

## AN ITALIAN REVENGE

Do you remember the incident that made such a sensation four or five years ago, when Antonin Leroux, the banker's son, married Mlle. de la Combe aux-Fontaines?

Several times it was reported that the match was broken off, but the wedding took place in spite of the oracles and everything was carried out with a magnificence that awakened some comment.

'How does old Leroux manage to do it?' wondered the envious and suspicious. For doubtful rumors had been floating about concerning the banker's solvency.

He had previously been associated with an Italian, one Count Calcatroni, who then still visited at the Leroux house, though he has since ceased to appear there. This gentleman, tall, dark and spare, with a foreign decoration on his coat, was among the wedding guests, as was also the learned M. Desroches, keeper of the bibliotheque du Garde-Meubles.

I must pause here to remind you that the functions of a librarian impose duties which seem contradictory. He must be the most obliging of men and also the most mistrustful. In every reader who addresses him he must recognize a brother in science, almost a friend, but a friend whose hands he must watch and whose pockets he must fathom with an experienced eye. I have often heard M. Desroches say:

'I know women who are faithful and men who are honest, but there is not a human being existing who would not be capable, at some instant of his life, of slipping off with a rare or curious book!'

To return to the wedding. When they left the church they went to breakfast at the Leroux mansion. The presents were spread out in one of the drawing rooms—a horrible custom which constrains people to a generosity that is usually involuntary—and among the costly things displayed, a riviere of diamonds, given by Antonin's father, attracted all eyes and silenced reports about his business difficulties, for it was worth at least ten thousand ecus.

All at once, at the moment when the elegant crowd was passing into the dining room, a clamor was heard.

'The diamonds have disappeared!'

The riviere have been stolen! In the confusion following this painful discovery M. Leroux acted nobly. It is true that at first his face flushed crimson and he seemed stunned, but he recovered himself almost instantly, and as the tumult increased, he cried:

'Let me beg you all, my friends, not to allow this misfortune to darken a happy day! The loss is not mortal. My dear children, may this little cloud be the only one that shall ever obscure your joy!'

'The old fellow bears it bravely,' muttered one or two.

'We ought to close all the doors and have a search!' cried several others.

'Never!' protested the master of the house with indignation. 'I cannot suspect the honor of my guests.'

But the Leroux clan whispered among themselves: 'Far be it for us to accuse any one, but really, the bride's family have invited some people—'

While in the adjoining room Mme. de la Combe-aux-Fontaines was holding salts to her daughter's face and sighing to her friends, 'This is the consequence of promiscuous invitations. The relations of a financier like M. Leroux are always very mixed.'

The affair was distressing, and most of the people breathed more freely as they left the house. It was not long before the drawing rooms were emptied, and then a domestic brought word that a gentleman wished to see M. Leroux in his study. He hurried to the room and there found M. Desroches.

'Sir,' began the old librarian, 'I have a habit, cultivated by professional duty of watching all that goes on around me. I saw the robbery committed. The guilty man is over fifty, thin and very dark. You know him. I saw you shaking hands with him at the church. Besides, there is one detail which renders any mistake impossible—the man wore a foreign decoration, suspended by a chain. I followed him into the street, but as I was about to address him we were separated by the crowd and the rascal drove away in a carriage. The rest is your affair. Of course, I am at your service as a witness. Shall we make a complaint at once?'

M. Leroux did not jump at this suggestion nor seem overjoyed at the discovery. 'I must think it over,' he said slowly. 'I do know the person you suspect. I know him well.'

'Suspect!' cried the librarian. 'I don't suspect. I tell you I saw the theft! The whole thing was reflected in a mirror. I saw him put the diamonds in his pocket. He shall sleep in jail to-night, if he can sleep at all. Do not let us lose precious time.'

'But if you please,' replied Leroux, without moving, 'I would rather let him sleep in his bed. I know him; we were formerly

associated in business, and I do not want to prosecute him, though hereafter I shall avoid shaking his hand. It would be very unpleasant for us all to appear in court for a few thousands of francs. I can bear the loss. And so, my dear sir, you saw nothing at all—it is understood? I am exceedingly obliged to you all the same.'

