will be troubling madame,' said Anna.

'I have my waiting-maid with me,' replied

Mademoiselle Borghese; 'but be composed, I am responsible for this precious portrait, to which you should always hold as a treasure. Adieu, and thanks, dear children, for having permitted me to accomplish my mission. Be of good courage; you will perhaps presently have news from us, and above all, if there is still time, give no signature to anything.'

Mademoiselle, before taking leave, visited with interest and curiosity the apartment of the two sisters. She returned to Madame Blancheman, to thank her for George, and to give her some recommendations. Then, with a special attention, she gave a last look at the front of the little white house, nearly hidden under the rose branches, whose graceful and picturesque appearance she admired.

XXIV.—MANTES THE PRETTY.

At length, here was a field of activity for George, who was wasting away in his loneliness, and powerless condition to assist the two sisters. He touched his lips respectfully to the portrait which Mademoiselle Borghese put in his hands. Perhaps she told him that Jeanne had done the same. He thanked that excellent friend for having so well performed her part, but he had something else to do besides setting himself to drawing.

The high position which he had reached in the house of Wolff left him, in case of necessity, his perfect liberty. He examined the papers which were placed in his possession.

'All is not lost,' said he. And he immediately set out for Mantes, where resided the obstinate heirs, who were the cause of so much unhappiness.

Mantes, which is called the pretty, and which from the report of everybody, is worthy of this name, appeared to him a most detestable place. George wished to act prudently. He was announced at the house of Monsieur Doucet, who pursued the orphans with such relentlessness;—and he presented himself as if commissioned with the management of the business of the Meses Duval.

He found a man already advanced in years, fat and sleek in his exterior, and with an appearance of affability and jocundity. All in his house spoke of ease and comfort.

'Monsieur,' said George to him, 'your kind reception, and your benevolent air, give me hope that you will assist me in drawing my clients from a very painful position.'

'You are right, sir,' responded the fat man; 'honest people always recognize each other;—it is a kind of freemasonry. I am persuaded that we will be able to understand each other. I know all the nobleness of those ladies, who are, upon my faith, very charming; and, although I am temporarily their adversary, ha! ha! I can not prevent myself from complimenting them sometimes.'

'Sir,' said George, 'I suppose that we are here to speak of serious things.'

'True, sir, true. As heir of my excellent uncle, Doucet, whom I shall always regret, and as administrator of the property of that worthy kinsman, I find myself compelled to claim from the Meses Duval, the restitution of ten thousand francs which their mother owed to this good uncle Doucet, with interest from the date of the note. But, be assured, I am a man to render the execution of my charge as free from unpleasantness as possible, and the ladies—'

'But, sir, you know very well that those children possess nothing in the world, and find difficulty in supporting themselves by their labor.'

'Without doubt; but they have friends,' said Monsieur Doucet, laughing; 'they have friends, for everybody is interested in these charming girls, and they well deserve it.'

'And then why do you make them responsible for the engagements of their mother, who has left them no heritage? for they were not of age when they became orphans, and you knew very well that they owe nothing.'

'Ah! my dear sir,' replied Monsieur Doucet, with an appearance of emotion, 'how little you know of these persons of whom you speak. Let me tell you that they possess a very rare trait, and that for this trait there is an account kept in—a better world.'

'And what is this extraordinary trait?'

'Filial piety, sir, filial piety! They remembered and spontaneously confirmed the debt of their mother, as soon as, reaching their majority, they could make themselves personally responsible. There were only slight threats made, nothing of any consequence; we were obliged to seize the furniture, the family portraits, almost nothing; all together was not worth a thousand francs; ah, well, they have acknowledged the debt of the thousand francs. It is admirable, sir.'

'And undoubtedly you have the intention,' said George, indignantly, 'of taking advantage of so irregular a document? for the origin of the debt cannot there be indicated.'

