

"THAT LITTLE FRENCHMAN."

CHAPTER III.

A TROUBLOUS TIME.

"I—prisoner! Nonsense—absurd!" exclaimed Rivière, turning pale as ashes. "Sir Richard, this is some mistake—will you explain? You, mon ami," he cried to the officer—"you have mistaken me for some one else."

"Louis Rivière, gentleman, Rue d'Auvergne, numero vingt," said the officer, coldly, reading from a paper in his hand.

"But for what? Good Heavens! They suspect me of the attempt. Mon Dieu—my poor Marie!"

At a sign from their leader, a couple of gendarmes placed themselves one on either side of the agonised man, who darted from them to Sir Richard's side, exclaiming, hoarsely—

"This is a mistake; but I know not how it will end. You are a man—you have your wife. Think of my feelings—my pauvre Marie. Will you—will Mladzi Lawler go to her, say a few words of comfort—watch over her till I am again at liberty?"

"Indeed, we'll do all we can. Yes, yes—of course," cried Lady Lawler, excitedly; for she had entered, and heard the latter part of Rivière's appeal.

The next moment the little Frenchman was bending over the soft, white hand extended to him, to leave upon it a tear; there was the clanking noise of sabres on the floor, the door closed and the sounds died away as Lady Lawler sank weeping into a chair; while her husband stood silent and moody, as he passed in review the events of the past two days.

"I think it is time we left Paris," he said at last, gruffly. "Nice mess we've made of it!"

"What! and leave these poor people, who played the Samaritan to you, in the midst of trouble? Richard, I'm ashamed of you!" exclaimed Lady Lawler, impatiently. "I really don't think I should have married you if I had known that you could be so mean and shabby. I do hope Oh will not grow up like you. You can leave, though, when you please."

"I go?" said Sir Richard, staring.

"Yes, you can go. And you had better ask papa to come over and take care of me, while I see to your friends, whom you want to leave in the lurch."

"My friends—lurch!"

"Yes; your friends and mine, Dick. I am ashamed of you, that I am. But do you think I can't see through it all—you greatly silly fellow? You're jealous. And all because that nice little lovable Frenchman was polite, according to his nature. There, don't touch me! I haven't patience with you."

"But, Addy," pleaded Sir Richard.

"Don't Addy me, sir. Only think! To treat me like this—and so soon! What will it be at the end of—"

There were very strong evidences here of hysterics, and tears were already flowing abundantly. But vows, promises, and offers to do everything the lady wished had their due effect, and at last there was peace in the handsome suite of rooms occupied by Sir Richard Lawler and his lady; while, in a fever of excitement, Louis Rivière impatiently paced the stone floor of his allotted cell.

Truth to tell, Sir Richard Lawler felt but little gratitude towards the man who had been arrested in his apartments; but, urged thereto by his lady, he used every effort to procure Rivière's release, while Lady Lawler called again and again on the prisoner's wife; but only to receive rebuff after rebuff. Marie Rivière mistrusted her motives, and received her advances with unmistakable coldness.

But all Sir Richard's efforts were vain. Rivière had been denounced as one of the plotters against the King's life; and, in company with two more, was condemned to a long term of imprisonment; while three others were sentenced to death. The three former were considered to be the least culpable; hence their escape from the terrible penalty.

Sir Richard had a couple of interviews with Rivière, when, in a blunt, half-sympathizing manner, he explained how Madame Rivière had declined all offers of assistance, preferring apparently to trust to Monsieur Lemaire; and ended by saying that they departed shortly for their home in London, where he, Sir Richard, would at any future time be glad to see M. Rivière if he would give him a call, and to that effect he gave the prisoner a card.

Rivière smiled as the door closed, and thought bitterly of the future, and of the improbability of his ever seeing the pompous, weak baronet again. Then he thought of his wife's position, and of her behavior to Lady Lawler; and then he sat down upon his iron bedstead, to bury his face in his hands, and wonder whether those poor wretches whose heads had fallen by the guillotine's knife could suffer more than he did as day after day and week after week crept on in the customary prison routine.

The thoughts of his wife at times almost maddened him, as he recalled the past, and then thought of how, to all intents and purposes, he was condemned to death; for he was buried in these prison walls, cut off from all communication with the outer world. To those outside—wife, relations, all—he was dead, passed away from the busy world of life. And Marie? Well—why should she not?—she might marry again.

