

old French gentleman who had come to visit his parents when he was a boy; he recollected how he sat unnoticed in a corner, drinking in every word this old man said about the "Chateau de L'Isle," his father's rightful inheritance; and the rich estates that belonged to it, which it now flashed upon him had been mentioned as lying in precisely the "Department" of France in which he at present was. Some dim confused reminiscence too he had of a relative of their name and blood who had usurped his father's place, and of the bitter scorn with which Mr. Lisle spoke of him. Bertrand had been but a child when he overheard this conversation, and though it excited him greatly at the time, it had gradually passed from his mind, but now the sight of the name seemed to have struck the key note which revived the whole in his memory, and he sat there pondering over his recollections with the keenest interest and excitement, for many more minutes than he was aware of. He could not doubt that by a strange Providence he had been actually led almost to the gate of his old home, and under the strong influence of the religious feelings which had so lately been enacted in his mind, he could not but feel that he must have been brought there for some special purpose. He had not the smallest idea to whom the chateau now belonged, or whom the relative had been whom his father had so vehemently repudiated, but it did not take him long to make up his mind that he would seek a shelter that night in the ancient abode of his ancestors and nowhere else.

The resolution was no sooner formed than he put it in execution; he turned his weary horse into a side-path, and went on for nearly a mile through a wood with occasional glimpses of an open country lying beyond, till he saw before him a high wall, enclosing what was evidently an extensive park, shaded by very fine old trees. It was evidently a private residence, for it was entered by a huge iron gate with a quaint little lodge set on one side of it, and two fierce looking stone griffins guarding it from pillars to the right and left. Bertrand felt, as if by intuition, that he was at the gate of his rightful home, and dismounting he led his horse up to it, and pulled a massive iron bell-handle which hung at one side; it seemed rusty from age and the sound it woke was harsh and loud, echoing down among the old trees with a discordant peal.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

As the sound of the bell died away among the trees, an old woman came out from the lodge and reconnoitred Bertrand for a few minutes through the bars of the gate without making the slightest movement to let him in; when he spoke to her she shook her head and pointed to her ears as an intimation that she was deaf; finally she turned round and went off in what he supposed to be the direction of the house, and he concluded that she had gone to call some one else. In this he proved to be correct, as it was not long before a man-servant, in old-fashioned livery, came down the avenue towards him; he was a thin elderly man, with a somewhat haggard worn-out look, and he too came and peered at Bertrand through the iron bars before attempting to let him in. It was quite dark by this time, and in the gathering shadows he seemed only able to distinguish that it was a soldier who stood there with the bridle of his horse hanging over his left arm, for he said in a suspicious tone, "Is it a Prussian?"

"A Prussian! no indeed," exclaimed Bertrand; "I am a French officer, a friend. I am travelling to Paris on a mission from the army, but my horse is

exhausted and I am disabled, and I have come to ask for a night's shelter in the chateau; I suppose you have shown hospitality to our troops before now?"

"Doubtless; I will go and ask my master."

"Your master is the Comte de L'Isle, is he not?" said Bertrand at a venture, devoured by anxiety as he was to ascertain whether any of his father's family still held possession of the old home.

"Certainly," answered the man; "and, monsieur, by what name shall I announce you to my master?"

"Say that I am Bertrand de L'Isle, his relative," he replied; and it seemed to him as if a voice within him that was not his own had given the answer.

Its effect upon the servant was very startling; he uttered a great cry, flung his arms above his head, and turning round, without another word, fled up the avenue as fast as his somewhat attenuated limbs could carry him. Anxious as he was, Bertrand could hardly help smiling at the absurd position in which he was placed; but he felt convinced from the man's manner that he meant to come back, and he was not mistaken. In the course of a very few minutes he reappeared, hurrying to the gate as quickly as he could. Hastily he unlocked it, flinging back its ponderous weight with some difficulty as it swung round on its creaking hinges, while with a very low bow, he advanced to Bertrand, and took the horse's bridle from his hand.

"Enter, sir," he said. "It is Providence which has conducted you here. Monsieur Le Comte awaits you with impatience. Permit me to follow you with the horse; the avenue leads straight to the chateau; you cannot mistake it."