'The document is perfectly in order,' said

Monsieur Doucet, with a benign air. 'But allow me to say, there are various ways of arranging the matter, but they have not intimated their desire to accept of any of these ways.'

'First, if they had consented to be a little amiable—ah, well, in that case, one would see. One is more easily disposed to have some regard when he is treated himself with a certain sort of consideration, and it was, perhaps, for their interest—but they are very proud; very proud they are. They bear their poverty like a diadem, sir, like a diadem, I repeat the word.—Upon my word, it is splendid! But then I say: 'My fine young ladies, return me my money, or let me seize you—as in the opera you know.'

And he laughed uproariously.

'Sir,' said George, arising, 'this business possibly may lead you further than you think.'

'Oh! the right still exists; I can arrest them to-morrow. But I am a good man; it is not without reason I am called Doucet, ha! ha!—Excuse me; even in business I love a joke.'

'Our steps will be following you closely,' said George; and if ever—'

'Ah my dear sir, in business, it is never necessary to get vexed. I have the right, or I have not; it is as plain as day, and in assuming this tone, you forget, perhaps, the true interest of your amiable clients. But, much better, do you find me harsh and unmanageable? You do not know Monsieur Doucet? Ask what is thought in this region of Monsieur Doucet.—The whole city of Mantes the pretty will tell you that I am the most affable of men. I am a member of the board of benevolence, and I have been churchwarden; I would have been it again except some obstacles which—'

But that will lead us too far; in fine, I do not make a face at misfortune. And, to return to your young ladies, have we not offered them the means of extricating themselves from this business without untying their purse-strings? One cannot be more accommodating than that. The other day again we were upon the point of terminating; but little—how do you call her?'

'Mademoiselle Jeanne,' replied George—'well?'

'Ah well, she has firmness, that little woman. Ah! if ever she is married—After all she is not bad, and—'

'Proceed, sir,' said George, becoming irritated. 'What were these conciliatory propositions?'

'Ah, you knew that strange pretensions of keeping in reserve a receipt for thirty thousand francs, which Madame Duval pretended was owing to her in return from uncle Doucet, and of which we cannot find, as true as heaven, any trace in his papers, which were, nevertheless, well kept; for he was rather close-fisted, the old man. Did you ever imagine such a reason for dispensing with paying one's debts? And where is your receipt for thirty thousand francs? What has become of it?'

'And we do not know. It is somewhere,' and he imitated a female voice. 'Ah, that is not the way to do business. We say: 'You are very interesting girls; you are engaged in the fine arts.' I love the fine arts very much, sir. I have always regretted that Mantes the pretty does not possess a gallery. Yes, sir, arts, literature, poetry, all act upon my imagination; it is a weakness. Ah! well, say to the amiable Jeanne, who is a flower among flowers—ha! ha! I said it to her again the other day: Talk no more about that, we cannot listen to you. We will each maintain our own part. Acknowledge only that you have received the thirty thousand francs which you claim, without reason, without title, and without the least proof; and we will benevolently desist in the claim of the ten thousand francs, to which we have title duly in order with your two signatures, and we will tear up your receipt, and give you the fragments!'

For myself, sir, I said that from the fullness and liberality of my heart. Ah well, you begin to have a better idea of this poor Monsieur Doucet, of whom they have spoken so badly. If you are a well-advised man, and you can arrange this business. It is a simple misunderstanding.'

'In fact, that is what I charge myself to do,' said George, seriously. 'I know what I wished to know; and you will find me yet in your way before consummating this iniquity.—Adieu, sir.'

'As you please, sir,' replied Doucet, in conducting him to the door. 'But, in business it is never necessary to get vexed,' he cried again from the staircase. 'I bid you adieu in all kindness.'

XXV.—THE PORTRAIT.

George went out in a most excited state of mind. He hastened to return to Paris, and consulted a well-informed lawyer, who promised to take the matter into consideration. He was, nevertheless, slightly re-assured from Mademoiselle Borghese having so well recommended the two friends neither to sign nor promise anything.