When he had been allowed he had written; and during the interviews permitted while his

trial had been in progress, he had given all the instruction he could to his wife; and then he had given way to the despair that oppressed him, sleeping or waking.

Months passed, and he was still in France, moved from prison to prison, and wondering whether one of the distant colonies was to be his home, when there came a change, and he was placed in a larger cell, with a companion, to pass a further term of this death in life—with one of those who had been implicated in the deed which had been the cause of his own arrest.

CHAPTER IV.

A REVELATION.

Twelve feet by twelve, fair measure. Four steps forward—the stone wall—turn; four steps backward—the wall—turn. Four steps forward, four steps backward—hour after hour, day after day, week after week; till the thought would come upon the prisoner that his acts were like those of a wild beast in his cage, when he would throw himself upon his rough bed, and lie and glare at his fellow-prisoner, seated where the light streamed in through the window bars, bony-fingered, and plaiting straw.

A contraction of the facial muscles, as Rivière thought of his own once busy fingers—fingers which he felt that he could only employ now in one way, in tearing at his prison walls; a contortion of the body; and then he would jerk himself round, so that he lay trying to pierce with his eyes the massive stones of his cell—mentally seeing the bright sunshine, the green trees, his own peaceful home, the face of his wife. And then would come clouds over the sunshine—the explosion, the arrest, the trial; and his thoughts would grow so agonizing that he would strive to lull them with fatigue, by leaping up, and once more pacing, like some imprisoned animal, up and down the length of his cell.

"Tonnerre!" he one day exclaimed, angrily snatching the plaited straw from his fellow-prisoner's hand, "you can be at rest in your guilt, while I—"

He checked himself; for in an instant he saw the pettiness of his anger, as his companion's face was turned gently towards him, his hands raised deprecatingly, and a smile that would have disarmed the fiercest wrath met his own angry glare.

Rivière was conquered; and, slowly crossing the cell, he picked up the straw plait, returned it to his fellow-prisoner, and then once more threw himself upon his pallet.

But not for long. Lethargic and active, goaded by the recollection of his position, he again sprang from the bed, his breast heaving as if for air; and then, with a bound, he leaped up at the window, clasped the bars with his fingers, and by sheer muscular force drew himself up so as to gaze out at a dreary blank wall.

Then came the sound of a heavy pace outside, a few muttered words, an angry reply from the prisoner, a blow or two from the butt-end of a musket, and, with bruised and bleeding fingers, Rivière fell back into his cell, to stand shaking impatiently a throbbing hand at the blank wall, and hiss at the aggressor the one word "Dog!"

"How long will it take us to go quite mad?" he exclaimed, after once more striding up and down. "I am half mad now; but I mean quite, so as to be beyond the reach of thought and the recollection of the bygone."

There was no reply from the straw plaiter, and another interval of pacing up and down ensued, when Rivière paused before his patient companion.

"Look here, silent Pierre," he cried, and the young man's pale face was turned up towards him, though the busy fingers still twisted straw after straw into its appointed place—"look here. I thought to find rest with a comrade; but you only madden me. You know that I was not in the plot. I told you when I was brought in."

"Yes, I declared it at the trial."

"I have told you a hundred times, have I not, that I was standing in the crowd with my friend?"

"With your friend," assented Pierre.

"Yes, with Lemaire."

"With whom?" said the other.

"With my friend, Etienne Lemaire, chirurgien—have I not told you his name a hundred times?"

"No; you never mentioned it till now."

"Wait, and I will tell you. I was standing to see the King pass, when there was the explosion, and I was borne away in the crowd with the English milladi."

"But you were denounced, Rivière."

"Yes, I was denounced," said the other, bitterly, "by some Government spy."

"You were denounced by Etienne Lemaire."

"What?"

There was a minute's pause, during which Rivière glared at his companion.

"You were denounced by Etienne Lemaire."

"I said how long did it take to make men quite mad, Pierre," said Rivière, with a ghastly face, as he came nearer. "I know now: just as long as you have been in prison; for you are mad to declare such a thing. Do I not tell you that Lemaire was my friend?"

"He may have had some motive."

"Motive? How could he have? He was my friend, and I lent money—ample—thousands of francs. He lived often at my table. He attended my wife when she was ill."

"Your wife? She was very handsome, was she not?"

"Was?—she is! Un ange—and she is left to despair—to—Oh! mon Dieu."

