

THE BEAUTIFUL PRISONER.

AN HISTORICAL ROMANCE.

CHAPTER VIII.—Continued.

Countess Chavreux smiled at her husband, who shrugged his shoulders.

"Yes, yes," continued the count, laying his hand upon the head of the dreaming young lady beside him. "Is it not your daughter, dear Chavreux, to whom the spirit has manifested itself? Have not many of you who had listened to me incredulously, been gained for the future by my words in this hour of devotion? Is there not Bretignolles and dear Lespinasse at my side? Not my own daughters who were vain and prejudiced, but who now see the will of God in the revolution? John the Baptist, first baptized one, and others followed. Christ's first congregation were his apostles, and then mankind. The pious mother in Paris having converted me, I convert again with the truth I have learned, and gather in my house the citizens of the future."

The dreamy young lady, the daughter of the countess Chavreux, whose first husband, viscount Laroche-Tonard, had been beheaded, now rose in ecstasy, and kneeling before the count, exclaimed:

"Chosen of the Lord! I thank you for the conviction I have experienced! The decline of the living is near, and but those will be delivered who, like you, believe that a new human race will arise for the glory of God. I can penetrate through darkness. Beyond this sea of blood, shed by the scourges of God; beyond these corpses, and this misery and calamity, Paradise opens with its eternal sunshine. Men will be brethren, will no more be divided in masters and servants, and in this way become free of all vices which have arisen from hatred, envy, injustice, necessity and dishonour, from presumption and baseness."

The count became more and more excited by those words.

"The spirit is revealed unto her!" he interrupted.

"Ah, who can doubt that such a revolution breaks forth without producing wonderful changes! Mankind was corrupt, and must become extinct, unless the spirit of God enters into them. No more hypocrisy and deception. Liberty, liberty, my beloved, beneath the banner of the God of liberty, of love and reason, that we may enjoy the life with which He has blessed us, demanding no other piety than happiness, love, and reason. Neither kings, nor superiors and inferiors, neither bad nor good—no, we want men, pure and noble, as God has created them. God will no longer permit men to look upon Him as the creator of misery. He will destroy those who in their madness testify against Him, and will save only those who comprehend the harmony of creation with proper spirit."

After these words the count drew the young lady back to her seat, and gazed upon her, his eyes beaming with happiness. "She will be saved," he breathed. "She is truly filled with the new spirit, and will, by her word and testimony, increase our congregation."

A pale young man now approached her and said:

"For your sake, noble lady, I believe your predictions. So rich a mind cannot err, and the experience I have had causes me to long for a faith so elevating. It must be true—the revolution is like the deluge; it has destroyed all members of my family who have lived in vice and presumption. I am the last of the Montferrats."

She raised her glowing eyes upon him and replied:

"Many names have become extinct, and the lustre that has deceived you perishes. He who is converted by the holy spirit will become pure in heart."

"The house of Jacob shall be a fire," exclaimed one of the elder servants, moved by the spirit, "and the house of Joseph a flame, and the house of Esau for stubble, and they shall kindle in them and devour them, and saviours shall come up on mount Zion to judge the mount of Esau, and the kingdom shall be the Lord's."

"Truly," remarked old count Chavreux, expressing his surprise to Baron Montferrat, who thoughtfully stepped back to his place, "we will soon be the only ones that are not converted, and our death will be certain. Sacrifici, it would be better for us to become converts also."

"Believe if you can," replied count Montreuil, "but do not persuade any one, it would be of no avail."

"And of what avail would belief be, my father," added Lady Laroche-Tonard, "if you do not change the maxims of your life?"

"Eh! that is becoming Jacobin," cried he jestingly.

"The Jacobins," replied the old count contemptuously, "are the tools of destruction, and few think that behind their devastation the throne of God stands, from which all spiritual and political powers must flee. They will not stop the regeneration of mankind!"

"This revolution," said countess Chavreux, "is a curse from God. Ah, to what will it drive us?"

"We cannot predict the end," added her husband reflectively.