Bertrand merely bent his head and walked on in silence between the two rows of magnificent old trees that lined either side of the way. He felt like a man in a dream. He was treading the soil that had owned the lordship of his ancestors for centuries back; he was about to enter the home of his fathers, to meet one linked to him in name and blood—by what relationship he knew not, whose very existence had been unknown to him half an hour before. How and why had he been led to this one spot on all the fair face of France with which he had any connection? Certainly the old servant must be right, and Providence had brought him hither for some purpose yet unknown.

So he paced on silently along the sombre avenue, with the trees meeting nearly over his head, and at last the glimmer of lights began to appear through the branches, and soon he emerged into an open space, where there was a wide sweep of sufficient extent to allow a carriage and four to turn round it, while before him, showing black against the clear evening sky, rose the outlines of a huge old house, with the battlements and turrets which distinguished it as one of the feudal chateaux of former times.

There were lights in many of the windows, and as the clatter of the horse's hoofs were heard on the gravel, the great front door was thrown open, casting a blaze of light on a fountain surrounded by uncouth statues which stood in the centre of the sweep, while two or three servants, bearing torches, hurried down the steps to receive the visitor. One of them took the horse from the butler, another relieved Bertrand of his military cloak and knapsack, and a third led the way into the house; but the old man who had met him at the gate pushed past the men, and waving them all aside he gravely beckoned to Bertrand to follow him. He

moved on before him through the vast hall which was paved with stone of different tints harmoniously arranged, and lined with suits of armour, and banners hanging from the walls with all the colour faded out of them by age.

The servant opened a door to the right of this hall, and standing back signed to Bertrand to pass in. He did so, and found himself in a long lofty room, the floor and ceiling of which were of dark polished oak, the walls almost hidden by well-preserved tapestry, clearly of ancient date; there was a wide open hearth of stone, on which, summer though it still was, some logs of wood were blazing brightly. A table in the centre of the room supported several tall wax candles, but the space they had to illuminate was so vast that they cast but a limited circle of light around them.

Within that circle however sat the only occupant of the room, in a huge easy-chair drawn close to the flaming logs. He was an old man, with thin white hair falling on his shoulders from under a black velvet skull-cap, and a haggard worn face, almost livid in its deadly paleness. He had evidently been originally a man of small stature, but illness or sorrow had reduced him almost to a skeleton, and it was plain from the manner in which his shrunken limbs were swathed in wrappings and supported by cushions that he had completely lost the use of them. The upper part of his body alone seemed alive, and his small piercing eyes especially seemed to glow with a lurid light from under his sharply defined eyebrows. There was an expression of restless misery on his countenance which it was painful to witness, and he was now gazing towards the door with an eagerness which had something almost wild in its intensity.

"Monsieur le Comte," said the servant, in a low voice, to Bertrand; and then drawing back, he closed the door, and left him alone with his host. As the newcomer advanced towards the invalid, who was utterly incapable of rising to meet him, his face assumed an expression of mingled terror and longing anxiety; his lips parted breathlessly, his eyes wide open and staring, fastened on Bertrand's countenance, till, when he was within a few steps of his chair he stretched out his thin shrunken hands, and said, with the pure French accent of the old school, which recalled to the young man the tones of his dead father's voice, "Louis de L'Isle! God has heard my prayer! It is—it must be Louis!"

"No, not Louis, alas!" said Bertrand. "Louis de L'Isle was my father, and he is dead."

The old man fell back in his chair with a look of the deepest despondency and disappointment. "If you are his true and legal representative, I may yet, so far as this world is concerned at least redeem the past. Young man, who are you?"

"Bertrand de L'Isle, the only child of Louis de L'Isle and Caroline (nee Vernon) his wife."

"Louis de L'Isle and Caroline Vernon! yes, notice of their marriage was sent to be entered in the archives of the family, and an intimation of the birth also of his son; but from that day to this no tidings of him have ever reached this place. For more than twenty years I sought none, but rather strove to lose all trace of him, and succeeded but too well. For the last five years I have sought him with anguish; but God has been merciful at the last. He has not suffered me to perish altogether in despair. He has sent you here, Louis' only son, and the true legitimate heir of our house; and I recognize the purpose for which you have been brought to me.