Rivière groaned as if stricken by a sudden blow; the veins in his forehead swelled, his mouth twitched, and he glared at his companion as if he would have sprung at him. Then, by an effort, he recovered himself, saying with a grim smile—

"I am better now. It was a foolish thought—an inspiration from the tempter—evil promptings from the father of lies. But, tchut! Do not name my wife again. The name of this hideous cage contaminates her name."

He walked up and down again for a few minutes before pausing once more in front of the straw-plaiter, and taking hold of his work—

"Why do you do this?" he said.

"Why do I do it? Why have men carved the stones of these prison walls, written upon their linen with a fish-bone pen? For rest and forgetfulness. It is something to do—something to kill thought—something to achieve. Try it—you."

"Fish!" exclaimed Rivière, fretfully.

And again he paced the cell; but only to stop once more, and gaze in his companion's face as if he expected him to speak.

"It was bad for you—that workshop of yours," said Pierre. "They said at the trial it was full of deadly mechanism."

"Yes, yes—the fools, the idiots. Lathe, tools, chemicals—my amusements from a boy. They seized and destroyed them all, saying that each innocent machine—upon which I had lavished years of thought and toil—was a diabolical construction. But you, you—you were in the plot!"

"Yes," said Pierre, slowly, "I was in the plot. I was dragged into it. I could not help myself."

"And I suffer—she suffers. We are called upon to bear the punishment of your crimes. Fiend—dog!"

"Help—help!" screamed the younger prisoner, faintly; but his voice sounded half stifled, for Rivière had seized him by the throat, and borne him back against the wall.

The struggle was but short, for the cries brought in the gaoler and a couple of sentries, one of whom sent Rivière staggering back with a heavy blow from the butt end of his musket; and the next minute they dragged him across the cell to his bed, threw him on it, and secured him there with straps.

"Don't hurt him," pleaded the younger man; "it was all my fault—I angered him. He will be still if you set him free. We are friends now, Rivière, are we not?"

The latter nodded sullenly; and after a few moments' consideration, the gaoler leant over him, and cast loose the straps, grumbling loudly the while, as he snatched and pulled at the buckles, causing the prisoner acute pain. Then, muttering threats of what he should report, he slowly left the cell with the sentries, and the prisoners were once more alone.

"Why did you not let them punish me?" hissed Rivière.

"Because you were only mad for the time, and I did not wish to be here alone," said Pierre. "Together, it is more bearable."

"Yes, I am a madman—a wild beast," exclaimed Rivière. "My thoughts seem to be all barbed points, and goad me into fury. You will forgive me, though, Pierre. You could not withhold your pardon if you knew all I suffered. Will you take my hand?"

He held it out, and it was taken frankly.

"Yes, yes, I forgive you," said Pierre; and then, with a sigh, he returned to his straw-plaiting, while Rivière resumed his hurried walk backward and forward.

After a while he paused once more before the straw-plaiter.

"Tell me," said he, "how many days since the trial?"

The young man drew from his pocket a small bag, out of which he took five round pieces of bone, and a number of short scraps of straw.

"I cannot recollect without these," he said, counting them over. "See, here are five bones, each stands for fifty; forty-five straws." Two hundred and ninety-five days.

"Mon Dieu!" ejaculated Rivière, dashing his hands to his forehead. "Two hundred and ninety-five days and nights of agony! But it cannot last—it cannot last."

"You must work," said Pierre. "It is the only rest."

Rivière seemed not to hear him; but paced the cell in the same restless, wolfish way till he stopped suddenly before his busy-fingered companion.

"Look here, look here!" he cried gesticulating fiercely. "I know what you think. You would have it that my friend had designs of his own—that he wished me away; but, pah! I laugh at all such folly. It is not true. I drive such thoughts away as you would so many scraps of your straw."

He sat down upon the edge of his bed, with a scornful laugh curling his lips, and remained there, buried in thought, until the last ruddy light of evening had faded from the cell—till the heavy, echoing sound of steps was heard in the stone passage. Then bolts were drawn with a heavy clang, and a gaoler, guarded by two soldiers, whose muskets gleamed in the light they carried, thrust in a black loaf of sour bread and some water. The door was then banged to and bolted, and, after the echoing footsteps had died away, all was silent.

The food was taken by Pierre, who placed his straw-plaiting aside with a sigh, ere he broke the bread, and passed one-half of it across to Rivière, who heeded him not.