"Between the present time and the regeneration of mankind," mildly answered count Montreuil, "there is a chaos of confusion, vexation and sorrow, the necessary accompaniments for the destroying of the worldly, and for the establishing of the will of God. But the time of redemption will come."

"It is approaching, and bringing liberty with it!" added the beautiful fanatic.

"Happiness arises out of perdition!" whispered the other neighbour of the old count.

Quietness was restored again, and all persons had become serious.

For a long time the assembly sat lost in thought, and even those who could not boast of being converted, did not venture out of respect for the count, who so liberally and nobly afforded them an asylum, to break the devotional silence.

At last the count rose and said, as it was his custom:

"I thank the Lord for having granted me this hour which has brought me new light and spiritual comfort. I thank you, my friends, for having allowed an old man, who with ecstasy believes in the happiness of mankind, this hour of rejoicing. We will now return to the things of time, and no restraint shall be put on you who have gratified my desire to meet here. The conversion is over, and be assured that without it there is no truth. Let us now enjoy the social blessings God has given us."

By a gesture from the steward the servants threw open the folding-doors, which Benoit perceived, led to the dining saloon that was brilliantly lit up and provided with a sumptuously loaded table. The servants preceded, and took their places, while Benoit had to assist his uncle to uncork the wine.

In couples, conversing merrily, the party entered the room, preceded by the count with the two young ladies. He took his seat at the centre of the table, and the others seated themselves according to their pleasure. The supper then commenced.

CHAPTER IX.

THE MAN OF VIRTUE.

By making long day's journeys with short stoppages at the larger cities, Tallien and his beloved had reached Paris. It seemed to them as if they were making their marriage trip; and this was so far true, as they had agreed to have their union consecrated in Paris. They at first took their quarters at an hotel in the Rue St. Honoré, as they not only intended to make at their leisure a careful selection of a larger residence, but Tallien desired first to ascertain the cause of his recall, and what the committee of the public safety would decide about him.

He resolved, therefore, to call on Robespierre, who had signed the decree of the committee of the public safety. He wished to know in what position he stood towards a man who was the most powerful, the most dreaded, and most dangerous in France, and whose civility he would not willingly bring upon himself. The residence of Robespierre was in the same street, not far from his hotel; several groups of women and *Sans-culottes* were standing near the modest house, talking together. Now and then the door opened, and a gendarme stepped out, or a citizen, perhaps a spy, or a petitioner. An observer could see that many who had to pass the house described a semi-circle before it, so as to avoid coming in contact with one of the mirmidons who might unawares seize them, and drag them to the guillotine. Nothing of this kind, however, had ever occurred; peace and quiet reigned in the house of Robespierre, who received his visitors with the greatest affability, not displaying in any way his power.

Scarcely had Tallien knocked at the door, when it was opened, and the porter in his lodge looked enquiringly at him.

"To citizen Robespierre!" cried Tallien. "Is he within?"

"It may be that you can see him," answered the porter.

"Has he visitors?"

"I do not know," was the cautious reply.

Tallien hastily mounted the rather dark stairs, and when at the top, passed through a suite of rooms, which were all open and unoccupied. In the fourth room there were two negroes seated, and two clerks at their desks, who continued their work without noticing the visitor.

One of the negroes conducted Tallien into the reception-room of Robespierre, which was done without a word being uttered, even the steps were inaudible upon the thick, faded carpet. The room, the windows of which opened into a narrow yard, was dark and gloomy. A pendulum clock just commenced to strike, and its dull, slow strokes heightened the melancholy of the situation.

Tallien seated himself in a worn-out leather arm-chair while waiting for the all-powerful man; he was anticipating the part he had now to play, and being seized with fear of Robespierre, was reflecting if he would be successful in justifying himself, and removing the mistrust of the former advocate.