M. Desroches reached the sidewalk in a state of complete bewilderment: To this good man, honest and frank as gold, such exaggerated compassion seemed almost like sharing the crime. And so, after weighing the matter, he went to the police headquarters and made his statement, describing the thief, after which he returned home with a lightened conscience.

The next morning M. Leroux received a call from a police agent armed with the details furnished by M. Desroches, who signed his deposition. The banker clenched his fists and consigned the meddling librarian to the furies, but quickly controlling his annoyance he quietly declared that he did not intend to prosecute. Nothing could shake this determination, and the agent had to leave without gaining any additional information, without even finding out the name of the jeweler who had sold the riviere or procuring the empty case as further evidence.

'If you will not take the matter we shall act upon our own responsibility,' said the officer as he left.

These words brought a cold moisture over the banker's brow; but he was not long in making up his mind what to do. He ordered his carriage and drove to the corner of the Boulevard and Faubourg Saint Martin. There he dismissed his coachman, walked on for some distance, entered a house of unpretentious appearance, went up three flights of stairs, rang, sent in his card and in five minutes was conversing alone with the famous Coindart, the head of the best detective service in Paris.

'Sir,' said the banker, 'I will tell you my affair in a few words. Yesterday my son was married. Among the wedding guests was a certain Italian Count, formerly an associate of mine in some business transactions, who has since become one of those gentlemanly sharpers we often meet at Paris. Calcatroni, that is his name, took advantage of the crowd to rob me of the diamond riviere I had given to my daughter-in-law.'

'And you wish me to take up the case?'

asked Coindart, who was making notes.

'I wish you to take up the case, certainly; only, understand me, I do not want to have him arrested. In fact, that is just what I wish you to prevent, and I must warn you that a meddling idiot has put the police on the track.'

Coindart, without any change of expression, went on making notes.

'This may surprise you,' began M. Leroux; 'but without entering into—'

'Nothing surprises me, sir,' interrupted the detective. 'You are not the first who has asked me to render this kind of service. If the public knew all it would not be surprised that the police fail in certain cases. But to return to the Count. You do not wish anything unpleasant to befall him; that is understood. But, of course, you want to recover the jewels?'

The banker reflected for a moment.

'Yes,' he then said; 'that would evidently be best. But the question of money is quite secondary. No arrest, no scandal, no scenes in court; all that is what I am most anxious to make sure of. I need not tell you that any amount of money is at your disposal. Above all, lose no time, for they are already working on the other side.'

And there the interview ended.

That very evening as Count Calcatroni was walking home from the opera for the sake of a little fresh air and stopped to light his cigar a gentleman approached and asked for a light with the graceful ease of a man belonging to the best society. Then raising his hat as he returned thanks for the favor he said:

'M. Calcatroni, do you intend to go home this evening?'

The Italian started slightly on hearing his name from a stranger, but kept perfectly cool and answered with an amused smile: 'This is the first time in thirty years that any one has shown so much interest in my movements, but there is no reason why I should not satisfy your curiosity. In half an hour I hope to be at home and asleep.'

'Indeed, you are mistaken,' replied Coindart. 'In less than ten minutes you will be in a cab between two policemen who are waiting to arrest you at your own door. So, if you take my word for it, let us turn around and you will sleep at my house. By the way, where are the diamonds?'

Calcatroni felt perplexed for a few seconds. He had them in his pocket. He finally decided to reply haughtily: 'A joke may go too far. And pray whom may you be?'

'Your good genius. I am the confidential agent of your friend, M. Leroux, who does not wish one hair of your head to fall beneath the prison scissors. You do not believe me? Then come with me. I will

show you the two men waiting to arrest you.'

'No, no, let us go directly to your house,' said the Count quickly. 'We can have an explanation there.'

But they had not gone far when Calcatroni admitted his 'error.'

