

# THE PRIZE STORY.

NO. 18.

One lady or gentlemen's Solid Gold Watch, valued at about \$75, is offered every week as a prize for the best story, original or selected, sent to us by competitors under the following conditions:—1st. The story need not be the work of the sender, but may be selected from any newspaper, magazine, book or pamphlet wherever found, and may be either written or printed matter, as long as it is legible. 2nd. The sender must become a subscriber for *Truth* for at least one month, and must, therefore, send one dollar along with the story, together with the name and address clearly given. Present subscribers will have their term extended for the dollar sent. If two persons happen to send in the same story the first one received at *Truth* office will have the preference. The publisher reserves the right to publish at any time any story, original or selected, which may fall to obtain a prize. The sum of three dollars (\$3) will be paid for each story when used. Address—Editor's Paris Room, "Truth" Office, Toronto, Canada.

The following attractive and well written story has been chosen as our prize story for the present week. The sender can obtain the Watch offered as the prize, by forwarding twenty-five cents for postage and registration.

## THE TWO STRANGERS.

A STORY OF MARSEILLES.

SENT BY MARY M. LUXTON, BELLEVILLE, ONT.

### I. THE YOUNG SOLDIER.

It was a rough winter's night. A slight sou'-wester had been blowing all day long; but since the sun had gone down and it had grown dark, heavy gusts fled boisterously up and down the old streets of Marseilles, as though they had lost their way. Many of the principal thoroughfares appeared comparatively deserted, as if the storm had driven most people home. Those who yet remained out of doors seemed to be bent upon reaching their domiciles with all possible speed. There was one solitary exception—a tall, powerfully built man; and upon him a gust of wind had little more effect than upon a solid rock. Enveloped in a thick black cloak, with a military cap drawn down tightly over his forehead, he walked along at a slow, measured step. He never once turned his head, even when the wind cast a stinging splash of rain full in his face. He was so erect, and strode forward in such a steady manner, that one would have supposed the weather absent from his thoughts. When he reached the quay, he crossed the road and stepped along the gangway, so close to the edge of the basin that by stretching out his hand he could have touched the rigging of large vessels as he passed. The danger, even in broad daylight, when walking so close to the edge, would have been great; but upon this pitch-dark, windy night, a false step meant certain death in the dock below.

Presently a small boat, dimly visible by the light of a lantern attached to the bow, came slowly towards a landing-place several yards ahead. When the boat touched the wall of the basin, the man quickened his pace, and on reaching the spot, looked down and demanded:

"Who goes there?"

"Prosper Cornillon," replied a voice. The voice appeared to come from a figure in the boat which resembled a black shadow in the darkness.

"Is your boat for hire?"

"Yes, monsieur."

There was a short pause. Then the stranger, with a sly look of command in his tone, said:

"I shall want you to night; but not yet."

The boatman, having meanwhile made fast his boat, took the lantern out of the bow and climbed slowly up the steep wooden steps.

"Does the Cafe Cornillon, on this quay belong to you?"

"It is mine and my sister's," Prosper replied.

"That is lucky," said the stranger, in a more cheerful voice. "I will sup at your cafe before we start."

Prosper Cornillon led the way, holding the lantern so that the light was thrown directly in their path.

The cafe Cornillon stood in the centre of a row of houses facing the quay. The frontage was one large window with small panes of glass, like a conservatory. Through the panes, white muslin curtains a light was shining, which illuminated a limited space of the roadway. Stepping forward, Prosper held open the door of the cafe for the stranger to enter. It was a snug, unpretending little cafe; long, narrow, and low pitched, like a cabin on board ship, with small wooden tables and chairs arranged against the wall. Some half-dozen persons, who looked like fishermen, were seated near the window, drinking coffee and cognac, and playing at dominoes. They glanced up for

a moment, and returned the stranger's salute, and then continued their game. At the further end of the cafe was an open hearth, with a fire burning brightly in the grate; near this hearth, engaged in some culinary operations, stood a young girl. She turned when the door opened; and an expression of surprise, mixed with curiosity, gathered in her face as the stranger advanced and raised his hat.

"Nina," said Prosper Cornillon, looking from the girl towards the customer, "this gentleman has hired the boat; but he wishes for a little supper before starting."

The stranger nodded approvingly. "Before sunrise, I must be on board."

"The name of the ship, monsieur?" asked Prosper, stroking his dark beard and looking with keen eyes into the stranger's face.

"The *Liradia*."

