

THE BEAUTIFUL PRISONER.

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE.

CHAPTER XI.—Continued.

The elder was scarce twenty, the younger was hardly more than a child, and child-like in her manner, but had at the same time the demour of a woman. Her carriage was most dignified, her steps light and graceful. Her dark hair was arranged in braids shaped like a crown, and ornamented with a faded green ribbon; in a similar manner the elder wore her raven black and still more luxuriant hair. This lady, who had only slightly covered her splendid neck with a shawl, looked like one of the muses of old Hellas. It was Thérèse de Fontenay, who has been kept here already five months in a state of uncertainty as to her future, and who, after suffering all the torture of imprisonment, showed herself to all her companions in affliction as the genius of hope and consolation. The other lady, not quite sixteen, was the banker Recamier's wife, who with a third lady had become the room-mates and friends of Thérèse.

"What a bliss!" exclaimed she, raising her blue eyes to the pure azure sky illumed by the rays of the sun. "Oh, Thérèse," added she, drawing her affectionately to her heart, "is this sky not necessary for man? Could we live, could we become conscious of a spiritual connection with Creation, if we did not see this azure sky?"

"Little fool!" scolded Madame de Fontenay smilingly. "Do you not know that there exist also persons that are blind?"

"You are right," replied she with graceful modesty. "There are persons yet more unhappy than we."

"More unhappy? Ah, dear Adelaide—yesterday you said that you were happy, and to-day you complain of your unhappiness?"

"Unhappy or happy, just as you like, dearest Thérèse. I am unhappy in living for months behind these walls, in not seeing a tree, nor a field, nor even a flower—nothing more of God's beautiful nature than this sky, of which those monsters of liberty cannot deprive us! I am happy in having found in this misery you and Josephine, in drawing nourishment from your minds, your hearts, in loving you as your child! Oh, Thérèse, if the gates of this prison should open, and you be left behind—if I were not conducted to death, I would remain here, not to part with you!"

Thérèse Cabarrus kissed the young Madame Recamier and said: "And your poor husband? Would you not long for him?"

"Ah, my husband!" replied she sighing. "I scarce know him. I have been taken from the convent, and as a child, which might yet play with dolls, been married to a very sedate, rich and prosaic man. I came from Lyons to Paris in a carriage as a young wife who was ashamed of being but fourteen, and as a detested royalist have been torn from my husband by these *Sans-culottes* and Jacobins, before I could conceive the happiness of possessing him."

"Is your fate not similar to mine?" asked Thérèse.

"Oh, you," whispered she, clinging to her and gazing lovingly into the eyes of her friend: "you love, and are beloved."

"And do you think, you will not also enjoy this happiness?" replied Thérèse, adding jestingly: "Wait till you become my age, then you will know what love is."

Madame Recamier burst out laughing.

"Eh," whispered she waggishly to the ear of the smiling and listening Madame de Fontenay, "does every one find a Tallien, a grim Pluto who chooses out of the condemned in the lower regions a Proserpine? And how romantic is this not! You are happy by having gained such an experience! Do you not write to each other, as if you had gone for a short time to Italy, or you were the wife of a deputy from the province, who has to live in Paris while she stays at home? My husband never writes any letters to me."

"He is not successful in managing so that his letters reach you," consoled Thérèse. "You know how long it has taken me to persuade Jeanne to be my letter-carrier."

"She has forwarded also my letters, but I have never received any answers. Ah," continued she indignantly, "how long must I yet remain in this detestable prison! What do they want with a child like me?"

"Now you are impatient again. Be content that they do not impeach you. With dread I see every evening the arrival of the police commissioner with the ferocious pike-man, each time imagining that my turn has now come, that I will be called and impeached. My good Tallien has not been able to save me; he is, perhaps, like Danton and Desmoulin, waiting for his death in the ante-room of the guillotine. Ah," muttered she angrily, "if Tallien would only show himself a man, if I could only be with him, he should long since have terminated the tyranny of Robespierre!"

"How should this be possible, my darling? Does he not rule with the mob? And what power is there to-day that he could not oppose?"

"Adelaide," whispered Thérèse, looking cautiously around to see if there was not near her a prisoner suspected of espionage, one of those paid "montons," whose duty it was to denounce the so-called conspiracies in the prison. "A dozen of resolute men in the convention are able to terminate this bloody scandal—you may believe me. The people have become sober from terror and desire to escape Jacobin slavery. If one courageous man would attack Robespierre, the rest would soon follow his example."

"Yes, are they not all condemned to be slaughtered one after the other, as in the cavern of Polyphen?"

"Thus I wrote to Tallien lately. I told him he should die to liberate France from the tigers, as die he must if they continue their bloody work. They will not spare him much longer."

"But Charlotte Corday thought and acted the same. Of what avail has it been? After Marat's death the rule of terror has been more fierce than ever."

"Believe me, things are different to-day. If I played the part of Charlotte Corday against Robespierre, you should see that his fall would also bring down the mad government of the headsmen."

Her eyes flashed as she said these words to Madame Recamier, who anxiously replied:

"Thérèse, for God's sake, let no one hear you—it would be your destruction."

"My destruction? That would mean to be guillotined.—Ah, my little one, who to-day would be afraid of it?"

"Oh, I would! I do not like to die. I wish to live, to be free—how I long to see myself attired again in the finest robes!"

"Say rather, in clean linen," interrupted Thérèse laughingly; she then saluted a group of men and women who had approached her.