'I have a debt of honor to settle,' he said in excuse; 'fifteen thousand francs lost at play, which I was obliged to pay to-day. I have pawned the diamonds for that sum. Leroux need not be afraid, I will return them. It is certainly very kind of him to show his old partner so much consideration. You must tell him that I feel grateful.'

Calcatroni did not sleep well at the house of his rescuer; but at least the policemen were waiting for him were foiled.

From that time it was a struggle between these men and Coindart, they tracking their man remorselessly and he continually contriving to render their efforts fruitless. He hoped to get the Count out of the country. In an interval of repose the detective called on M. Leroux to report progress and delivered Calcatroni's expression of gratitude.

'I will acquit him of all obligation,' said the banker, 'if he will return me the riviere.'

'Impossible just at present,' replied Coindart; 'he has pawned it for fifteen thousand francs.'

'For fifteen thousand francs!' cried the banker, unguardedly. 'The broker could not have examined the stones!'

'Why? Are they worth so much more?'

asked Coindart with interest.

'Fifteen thousand francs!' muttered Leroux, without seeming to hear the question. 'How shall we ever get out of this? M. Coindart, have the goodness to bring me the name of the broker who lent the money. His name and address. Bring them to-morrow.'

But the next day it was not Coindart who appeared at the banker's office. Count Calcatroni haughtily sent in his card and was not kept waiting.

When the two men were alone and the doors well closed, the Italian advanced with a firm step toward his old associate. Any one might have supposed that Leroux was the guilty party.

'And so,' said the visitor, 'the reports were all true! You are on the edge of ruin!'

'Really,' stammered the banker, 'this language from you—'

'Do not be so lofty,' interrupted the other.

'For one week I was foolish enough to believe that friendship influenced your conduct, and I was touched by your generosity. Now I know why you were afraid to have the police pry into your actions.'

'My actions!' protested Leroux with such courage as he had left.

'This morning,' continued the Count coldly, 'I did what I had not before thought of doing, believing you to be an honest man. I examined the stones.'

'Then you have not pawned them!' cried the banker joyfully.

'Pawned them, sir? What gentleman would try to raise money on bits of glass?'

Leroux fell back in his chair trembling.

'Ah, ah! You are no longer so confident! And so, to deceive the public about the condition of your affairs you did not blush to offer a common glass necklace to your son's bride? To hide the guilt that is sucking in the fortunes of your creditors you deceive a young girl into adorning herself with these sparkling frauds!'

'I intended to warn her,' faltered the financier. 'She would have understood that this is a trying moment for me and that I am waiting for certain payments.'

'You needn't warn anybody. I shall go from here to police headquarters and clear myself of this imaginary accusation, while informing the agents that the riviere in question was a valueless collection in glass which no man in his senses would think of stealing. This will be repeated. People will end by believing that you hid the worthless bauble to get rid of it and invented the story of the robbery to account for its disappearance, and you will be disgraced. To-morrow a crowd will assail your offices demanding the sums deposited with you. You had excellent reasons for your kind considerations, your efforts to save me from arrest! You need trouble yourself no further in my behalf. I am going myself to the headquarters.'

'No; spare me,' implored Leroux. 'How much do you want me to give you?'

'I want fifteen thousand francs. I have said from the first that I needed this sum, and I do not change my statement. Calcatroni is a man of his word. If your diamonds are talked about now they will cost you more than fifteen thousand francs.'

How M. Leroux managed to raise the amount is something I ignore; certain it is that he had not such a sum in his money-drawer at that moment, but after making his old friend wait for some time the fifteen thousand francs were handed over. Calcatroni pocketed the money and walked out with the firm step of a man who has just accomplished an act of justice. He also carried with him, ready to post, a letter

addressed to the chief of police, declaring that the riviere, which was supposed to be stolen, had just been found and was reposing safely in its velvet case.

The banker's difficulties were in time surmounted. His daughter-in-law now wears veritable diamonds of the purest water, but Calcatroni always answers with ill-concealed scorn when any one mentions the family before him:

'Oh—those people? I do not visit them now.'