His meditations and soliloquies were interrupted by the opening of the door leading to the front room. Robespierre entered, and with him another man, young, with a beautiful head, and an almost girl-like melancholy face, his thick brown hair falling in disordered locks over his forehead. This beautiful, soft-eyed fanatic was St. Just, the confidential friend of Robespierre, and the most inexorable of the blood-thirsty men of terror.

Robespierre, as usual, was very neatly dressed, and his hair carefully arranged; on perceiving the young ex-commissioner a sarcastical smile passed over his white, scarred face. His small, dim eyes lighted up behind the green spectacles, and stopping, as though he were surprised at this visit, he exclaimed with hypocritical friendliness: "Ah, citizen Tallien! How comes it that you are in Paris?"

Tallien, who had risen as they entered, was visibly confused by these words. Were they spoken intentionally, or did Robespierre make a mistake?

"I come from Bordeaux, citizen Robespierre," replied he. "You have signed yourself the decree which recalls me from my commissionership."

"Just so," said Robespierre, as though he now remembered it. "You come to Paris at the right time, as I know you are a good patriot, and a friend of mine. Ah, what a precious treasure friendship is; is it not so, St. Just?"

St. Just nodded assentingly, but seemed not to be well pleased with Tallien's arrival. He appeared careless and haughty.

"Let us be seated," continued Robespierre, throwing himself into an arm-chair near the table. "You have certainly much to communicate, friend Tallien; but tell me first if I am calumniated in the province." At the same time fixing his lurking, piercing eyes upon him.

"Calumniated, citizen?" exclaimed he in a tone of great sincerity. "Who would calumniate a patriot like you? Ah, Robespierre, what a strange question, what an unjustifiable imagination of yours!"

"Do you think so?" replied Robespierre earnestly. "And still, Tallien, I who love but virtue am calumniated. Follies that are ridiculous and pernicious are reported against me. I have enemies who secretly suspect me, who accuse me of aspiring to sovereignty, of being a Jesuit, and attempting to re-establish the Church. They even have asserted that St. Just wishes to save the aristocracy, as he was nobly born himself. What does it matter how he is born, if he lives and dies, guided by good principles. It was he that moved and passed in the convention the decree which banished all ex-noblemen, declaring them to be enemies to the revolution. Ah, those enemies behind the bushes, those Héberts, and Chaumettes are knavish Catalines who do not understand me, because I believe in a Supreme Being, in immortality, and regeneration of mankind! I am charged with all the death-sentences—it is the old story of the Brissots and Girondists! Ah, Tallien, these wretches live without thinking, and do not comprehend how I am exerting my brain to stop vice, and erect for France, and mankind in general, the sovereignty of virtue!"

After these unusually animated words, Robespierre stopped, and Tallien, not knowing what conclusions to draw from the remarks of the advocate, refrained from answering. St. Just appeared dreamy.

"Hearken, Tallien," resumed Robespierre, "what is your opinion about religion?"

Tallien's surprise increased by this strange question, at a time when religion was proscribed as unpatriotic, and Hébert and Chaumette exercised their worship of reason.

"Citizen," replied he, "who occupies himself to-day with such affairs?"

"Do you believe in a Supreme Being?"

"I believe in a supreme reason."

"Bah! there is no reason without a being. I have just now been quarrelling with St. Just about it. Is it not so, friend?"

St. Just nodded again, and remarked:

"We are now occupied with theology. But Robespierre is right: at the head of the State we must be conversant in all faculties."

"Earnestly spoken, citizen, who would not approve of your ideas?" remarked Tallien, addressing Robespierre.

"I will not only extirpate vice," resumed Robespierre in a mood which seemed to-day to control him, "but will also, to the best of my abilities, clear the road for virtue. There is no doubt but the revolution is a cornucopia of bliss—and I will employ it. Yes, there exists a Supreme Being to whom we owe our reason, and the State adoring reason must also adore this Supreme Being. What is your opinion, Tallien?"

"I admire you, citizen. Is it thus that you will re-establish religion?"

"Well, is it not a necessity of virtue? This John Chaumette and his gang must be exterminated."