The girl looked up with a distant, dreamy expression in her eyes. "That ship," said she, as though speaking her thoughts aloud, rather than addressing herself to any one—"that ship is bound for some Greek port."

"For Syria," said the stranger promptly, while at the same time he removed his cloak and sat down at a table near the hearth.

Prosper Cornillon turned away and joined the fishermen at the other end of the cafe. Like a true *cafetier*, he was soon laughing with the customers, taking a hand at dominoes, and calling to his sister Nina to serve him, as though he were a customer too.

Meanwhile the stranger sat in silence, waiting for his supper, with his back leaning against the wall and his legs stretched out towards the fire. He was dressed in the uniform of a French colonel, though only a man of twenty-eight or thirty at the utmost. He had a handsome expressive face, his eyes frequently brightening with some passing thought. But when he turned his glance upon Nina, his look grew serious and sympathetic.

Few would have resisted studying the face of Nina Cornillon, not merely on account of its beauty, but because some trouble sustained with brave resolution, was portrayed in every feature. That dreaminess in the eye already referred to, which seemed to indicate that her thoughts were wandering far beyond the port of Marseilles, was seldom suppressed except when she was spoken to; and when the conversation ceased, her look appeared to sink away again into the distance, while a smile would break pensively upon her lips, and tears glisten upon her long black lashes.

Scarcely a word passed between the stranger and Nina Cornillon until the supper was cleared away, when "monsieur" lit his cigar, and drew his chair closer to the hearth. But when the girl had served the customary cup of coffee, and was pouring out the *petit verre*, the gentleman remarked:

"Shall I tell you, mademoiselle, where your thoughts are travelling?"

The girl looked with a puzzled expression into the stranger's face.

"You would indeed be a magician," said she, "if you could."

"Your thoughts," said he, "are travelling along the shores of Greece."

Nina started and changed color. For a while she seemed too troubled to speak. Seating herself in front of the hearth, she looked thoughtfully into the fire.

"If mademoiselle will trust me," the

stranger presently remarked in a soft tone, "even though she might wish a message taken to a lover, I will promise to execute any errand faithfully."

The girl glanced up with a touch of indignation in her face. But suddenly dropping her eyes, she said, with a deep blush on her cheeks: "I have no lover."

The stranger looked grave; and as though conscious of having made a blunder, he hastened to change the subject. "I will not try any further to read your thoughts. But tell me," he added, "why does your brother keep a boat for hire in the harbor when he has such an excellent little cafe to attend to? It seems to me that the work is too severe for you all by yourself."

"Ah, monsieur, you would not say that," exclaimed Nina, "if you only knew how anxious we both are to make money."

The stranger could not conceal a look of surprise. Such sentiments, uttered in such an ardent tone by a comely girl like Nina, appeared inconsistent. "You mean, perhaps," he hinted, "that you do not find it congenial work to keep a cafe, and that you will be glad when you can retire from business?"

"O, no, monsieur! That is not what I meant. When we have accumulated ten thousand francs, we shall part with the money; and then—"

"Then, mademoiselle?"

"We shall begin again," continued Nina, "with light hearts; for if we ever save that sum, we can purchase our father's liberty."

"What!" cried the stranger, greatly moved. "Is it possible that?"

"Hush!" Nina whispered, with her finger on her lip, as she glanced around at the table where her brother and his companions were seated over their game. "Whenever Prosper hears this subject mentioned, he is like a madman. If it interests you, monsieur, this terrible disaster which has befallen us, draw your chair closer, and I will tell you, in a few words, how it all happened."

The stranger came nearer to Nina's side, and leaned forward in a listening attitude. His face assumed an expression of intense concern as she proceeded.

In a low voice, frequently choked by tears, the girl confided to the sympathetic stranger her sad story. "Always anxious to assist his family," Nina began, "it one day occurred to father to buy a vessel, for the purpose of trading along the coast of the Adriatic. So he collected together all that he was worth, made a capital bargain, and set sail in his little ship, confident that his venture would be successful. He had traded in the Adriatic for others for many years, and was well known as a brave and honest captain in those seas. But not many weeks passed before news reached us that all was lost."

Her utterance became thick with sobs. But speedily overcoming her emotion she continued: "A letter came from father; it told us only too plainly what misfortune had overtaken him. One morning, when least expecting such a mishap, he was attacked by pirates. He made a desperate resistance, but was eventually overpowered and taken prisoner. They carried him to Tripoli. The sum which is demanded for his ransom is so exorbitant that it will be impossible for him ever to raise it. In his letter, he adds that we must therefore relinquish all hope of ever seeing him again."