## OUT OF THE RUNNING.

It was on the north side of Butser on the long swell of the Hampshire Downs. Beneath, some two miles away, the grey roofs and red houses of Petersfield peeped out amid the trees which surrounded it. From the crest of the low hills downwards the country ran in low sweeping curves as though some great primeval sea had congealed in the midst of a ground swell, and set forever into long verdant rollers. At the bottom, just where the slope borders upon the plain, there stood a comfortable, square, brick farmhouse, with a cloudy plume of smoke floating up from the chimney. Two cowhouses, a cluster of hayricks, and a broad stretch of fields all yellow with the ripening wheat, formed a fitting setting to the dwelling of a prosperous farmer.

The green slopes were dotted every here and there with dark clumps of gorse bushes, all alight with the flaming yellow blossoms. To the left lay the broad Portsmouth Road curving over the hill, with a line of gaunt telegraph posts marking its course. Beyond, a huge white chasm opened in the grass, where the great Butser chalk quarry had been sunk. From its depths rose up the distant murmur of voices and the clinking of hammers. Just above it, between two curves of green hill, might be seen a little triangle of leaden-colored sea, flecked with a single white sail.

Down the Portsmouth Road two women were walking, one elderly, florid, and stout, with a yellow-brown Paisley shawl and a coarse serge dress, the other young and fair, with large grey eyes, and a face which was freckled like a plover's egg. Her neat white blouse with its trim black belt, and plain close-out skirt, gave her an air of refinement which was wanting in her companion, but there was sufficient resemblance between them to show that they were mother and daughter. The one was gnarled and hardened and wrinkled by rough country work, and the other fresh and pliant from the benign influence of the Board school, but their step, their slope of shoulders, and the movement of the hips as they walked, all marked them as of one blood.

'Mother, I can see father in the five-acre field,' cried the younger, pointing down in the direction of the farm.

The older woman screwed up her eyes, and shaded them with her hand.

'Who's that with him?' she asked.

'There's Bill.'

'Oh, he's nobody. He's a talkin' to someone.'

'I don't know, mother. It's someone in a straw hat. Adam Wilson of the Quarry wears a straw hat.'

'Aye, of course, it's Adam, sure enough. Well, I'm glad we've come back time enough to see him. He'd have been disappointed if he came over and you'd been away. Drat this dust! It makes one not fit to be seen.'

The same idea seemed to have occurred to her daughter, for she had taken out her handkerchief and was flicking her sleeves and the front of her dress.

'That's right, Dolly. There's some on your flounces. But, Lor' bless you, Dolly, it don't matter to him. It's not your dress he looks to, but your face. Now, I shouldn't be surprised if he had come over to ask you from father.'

'I think he'd best begin by asking me from myself,' remarked the girl.

'Ah, but you'll have him, Dolly, when he does.'

'I'm not sure of that, mother.'

The older woman threw up her hands. 'There! I don't know what the gals are coming to. I don't indeed. It's the Board school as does it. When I was a gal if a decent young man came a courtin' we gave him a yes or a no. We didn't keep him hanging on like a half-clipped sheep. Now here are you with two of them at your beck, and you can't give an answer to either of them.'

'Why, mother, that's it,' cried the daughter, with something between a laugh and a sob. 'May be if they came one at a time I'd know what to say.'

'What have you agin Adam Wilson?'

'Nothing. But I have nothing against Elias Mason.'

'Nor I, either. But I knew which is the most proper-looking young man.'

'Looks isn't everything, mother. You should hear Elias Mason talk. You should hear him repeat poetry.'

'Well then; have Elias.'

'Ah, but I haven't the heart to turn against Adam.'