"Just so, Maximilian," put in St. Just dreamingly. "The principle of a good government is virtue, through which we will establish terror. They have lived long enough, they may die."

"Ah, St. Just understand me!" exclaimed Robespierre in great glee. "But do you, Tallien, understand me? Do you not think that my calling and that of my assistants is the establishing on earth of the reign of wisdom and virtue?"

Tallien felt the necessity of flattering Robespierre's excessive vanity, to avoid drawing upon himself his hatred.

"Citizen," remarked he, "you know my patriotism, and know also how I respect you as the incorruptible and virtuous patriot. The welfare of France is in your hands, and who would not assist in your good intentions? You may count upon me. Now that I am again in Paris, I am also with you."

"And in Bordeaux?" asked St. Just maliciously, exchanging a glance with Robespierre. "With whom have you been there?"

"What a strange question!" cried Tallien, becoming uneasy.

"It is reported that you have forgotten your duties in the arms of love."

"It is a lie," burst forth Tallien. "Does the number of the beheaded not give testimony of the severity with which I have done my duties? Is not Bordeaux now quiet? Are they not there happy, after terrible justice has finished its work? I ought to be praised for the way in which I have exercised my office to the honor of the republic, and not to be blamed for it."

"Friend," resumed Robespierre, "you have seen that I am not angry with you. I am rejoiced at seeing you back to Paris. I am in need of your friendship and count upon it. I have told you already that I have many enemies, and have confided to you some of the ideas the realization of which occupies my mind. But St. Just is not wrong in accusing you of weakness."

"Weakness? of what?" asked Tallien uneasily.

"He who can be ensnared by a beautiful woman," remarked Robespierre, smiling maliciously, "is not strong."

"Well," said Tallien, "is love a crime? Is it not a virtue?"

"It is a virtue, but it is often a crime."

"There is no doubt about yours," remarked St. Just. "You have saved by this love an aristocrat who has deserved death, you have forgotten your office for the love of her, flattered the Girondists, and even prosecuted brave Jacobins. You deserve to be impeached."

"St. Just, you are too severe. An error may be pardoned him on account of his patriotism, and a weakness on account of his youth. Harken, Tallien," continued he, "you have said that you are my friend."

"I consider it an honour."

"I ask therefore a pledge of your fidelity—understand me right! I do not mistrust you, but want a proof that you are a genuine patriot."

"What proof do you want of me?" asked Tallien impatiently.

"The separation from Thérèse Cabarrus, at least for some time," replied the powerful man, his eyes winking violently behind the green spectacles.

"The separation from her?" cried Tallien passionately. "For what reason? Who gives you a right to meddle with my private life?"

"Just hear him, Robespierre!" said St. Just sneeringly. "Does he not speak as if he were a novice? Fool that you are, we can arrest our beloved when ever it pleases us."

"But I will not do so, friend," resumed Robespierre. "You, yourself, Tallien, shall, as a patriot, make the sacrifice, as she is not only an aristocrat but also enervates you, and smothers in you the grand enthusiasm with which you were formerly filled for the republic. Arrest her yourself, that I or another will not be obliged to do so. Ask this sacrifice from her as a token of her love. In this manner the law will be satisfied, and the public conscience appeased; and Thérèse Cabarrus will escape impeachment and consequently death. I will retain the accusation which you shall deliver into my hands, and the impeachment will then be impossible. At the same time it will serve as a pledge of your fidelity, and should you disappoint me, the prosecution of your beloved will be subject to my will. I have shown you the road to safety, as I am your friend and expect your assistance in the convention at the approaching crisis. Do now what you consider prudent—remember that self-denial is a virtue."

He then pulled out his watch and hastily exclaimed: "It is four o'clock—it is time to repair to the Assembly."

CHAPTER X.

THE PROSECUTION.

A few minutes later Tallien was in his dwelling, trembling with excitement, anger and fear.

"Thérèse, you must depart immediately!" cried he impetuously. "Every minute brings danger. I must save you, my beloved; they are coming to arrest you."