

The Interpreter.

CHAPTER III.

(CONTINUED.)

'Hush Victor' said his father, laughing, in spite of himself, at his child's forwardness. 'Look at your little English friend; he stands quiet there, and says nothing. I shall make an Englishman of my boy, Egerton; he shall go to an English school and learn to ride and box, and to be a man. I love England and the English. Egerton, your good health! I wish my boy to be like yours. Sapperment! he is quiet but I will vouch for it he fears neither man nor devil.'

My father's face lighted up with pleasure as he pressed me to his side. Kind father! I believe he thought his ugly, timid, shrink-child was the admiration of all.

'I think the boy has courage,' he said, 'but for that I give him little credit. All men are naturally brave; it is but education that makes us reflect; hence we learn to fear consequences, and so become cowards.'

'Pardon, mon cher,' observed the Austrian general, with a laugh. 'Now, my opinion is that all men are naturally cowards, and that we alone deserve credit who overcome that propensity, and so distinguish ourselves for what we choose to call bravery, but which we ought rather to term self-command. What say you, De Rohan? You have been in action, and 'on the ground,' too, more than once. Were you not curiously afraid?'

De Rohan smiled good-humoredly, and filled his glass.

'Shall I tell you my opinion of courage?' said he, holding up the sparkling fluid to the light. 'I think of courage what our Hungarian Hussars think of a breastplate. Of what use, say they, 'is cuirass and back-piece, and all that weight of defensive armor? Give us a pint of wine in our stomach, and we are breastplate all over.' Come, Wallenstein, put your breastplate on—it is very light, and fits very easily.'

The general filled again, but returned to the charge.

'You remind me,' said he, 'of a conversation I overheard when I was a lieutenant in the first regiment of Uhlans. We were drawn up on the crest of a hill opposite a battery in position not half-a-mile from us. If they had retired us two hundred yards, we should have been under cover; but we never got the order, and there we stood. Whish! the round shot came over our heads and under our feet, and into our ranks, and we lost two men and five horses before we knew where we were. The soldiers grumbled sadly, and a few seemed inclined to turn rein and go to the rear. Mind you, it is not fair to ask cavalry to sit still and be pounded for amusement; but the officers being cowards by education, Mr. Egerton, did their duty well, and kept the men together. I was watching my troop anxiously enough, and I heard one man say to his comrade, 'Look at Johann, Fritz! what a bold one he is; he thinks nothing of the fire; see, he tickles the horse of his front rank man even now, to make him kick.'

'Exactly my argument,' interrupted my father; 'he was an uneducated man, consequently saw nothing to be afraid of. Bravery, after all, is only insensibility to danger.'

'Fritz did not think so,' replied Wallenstein. 'Hear his owner—Johann is a blockhead,' he replied, 'he has never been under fire before, and does not know his danger; but you and I, old comrade, we deserve to be made corporals; for we sit quiet here on our horses, though we are most curiously afraid.'

The guests all laughed; and the discussion would have terminated, but that De Rohan, who had drunk more wine than was his custom, and who was very proud of his boy, could not refrain from once more turning the conversation to Victor's merits, and to that personal courage by which, however much he might affect to make light of it in society, he set such store.

'Well, Wallenstein,' said he; 'you hold that Nature makes us cowards; if so, my boy here ought to show something of the white feather. Come hither, Victor. Are you afraid of being in the dark?'

and it closed up a burst of laughter, which to us, bound, as we fancied, on an expedition of unparalleled danger, sounded to the last degree unfeeling.

Hand-in-hand we two children walked through the anteroom, and across the hall; nor was it until we reached the first landing on the wide, gloomy oak staircase, that we paused to consider our future plans, and to scan the desperate nature of our enterprise. There were but two more flights of steps, a green-baize door to go through, a few yards of passage to traverse, and then, Victor assured me, in trembling accents, we should be in the Ghost's Gallery. My heart beat painfully, and my informant began to cry.

We laid our plans, however, with considerable caution, and made a solemn compact of alliance, offensive and defensive, that no power, natural or supernatural, was to shake. We were on no account whatsoever to leave go of each other's hands. Thus linked, and Victor having his sword drawn,—for the furtherance of which warlike attitude I was to keep carefully on his left,—we resolved to advance, if possible, talking the whole way up to the fatal table whereon lay the Breviary, and then snatching it up hastily, to return backwards, so as to present our front to the foe till we reached the green-baize door, at which point *sautez qui peut* was to be the order; and we were to rush back into the dining-room as fast as our legs could carry us. But in the event of our progress being interrupted by the ghost (who appeared, Victor informed me, in the shape of a huge black dog with green eyes,—a description at which my blood ran cold,—and which he added had been seen once by his governess, and twice by an old drunken Hussar who waited on him and answered to the name of Hans), we were to lie down on our faces, so as to hide our eyes from the ghostly vision, and scream till we alarmed the house; but on no account we repeated in the most binding and solemn manner—on no account were we to let go of each other's hands. This compact made and provided, we advanced towards the gallery, Victor feeling the edge and point of his weapon with an appearance of confidence that my own beating heart told me must be put on for the occasion, and would vanish at the first appearance of danger.