One day he was in his chamber, seated sadly

before the pledge which had been brought him from Saint Germain. 'Poor mother,' said he, 'how unhappy you would be, if you could see thus tortured the children whom you have guarded and protected, and who are now without defence. But I promise you, dear mother, to take your place.' And opening his secretary, he again said to himself that he had, in any case, sufficient resources to take the terrible receipt from the hands of the unworthy Doucet, if his lawyer could not immediately furnish the means of disentangling the two sisters from their adversaries.

As he was admiring the angelic sweetness of this pastel, he noticed a strange line, slightly varying from the horizontal, which passed under the eyes, and which seemed to give an entirely different tone to a portion of the face. Having observed more attentively, he concluded that a paper must have slipped behind; and as the effect of the color appeared to be changed by the contrast, he undertook to remedy the difficulty.—It was a very easy thing. Six tacks, with bent heads, held the paste-board behind the frame.

He cautiously turned the tacks, that he might not injure the drawing in the least. And then, a folded paper fell at his feet.

He picked it up with indifference; but, shortly, he perceived upon the envelope a word written in a trembling hand. That word, which produced upon George all the effect which the reader can suppose—that word was: 'Testament.'

His face paled, his heart beat violently.—There, then, was the last words of an aged mother; he it was who had been reserved to convey her last wishes.

He attempted to unfold the paper, which bore no seal; but his courage failed. Leaving all in disorder, he ran to his excellent friend, Mademoiselle Borghese, and pressing her hand with eagerness:

'Read,' said he. 'What is it again?' said Mademoiselle Borghese, 'what troubles you? Do you wish then to make yourself ill? Is it thus that you guard the strength which is necessary to you to defend your friends? Ah, well, it is some stamped paper which has reached you again from Saint Germain. It will not kill one.'

And, in fact, she held up a stamped slip which had fallen from the envelope.

She cast her eyes upon it with surprise. Her expressive features were lighted up with evident satisfaction.

'George,' said she, 'sit down there; recover yourself; hold yourself in readiness to hear good or bad news with the firmness which is becoming to a man of gravity. How do you expect to be responsible for the future of others, if you are not master of yourself? See, I will excuse you from the rest of the sermon; I will resume it after a while. Now compose yourself, and listen to the reading of this little paper, which Providence has sent you. But now, I think of it, how was this precious document found in your hands?'

'Behind the portrait of—our mother,' said he. 'I comprehend all: the poor woman! she sought the surest, the most protected place.—'My children,' she said to herself, 'would lose all; never would they be separated from the portrait of their mother.' And illness and weakness came, and she missed the time, perhaps, to show them the place where her treasure was concealed.'

'Her treasure,' said George, 'what do you say?'

'Listen to me, and, if you have any remarks to make, reserve them till I have finished.'

And she read:

'I, the undersigned, Hercules Doucet, living at Mantes, rue des Pres, No. 13, acknowledge having received from Madame Duval the sum of thirty thousand francs in specie, which sum is intended: First, to pay me the loan of ten thousand francs which I made to her; and, second, to constitute a fund in reserve of twenty thousand francs, which I will pay upon demand, after having received notice three months beforehand; he said sum being found moreover defensible without other notice, in case of the decease of the said Madame Duval, with interest at five per cent. from the day of date.'

'Made at Mantes, December 15, 18—'

'Signed, HERCULES DOUCET.'

'Ah, well, George, my child, God has led us by the hand. What say you to that? We have them in our power, George, and your Doucet and his co-heirs shall pay dear for it.'

How can George's joy and happiness be told? He saw repose and security suddenly enter into the little white house, and he could not subdue his emotion.

'Go,' said he, 'dear Borghese; do not lose a moment. Go and carry them the grand news.'

'And this will,' said Mademoiselle Borghese, 'should we not see what it contains? It is not even closed.'