'There now! I never saw such a gal. You're like a calf betwixt two hayricks; you have a nibble at the one and a nibble at the other. There's not one in a hundred so lucky as you. Here's Adam with £3 10s. a week, foreman already in the Chalk Works, and likely enough to be manager if he is spared. And there's Elias, head-telegraph clerk at the Petersfield Post Office, and earning good money, too. You can't keep 'em both on. You've got to take one or t'other, and it's my belief you'll get neither if you don't stop this shilly-shally.'

'I don't care! I don't want them! What do they want to come bothering for?'

'It's human natur', gal. They must do it. If they didn't you'd be the first to cry out maybe. It's in the Scriptures: 'Man is born for woman, as the sparks fly upwards.' She looked up out of the corner of her eyes as if not very sure of her quotation. 'Why, here be that dratted Bill. The good book says as we are all made of clay, but Bill does show it more than any lad I ever saw.'

They had turned from the road into a narrow, deeply-rutted lane, which led towards the farm. A youth was running towards them, loose-jointed and long-limbed, with a boyish, lumbering haste, clumping fearfully with his great yellow clogs through pool and mire. He wore loose brown corduroys, a dingy shirt, and a red handkerchief tied loose round his neck. A tattered old straw hat was tilted back upon his shock of coarse, matted brown hair. His sleeves were turned up to the elbows, and his arms and face were both tanned and roughened until his skin looked like the bark of some young sapling. As he looked up, at the sound of the steps, his face with its blue eyes, brown skin, and first slight dawn of a tawny moustache was not an uncomely one, were it not marred by the heavy, stolid, somewhat sulky expression of the country yokel.

'Please, mum,' said he, touching the brim of his wreck of a hat, 'measter seed ye coming. He sent to say as 'ow 'e were in the five-acre lot.'

'Run back, Bill, and say that we are coming,' answered the farmer's wife, and the awkward figure sped away upon its return journey.

'I say, mother, what's Bill's other name?'

asked the girl, with languid curiosity.

'He's not got one.'

'No name.'

'No, Dolly, he's found a child, and never had no father or mother that was ever heard of. We had him from the work'us when he was seven, to chop mangle wurzel, and here he's been ever since, nigh twelve year. He was Bill there, and he's Bill here.'

'What fun! Fancy having only one name. I wonder what they'd call his wife.'

'I don't know. Time to talk of that when he can keep one. But now, Dolly dear, here's your father and Adam Wilson comin' across the field. I want to see you settled, Dolly. He's a steady young man. He's blue ribbon, and has money in the Post Office.'

'I wish I knew which liked me best,' said her daughter, glancing from under her hat brim at the approaching figures. 'That's the one I should like. But it's all right, mother, and I know how to find out, so don't you fret yourself any more.'

The suitor was a well-grown young fellow in a grey suit, with a straw hat jauntily ribboned in red and black. He was smoking, but as he approached he thrust his pipe into his breast pocket, and came forward with one hand outstretched, and the other gripping nervously at his watch chain.

'Your servant, Mrs. Foster. And how are you, Miss Dolly? Another fortnight of this and you will be starting on your harvest, I suppose.'

'It's bad to say beforehand what you will do in this country,' said Farmer Foster, with an apprehensive glance round the heavens.

'It's all God's doing,' remarked his wife, piously.

'And he does the best for us, of course. Yet He does seem these last seasons to have a kind of lost His grip over the weather. Well, maybe it will be made up to us this year. And what did you do at Horndean, mother?'

The old couple walked in front, and the others dropped behind, the young man lingering, and taking short steps to increase the distance.

'I say, Dolly,' he murmured at last, flushing slightly as he glanced at her, 'I've been speaking to your father about—you know what.'

But Dolly didn't know what. She hadn't the slightest idea what. She turned her pretty little freckled face up to him and was full of curiosity upon the point.

Adam Wilson's face flushed to a deeper red. 'You know very well,' said he, impatiently. 'I spoke to him about marriage.'

'Oh, then it's him you want.'

'There, that's the way you always go on. It's easy to make fun, but I tell you that I am in earnest, Dolly. Your father says he would have no objection to me in the family. You know that I love you true.'

'How do I know that then?'