

The Poisoners.

(Cornhill Magazine.)

The Grea which had wrapped the Placo de Greve in a crimson mantle and sent Lavoinin and Lavigroux to their last account had been burned out for many days. Not even the ashes were left to tell the tale of the awful end of those two old nags whose poison vials had put to sleep so many scores of innocent husbands, unloved wives and pestering mistresses. But if the stake was now cool and inert, waiting silently and patiently for new victims to devour, Paris had not forgotten the sensational story of those poison sellers. Had not their customs included some of the greatest in the land? Did not their trial bring to light in all its sickly terror the whole hideousness of this poisoning mania that was rampant throughout the length and breadth of fair France?

And as though to keep the horror fresher in the public mind, Mlle. Morelle had caused them to be placed in a play, "La Devineresse," the joint work of Thomas Cornelle and Devise. Already, for three nights the theatre in the Rue Mazarine had been crowded to excess to see this play. The well-timed idea of Morelle's widow was raining lives into the treasury with a merry jingle that made the Comedians du Rue de la Harpe and her enterprise and wisdom in unimpaired terms. On the third night of the production the King had come with the president of the Chambre Ardente in his train— that same Chambre Ardente which His Majesty had endowed with such extraordinary powers for the detection and punishment of those guilty of the practice of slow poisoning.

"I like the play," Louis XIV. graciously avowed to Mlle. Morelle in the course of the evening. "And who knows but what it may do something to stay this ghoulie mania which seems to run riot among my people?"

"Or it may wipe out the Troupes Royales," murmured the Councilor of State, who hated the players and envied the favors the King showered upon them. "These poisoners, as I know full well, are revengeful fiends, and they will not like your play, madame."

The King looked displeased at this remark. Louis was in mortal fear of himself being a victim of the mania. At the English Court it was a favorite joke that the King of France would not eat fish because it was poison.

"Perhaps, then, we ourselves are in danger of their revenge for daring to punish them," he cried. "You frighten madame, monsieur, and do yourself no credit by raising such fears."

M. le President went a trifle pale, and paler still as Louis promptly turned his back upon him. But Mlle. Morelle's nature was too light and frivolous to be impressed by the gloomy forebodings of the Councilor, and she returned to her dressing-room so mightily pleased with the King's kindness that she speedily forgot all about them.

The next evening she walked from her house to the theatre late and alone. The night was dark, but fine, and the air braced and freshened her. At the threshold of the theatre, as she reached out to open the private door leading to the stage, a man suddenly stepped out of the shadow and thrust a note into her hand.

"Mlle. Morelle," he said, and made to hurry away, but the tilt of his sword caught in her cloak, and as some one within flung open the door the light fell for an instant full on his face. A pale, repulsive face, with a deep scar on the left cheek—that was how it struck her as he hastily snatched himself free and disappeared into the night.

In her dressing-room she opened the letter and read—

"If 'La Devineresse' be played for two more nights Lavoinin will be re-vengeed. There are those who will see that her name is no longer reviled. The King burnt her at the stake, and now you place her on the stage to withstand the Grea of the mob's derision. Beware! This is no light warning. In two nights you must have a new play, Mlle. Morelle, or—"

The actress blanched a moment, and convulsively grasped the arm of her chair; then she shrugged her shoulders and laughed lightly and scornfully.

"Freyinet," she said a little later, after scribbling a note and inclosing with it the threatening missive, "take this at once, Freyinet, to the Chambre Ardente."

As the door closed upon the departing messenger a sigh of relief escaped her, and she proceeded to make the toilet her part demanded.

"Yes, madame." "I will see him at once, certainly." A moment later a tall, lean man, attired neatly in the soberest of colours, stepped into the room. He bowed and waited until the servant had retired. Mlle. Morelle spoke first.

"You have come from the Chambre Ardente, about the letter I sent?" "I have, madame." "Am I being played with, think you, or is it a grave matter, M. Dupin?" He smiled somewhat sarcastically.

"There is no hoax about it, I can assure you. It is meant earnestly enough; of that there can be no doubt. But how the revenge will be attempted we know not. It may be that a servant will be bribed to drop some deadly cordial into your food, or that a letter steeped in some powerful poison—a poison that will permeate the pores of your skin upon the instant touch—will be sent you; or, again, it may be that open and violent outrage will be attempted. Ah, you shudder, madame, but you know not of the horrors which are taking place day by day around us. The Chambre Ardente knows this mania is spreading daily. No one is safe from brutal attack. Death is lingering at our elbows all day long and in the most silent watches of the night."

He grew impassioned as he spoke, and his eyes were and anon glistened with excitement. But suddenly he controlled himself, and was cool and inscrutable as a smiling again.

"You terrify me—oh, you terrify me!" the actress exclaimed, putting her hands to her eyes as if to shut out the frightful vision his words had conjured up.

"Pardon, madame, but I only wish to show you your danger, and to impress upon you the necessity to be watchful. However, I think you need have little or no fear. The Chambre Ardente has its hands upon your enemies, I believe, at this very moment."

She gave a little cry of delight. "Of course," he went on, "the safest course to adopt would be to stop the play at once. Will you do that?" "No, I will not do that," she replied, slowly. "It is too great a success."

"Could you, then, identify the man who gave you the letter?" "Yes—oh, yes; I can see his face, his horrible face, now!" "Well, then, you must help us in this way. After the play to-night go to the Placo de Greve. You will be met there by one of our agents, who will conduct you to one of our secret houses in the Rue de Sainte-Croix. There we have several men under arrest, and you must see them. Had the man a scar under the left eye?" "Yes, yes—a deep scar. I remember that distinctly."

so peaceful and beautiful in the delicate light, she espied a figure approaching her. "Mlle. Morelle?" he queried, in a deep, low voice when he came near. She nodded her head.

"Follow me," he added. They traversed a labyrinth of streets, and no further word was spoken until a quarter of an hour afterward, the man rapped gently at a house door in a queer little side street.

"This is the Rue de Sainte-Croix," he murmured. The door was instantly opened. "Enter," he said, and madame went in, with her attendant at her heels. The passage was pitch dark. She stood still, affrighted.

"Where am I?" she cried. "This way—this way." "All rich," said a voice.

"Oh, is that you, M. Dupin?" "Yes, 'tis I, madame." "Thank heaven! I began to fear that I had been entrapped."

A hand took hers in the darkness and conducted her several yards. Then a door was opened and they entered a dimly lighted room, half laboratory, half library.

"Pray be seated, madame," said Dupin, genially. "I think I've settled this affair." "The Chambre Ardente knows what it is about. Ha, ha, ha! I should think so! Have some wine first, madame, before you look on the scared, ugly faces of the rogues I have managed here. Besides, you must be exhausted after your walk, and possibly frightened, eh?"

He laughed pleasantly as he poured her out some wine. It struck her what a courtly, affable man he was. "Drink," he said.

She emptied the goblet at a draught, for in truth her nerves were all in a quiver, and replacing it on the table looked round at her host and laughed back at him with a well-natured confidence and gaiety. But as her glance fell upon him her laughter ceased. She gazed at him first in wonderment, and then aghast. M. Dupin was glaring at her fiercely.



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