

## MY FRIEND'S STORY.

(Continued.)

On the whole, any sensible person would find the alert and wholesome age of the sire at eighty more pleasant to look upon than the decaying youth of the man of thirty. This unwholesome fag-end of a burned-out manhood was the only hope and scion of the Marquis Larue. Languidly he looked up and asked:

"What would you have me do?"

"Who is it stands between you and the fortune of both our houses?" asked the Marquis with a sneer.

"A beautiful little cousin, Aimee Boh by name," answered Victorien, with a smile.

"And where is she now?" blessed the Marquis.

"I have reason to think she is in this chateau," Victorien answered coolly.

"Yes, she is here, and in our power; and then, what hinders us from taking away that obstacle, the only one between you and the vast estates we see from this window?" and the old Marquis pointed out across the lawn toward the forest. It was a pleasant sight. The chateau had been built with some regard to its surroundings. At the left was a dense forest which had been spared the ravages of war, as it was far from the field of active operations. Down a gradual descent in front rolled the meadows, now quite brown, and only in spots, where the warmth of spring had protected the roots, was the grass still green. Farther down in front ran the quiet river, now sparkling beneath the sun, where it was stirred by the wintry wind. On the right stood the scattered houses of the village, and just beyond were the tents of a detachment of the German army. Here and there over the brown fields roamed the cattle, as yet spared by the hand of the German army. As Victorien languidly surveyed the rising smoke from the houses in the village, and remarked the sparkling stream, he said thoughtfully:

"Yes, it is beautiful."

"You did not answer my question," said the Marquis.

"What hinders, you ask. Many things hinder. You say she was left in care of the American Ministry in Paris. When peace arrives, inquiry will be made for her. We dare not prove her death, and then—what? We will be the same as now. And more, I do not wish any violence, my dear papa;" and he went on with his cigarette-smoking.

"Why not marry Aimee?" asked the Marquis, abruptly.

"A man can marry when he can do nothing else, and a Frenchman's wife generally is like a butcher's wife—she has the scraps that are left after the day's sales are over. Good! I will marry Aimee, and then we will be safe;" and Victorien complacently stroked his mustache.

"Good!" said the Marquis, "you shall visit her as the friend, the tender-hearted son and sympathizer. Tell her that marriage means freedom. Tell her this chateau will be her home. I think she is too young to have formed any attachments, and you will know how to win her."

"Possibly," said Victorien, "it may be necessary to tell me of the sex; possibly not. If I knew as much of international law as I know of the sex, I would volunteer to go as Minister to Russia. Lead me to my fate, my respected papa."

Down the splendid hall they walked and up the wide staircase, and stopped at a door. Aimee was in no dungeon. Her room was one of a suite splendidly furnished, and her window looked out over the wide domain her father had taught her to think her own by birthright. This window was secured by an iron grating. Otherwise, she was waited on by servants, and treated with as much respect as though a guest in the chateau. A pretense was made of great care for her safety, but still she knew she was a prisoner. During her month of confinement her mind had been filled with thoughts of her father, her grief had distracted her thoughts from any danger to herself. Occasionally she had thought of the American who had won her heart, and at those moments she wondered that no effort had been made to search her out or effect her release. She had never really feared violence from the Marquis. She knew of his desire to secure her fortune, and had thought his love of gain would not drive him to crime. Here was one of those elastic natures which seem to be compressed into a new strength by adverse circumstances. Her childish features had taken on a mature look which added to her pensive beauty. When the door of the room was opened, she arose and faced the Marquis and his son.

"Aimee," said the Marquis, "you have never met my son. Victorien, this is your cousin, Aimee."

"It is with rapture I meet my cousin," said the exquisite Victorien; too long have I been deprived of that pleasure. Allow me," said he, attempting to kiss her hand. With a look of intense disgust, Aimee drew back and contemplated the grinning burlesque of a man.

"Such beauty should not be shut away from the world," he continued, in that tone which had been successful for so many years among the *l'ami-monde*.

"Who chooses to sequester my unworthy charms from the world? Not I, I assure you," said Aimee, with anger. "If you or your father have reasons for confining me here, do not attempt by flattery to conceal your motives."

"Mademoiselle is unreasonable," said Victorien. "Who should furnish a home to you if not your nearest relatives? To whom will you go if we throw open the doors and bid you depart? Two armies interpose between you and Paris. If you could trust our German invaders, still you would doubt the army of the Republic, and, worse still, the Commune. Here you are safe in seclusion, and we are not only bound by the ties of blood

to offer you a home, but since I have seen you, my fair cousin, I am constrained by a new force to shield you from all harm;" and the withered pigmy laid his hand on the padding of his coat, above where science locates the organ of life.