The girl's eyes were blinded with tears, and for some moments she could not speak; but by a painful effort she succeeded at last. "We are striving by every honest means in our power to collect the money. It is a hard fight. This is only a very modest little cafe, and our profits are very small. Prosper gains a few extra francs every week in the harbor. But many more years must pass before we can hope to accomplish this trying task."

"How long," the stranger asked, "has your father been a prisoner?"

"Ten years."

"Is it possible?"

"I was fifteen when he went away. At parting, he kissed me on both cheeks," continued Nina, smiling thoughtfully.

"Now, I am twenty-five."

"Poor child!" said the stranger, with great tenderness.

"During those years, we have managed to save nearly three thousand francs. Perhaps, in ten more years, if we are very fortunate, we shall be able to complete the sum; and father will be sitting in the old corner, where you are seated now, as I remember seeing him when I was a child."

While she was still speaking, that dreamy

look which the stranger had observed already began to reappear in her dark eyes, and she seemed gradually to locate herself in thought.

The stranger, who felt that his presence at her side was forgotten, rose from his seat with a suppressed sigh, and crossing to where Nina's brother and the fishermen still played at dominoes, he placed his hand upon the boatman's shoulder. "Monsieur Prosper," said he, "it is time we started. But before we go, let us drink a glass together.—If," he added, looking round—"if your friends will join us so much the better."

The fishermen expressed themselves agreeable. So Prosper filled glasses all round. Every one rose and "clinked" with the stranger, at the same time wishing him *bon voyage*.

Then Prosper Cornillon assisted "monsieur" to envelop himself once more in his cloak; while Nina came timidly forward to take his proffered hand and to bid him adieu. And then they stepped into the wind and rain, followed by the fishermen, leaving Nina all alone in the cafe, with her hands clasped, and a wistful look in her eyes.

### II. THE OLD SAILOR.

It was still stormy at Marseilles. For some weeks, owing to the gales which had visited the Mediterranean, the port had been crowded with vessels, driven in by stress of weather. In times like these, Prosper Cornillon reaped a harvest; for his boat was in demand from morning till night. It was tiring work; but a generous impulse gave him energy. He was toiling with the direct object of obtaining his father's freedom.

One evening, worn out with his unremitting labors, Prosper had thrown himself down, with his elbows on the table, in a corner of the cafe near the hearth; and as his head sank upon his arms, and he had fallen asleep. In front of the fire sat his sister Nina, with a weary look upon her face; but her great, dreamy eyes were wide open; for although late in the evening, yet it was not yet the hour for closing the Cafe Cornillon. At any moment a customer might enter; and some customers, if Nina was not very wakeful and attentive, were apt to be impatient; indeed, she had scarcely less peace and quietness during the twenty-four hours than her brother Prosper. At the moment when it became so late that Nina was on the point of rising to turn out the lamps and lock up for the night, the door was slowly opened. An old sailor in a rough coat, the collar of which was turned up about his neck, mysteriously entered the cafe. He touched his slouching hat with his sunburnt, horny hand in a feeble, bristling manner; then choosing a table near the hearth, opposite to the one upon which Prosper's head was resting, he sat down and began to stroke his long white beard thoughtfully without raising his eyes.

"With what, monsieur, can I serve you?" The old man answered in a low voice, with his head still bent: "Cafe noir."

Nina hastened to place a cup of coffee before him; and when she had filled a little glass with cognac, she resumed her seat before the hearth. The girl's chair was placed with the back towards the door. On one side of her was the table at which the old man sat sipping his coffee; and on the other side was Prosper, still fast asleep. Looking dreamily into the fire, Nina seemed to have forgotten the presence of both these men, so deeply was she absorbed in her thoughts.

"This is the Cafe Cornillon—is it not?" asked the old man.

Nina started as though the voice had awakened her. "Yes, monsieur," answered the girl, recollecting herself and looking up quickly—"the Cafe Cornillon."

"Kept by Prosper Cornillon?"

"Sleeping there," continued Nina, with a little jerk of her head.

"Ah," said the old sailor, "I am the bearer of a message."

"To him?"

"Yes—to Prosper Cornillon."

"Shall I rouse him?"

"No. I will deliver the message to you."

"It is the same thing," said the girl, with a pretty shrug of her shoulders. "I am his sister."

"Nina Cornillon?"

"Yes; that is my name."

The old man leaned forward, and in a hoarse, indistinct voice: "You may remember, perhaps, a few weeks ago, entertaining a young soldier who passed through this port on his