After awhile, Pierre took the great water jug, and raised it to his lips; but recollecting him-

self, he, with all a Frenchman's politeness, lowered the vessel without tasting the contents.

"Drink, mon ami," he said, passing it to Rivière; but the latter motioned him away, and muttering something about fatigue, threw himself back upon his pallet, and turned his face to the wall.

Pierre sat munching his bread slowly, with his face turned towards the shadowy corner where his fellow prisoner lay. He ate slowly, moistening his poor fare again and again, with water from the jug—the light growing fainter and more faint. At times he softly shook his head and muttered a few words—then, too, he would sigh; but, none the less, he applied himself diligently to his repeat, picking the crumbs delicately, pausing over choice scraps of crust—for it was his dinner, and, meagre as was the food, it was eaten with a relish to the last crumb.

Darkness at last, and then Pierre turned to his couch.

"Bonsoir, mon ami," he said.

There was no reply. Rivière seemed to be sleeping heavily, and soon the occasional tramp tramp of the sentry outside was all that broke the stillness of the night.

CHAPTER V.

THE SWORD WEARS THE SCABBARD.

It must have been about midnight that Rivière rose from his couch. No sooner had Pierre's lightly drawn and regular breathing told that he slept, than his fellow-captive had softly raised himself, to sit with his head leaning against the stone wall. The big drops of sweat—begotten by the agony of his spirit—stood upon his forehead. His countenance was drawn and ghastly, and he drew his breath from time to time with a sharp, cutting sob.

It was his hour for going over the past, and he was reviewing once more the scene of the attempted assassination of the King, the dénouement, and the long tedious trial. But soon came other thoughts, such as made his eyes grow hot and seem to burn him; for to his old recollections was added the fruitage of the suggestion uttered by Pierre.

That was a bitter seed, and it had fallen in ground long prepared for its reception. It burst its envelope, shot forth, and grew hugely, as its recipient ran over in his mind the motives that might have moved his friend and wife.

Let him see! Why, yes, his friend's evidence must have been all false and villainous—that of his wife simple and truthful. For what had she said? To be sure—yes—that her husband was mechanical, spending many hours in his little atelier performing experiments.

Oh, damning evidence!—all serving to prove him guilty before those who sought for the makers of that infernal machine whose mission was to destroy the life of the King, and which had, in Rivière's presence, been hurled at the passing carriage.

And now it was midnight; and barefooted the prisoner paced his cell, maddened almost by the rush of thought. At times he paused, feeling ready to dash his head against the cruel walls which closed him in; and a bitter smile crossed his lip as he thought of their impotence if he liked to set himself free.

Then he started, for a hand was laid upon his arm.

"Of what are you thinking?"

"Of death!"

Question and answer seemed to fall heavily upon the ears of the speakers, and Pierre shivered as he held fast by his companion's arm.

"It will come but too soon," he said at length.

"Let us wait, and first see those we love."

He led Rivière towards the straw bed; and then, seeing him throw himself wearily upon it, he stood gazing at the indistinct form.

"You would not be so mad," he said.

But there was no response; and after a time he turned, cold and shuddering, to his own couch.

"I will watch him," he said to himself; and he supported himself upon his arm, gazing intently in the direction of his fellow-prisoner's bed, and trying to pierce the darkness. Now he almost succeeded in defining the figure upon the straw pallet; but soon it seemed to fade away gradually into obscurity, and then again to loom up large and ominous.

Suppose he should attempt his life! How horrible to be present, shut up there till morning! Tchut! it was absurd. Over-excitement—and—no, not morning yet. He would watch, through—and—

Pierre was sleeping soundly, in spite of dread and trouble; and Rivière was again seated upon his bed's edge, sleepless, and wandering in a maze of doubt, chasing two phantoms—those of his fair young wife, and the friend so trusted and aided by his purse.

Doubt? He had not had a single suspicion till now. But now! Caged here, and Marie exposed to the machinations of a villain—it was horrible! But was she innocent?

A thousand simple acts now grew distorted, and clothed in a garb of suspicion. Wild thoughts assailed his brain, and clenching his hands, and glaring with bloodshot eyes into the darkness, he sat panting, gasping for breath.

He threw himself upon the pallet and closed his eyes, but no sleep came. Thoughts still pressed upon him in a confused crowd. But towards morning came a fitful slumber, during which wild dreams chased one another through his brain. He was free. His wife was smiling upon him, and he was pressing forward to clasp her to his breast; when Lemaire dashed him to the