"I think I can leave you to win the affections of our little cousin," said the Marquis, as he retired from the room with a sardonic smile on his face.

"Farewell, my dear papa; you need not fear for myzel-cousin and myself, for we shall know how to spend the time;" and Victorien kissed his fingers to his vanishing sire.

Readiness to resent an insult is not always an evidence of female purity. There are natures so pure that a gross idea is a novelty, and hard to understand. Reared in such seclusion that absolute innocence is again revealed by another Eve in a modern Paradise—such was the condition of Aimee as she gazed without fear on the closing door and the grinning face of her ape-like cousin. He approached her on his uncertain legs in a circular manner, and said:

"Aimee, my cousin, why may we not bring to a conclusion all the scheming of the last three generations of our family by uniting our fortunes. These are troublous times, and you have no home. I offer you my heart, hand and fortune;" and he again dramatically touched his narrow breast.

"I do not understand you," said Aimee.

"That is strange," said Victorien. "I offer to make you my wife. I am determined to marry and settle down on my estates here. Since I have seen you I have become the slave of the grand passion. Aimee, my child, you are lovely," and he extended his hands. Aimee looked at him out of great childish, wondering eyes, and said:

"Monsieur, it is impossible!"

"Her coolness and directness gave a sting to the calm words, and Victorien looked at the closed door and approached her more closely, saying:

"Mademoiselle answers as coolly and calmly as if she stood in the grand *salon* with a crowd around her. Aimee, we are alone. Give me a kiss, Aimee."

Still she did not understand him, and only drew back with a deprecating glance and uplifted hand, saying:

"Victorien, if you are my cousin I need only tell you that I cannot marry you. I am but a child in experience. I demand of you the protection which a child may expect from a man and a relative. Please go away and leave me."

"Ah, Aimee, you are too beautiful, and I must win your love. A kiss, my angel—a kiss!" and the baleful flush of a base passion which lingered in the ruins of his manhood, as fire lingers among the charred timbers of the house it has destroyed, flashed out of his sunken eyes as he grasped Aimee and drew her to his breast.

Then all the horror of her situation rushed upon her comprehension, and she struck him madly in his weakened face. He went reeling backward with a curse on his lips. As he gathered himself and approached her again, she said in a whisper of concentrated anger, at the same time grasping a heavy chair and raising it over his head as if it had no weight:

"If you touch me again I will kill you!"

White with anger, the cowardly wretch stood before her as the door opened and the old Marquis entered and gazed on the tableau. The chair was still in the air, but slowly it sunk, and a shriek of such awful intensity rang out of Aimee's lips that the old servant-woman ran into the room, and the Marquis and his hopeful son slunk out, leaving the unconscious girl to the ministrations of the nurse.

The tremulous Victorien was brushing the dust from his soiled coat, and straightening the crumpled linen of his erstwhile immaculate bosom, as they walked down the wide staircase and the long hall.

"You see it will not work, my son. Every means will not remove the obstacle in our path. I bought our freedom from the bandit Le Noir, and if I can find the smooth-faced villain again, he will place Aimee where she will never cross our path again. Shall I send for him?" asked the old Marquis.

"I am ready for anything now," said the amiable Victorien, showing his faultless porcelain teeth. "Crush her in any way you please, but be quick about it, for in a few days peace will be declared, and in a new form of society, perhaps, our methods will not pass as readily as they would in a time of war. Put her in the hands of Le Noir as soon as you will. I care not."

"This is our plan, then," said the Marquis. "She must disappear. Her father is dead, and when she is gone, farewell to fear. We shall succeed. Ah! who shall hinder?"

"I just want to leave one of these ere yaller dodgers in every house. I can't supply the goods now, but when this cruel war is over, as the poet says, we will show yew some soap that isn't deleterious, anti-malarious, and qualities various. A chromo card goes with every cake—"

The voice was heard at the door, and the Marquis sprang forward with a curse on his lips.

"Hello, Marquis! How hev you been since our little episode in the old skatin' rink. I heard a woman scream, and didn't know but the hor—" was afire, or somebody's pug-dog had a fit," and Sturgis smiled broadly.

"You cursed Yankee soap-peddler, how dare you crowd uninvited into my door? If I should serve you right, you fool, I would set my servants to flog you down the avenue to the highway," and the Marquis frowned with anger.

"You needn't go out of your way to bestow any little attentions like that on me. I am traveling incognito, and as a private citizen. I deprecate all style. Stick that ere dodger up in the kitchen, and when yew want soap give the sunflower a chance. Bye-bye, Marky," and Sturgis took a