"Beautiful Signora," said a very elegantly dressed, elderly gentleman, with the grace of a genuine *co-député*, "you have

The reader will have heard, not without astonishment, the mention of some names of the society in the castle of Montrouil. These persons, in fact, had, within the last few days, changed from pensioners of the count, and members of the new church, into inmates of the Luxembourg prison. Robespierre could no longer protect them, or did not wish to do so, after this sect had been called a gang of conspirators by some members of the convention, ironically alluding to the protection Robespierre gave to the pious mother in Paris, and the converts in Montrouil. As Robespierre did not interfere, most of the noble count's *protégés* were arrested; he alone was yet spared.

Amidst this circle, and other fellow-prisoners, the two youthful ladies were slowly walking up and down the courtyard, chatting, jesting, and laughing, while surrounded by the attentions and gallantries of the gentlemen, who were showing every distinction to Thérèse Cabarrus. Her charm was also exercising its power here, and while all the men of good society endeavoured to pay her their homages, the ladies even acceded willingly to her the foremost place, which she so well deserved through her beauty, her noble spirit, and her energetic, at the same time, true feminine character. With her wit and elastic spirit she understood how to give the conversation an ever new attraction and variety.

"But what keeps Madame de Beauharnais so long?" was again asked by some one, and they all looked round if they did not see her amongst the other prisoners. "Really, it is very strange," said Thérèse, wondering.

"Let us go to our cell," cried Adelaide, "there we shall find her, and hear from her why she, to-day, delays so long joining us."

"Yes, yes, bring her here," was the general request. "We are longing for her."

Cheerfully, arm in arm, the two ladies hastened to the building, and when they reached the corridor, from which the small room occupied by the three ladies opened, they met Jeanne with broom and pail.

"Hush," cried the girl who was cleaning the corridors, raising her finger in a warning manner.

Thérèse, concluding that Jeanne had to make her a communication, sprung towards her.

"What have you received for me, Jeanne? Letters?"

"Two," replied she in a low voice, and after ascertaining that she was not watched, produced from her dress-pocket two sealed letters.

The Spaniard's eyes gleamed with joy when she received these letters, which she hurriedly concealed in her bosom, and heartily thanking the girl, hastened to Adelaide, who stood already at the door of their cell.

When they had pushed open the door, which, to their surprise, stood ajar, while according to regulations it should have been wide open for the purpose of airing the room, they were greatly astonished and alarmed at seeing a slender woman of about the age of thirty, kneeling on the floor, her head resting on the bed, her face covered with both her hands.

"My God!" cried Madame Recamier, rushing towards the kneeling figure. "What has happened?"

"Josephine!" called Thérèse, while trying to raise her head. She was sobbing. She seemed to labour under a great affliction.

Thérèse observed a letter, wet with tears, lying beside her, and felt that it contained the tidings causing this misery.

Conscious of the condition she enjoyed, she seized the letter, and Adelaide, leaning her face against her friends', both manfully read the fatal contents, without being able to restrain their tears gushing forth as soon as they had read the first line. The letter ran thus:

"A few minutes more are granted me, which I will devote to affection and lamentation, then I must resign myself to the great thought of immortality! When you receive these lines, dearest beloved, your husband will be enjoying his true existence in the kingdom of God. I have taken care that a portion of my hair has been taken off to be given to my Josephine and my children, as a testimony of my love. I feel that in thinking of them, my heart is breaking. Fare-well to you all whom I so dearly love. Do not cease loving me, and speaking of me, and do never forget that the honour of dying as a martyr to liberty glorifies the scaffold."

General de Beauharnais was dead! For some minutes nothing but the sobbing of the three ladies was heard in the cell.

"Josephine," said Thérèse at last, trying to console her distressed companion, "do not lose courage, dear friend. Your husband has been destined to die for the glory of France. It could not be on the field of battle—nevertheless he has fallen as a hero."

The general's widow lifted her head, and seizing the hand of Thérèse, raised herself up. She proffered the other hand to the weeping Adelaide. For a long time she could not speak, the tears streaming down her cheeks. Though she was not exactly a beauty, the dignity, amiability, and grace she possessed adorned her also in her affliction.

"Dead!" said she, giving vent to her feelings, while her bosom convulsively heaved, and her features bore traces of heart-felt sorrow. "Dead! Thus France pays the services of a noble warrior. Thus they drag to the scaffold those who in times past received the wreath of laurels. Oh Beauharnais! sobbed she again. "Now you are dead—your wife is widowed, and your children orphans. What will become of us?"

"Confide in God," said Adelaide Recamier. "In God?" repeated she with bitterness. "That would be blaspheming God."



Prisoners in the Luxembourg.

come only with one of your sisters. Ah, why is the picture of the three graces incomplete?"

"Yes, madame," added a lady, very condescendingly, nodding her head, "where is Madame de Beauharnais?"

"It is not my fault that she is not here," replied Thérèse. "Countess Chauveux may believe that I painfully miss at my side the third companion of my prison."

"Is she sick?" asked the countess anxiously. "Or is she free? Perhaps she has escaped?"

"Ah, Baron Breugnolles!" said Thérèse. "How can you suppose that she is free. They do not liberate any of us. No, Madame de Beauharnais received a letter from the jailer when he opened our cell, and we did not like to wait so long for fresh air until she had read it. She will be here immediately."

"How? A letter?" asked another younger lady. "I thought that to forward letters hither was strictly prohibited."

"Yes, Madame de l'Espinasse," remarked Adelaide in an important manner: "it would be regarded as a capital crime."

"And still you say that the jailer himself . . ."

"It proves, count," explained Thérèse, "that it is an official letter, sent by special permission of the tribunal."

"This is a bad sign."

"I am afraid it is, Madame de l'Espinasse."