And now the green door is passed and we are in the gallery: a faint light through the stained windows only serves to show its extent and general gloom, whilst its corners and abutments are black as a wolf's mouth. Not a servant in the castle would willingly traverse the gallery after dark, and we two children feel that we are at last alone, and cut off from all hopes of assistance or rescue. But the Breviary lies on the table at the far end, and, dreading the very sound of our own footsteps, we steal quietly on. All at once Victor stops short.

'What is that?' says he, in trembling accents.

The question alone takes away my breath, and I feel the drops break out on my lips and forehead. We stop simultaneously and listen. Encouraged by the silence, we creep on, and for an instant I experience that vague, tremulous feeling of excitement which is almost akin to pleasure. But hark!—a heavy breath!—a groan!!! My hair stands on end, and Victor's hand clasps mine like a vice. I dare scarce turn my head towards the sound,—it comes from that far corner. There it is! A dark object in the deepest gloom of that recess seems crouching for a spring. 'The ghost!—the ghost!' I exclaim, losing all power of self-command in an agony of fear. 'The dog!—the dog!' shrieks Victor; and away we scour hard as our legs can carry us, forgetful of our solemn agreements and high resolves, forgetful of all but that safety lies before, and terror of the ghastliest description behind; away we scour Victor leaving his sword where he dropped it at the first alarm, through the green door, down the oak staircase, across the hall, nor stop till we reach the banqueting-room, with its reassuring faces and its lights, chattering beyond measure by contrast with the gloom from which we have escaped.

What shouts of laughter met as we approached the table. 'Well, Victor, where's the Breviary?' said the Count. 'What! my boy, was Nature too strong for you in the dark, with nobody looking on?' asked the General. 'See! he has lost his sword,' laughed another. 'And the little Engländer, he, too, was panic-struck,' remarked a fourth, 'he ran from them all and took refuge at

been making merry in the hall, are I beg of this sound asleep. It is the steward's custom to see all safe before he lights his lamp and retires to rest; but to-night he shades it carefully with a wrinkled hand that trembles strangely, and his white face peers into the darkness, as though he were about some deed of shame. He steals into the Ghost's Gallery, and creeps silently to the farther end. There is a dark object muffled in a cloak in the gloomiest corner, and the light from the steward's lamp reveals a fine young man, sleeping with that thorough abandonment which is only observable in those who are completely unwarmed and overdone. It is some minutes ere the old man can wake him.

'My boy,' says he; 'my boy, it is time for us to part. Hard, hard it is to be robbed of my son—robbed—' and the old man checks himself as though the word recalled some painful associations.

'Ay, father,' was the reply, 'you know our old Croatian proverb, 'He who steals is but a borrower.' Nevertheless, I do not wish the Austrians to 'borrow' me, in case I should never be returned; and it is unmannerly for the lieutenant to occupy the same quarters as the general. I must be off before dawn; but surely it cannot be midnight yet.'

'In less than an hour the day will break, my son. I have concealed you here because not a servant of the household dare set foot in the Ghost's Gallery till daylight, and you are safe; but twenty-four more hours must see you on the Danube, and you must come here no more. Oh, my boy! my boy!—lost to save me!—dishonored that I might not be disgraced—my boy, my boy! and the old man burst into a passion of weeping that seemed to convulse his very frame with agony.

The son had more energy and self-command; his voice did not even shake as he soothed and quieted the old man with a protecting fondness like that of a parent for a child. 'My father,' said he, 'there is no dishonor where there is no guilt. My first duty is to you, and were it to do again, I would do it. What? it was but a momentary qualm and a snatch at the box; and now you are safe. Father, I shall come back some day, and offer you a home. Fear not for me. I have it here in my breast, the stuff of which men make fortune. I can rely upon myself. I can obey orders; and, father, when others are bewildered and confused, I can command. I feel it; I know it. Let me but get clear of the 'Eagle's' talons, and fear not for me, dear father, I shall see you again, and be prosperous and happy yet. But, how to get away?—have you thought of a plan? Can I get a good horse here? Does the Count know I am in trouble, and will he help me? Tell me all, father, and I shall see my own way, I will answer for it.'

'My gallant boy,' said the steward, despite of himself moved to admiration by the self-reliant bearing of his son; 'there is but one chance; for the Count could not but hand you over to Wallenstein if he knew you were in the castle, and then it would be a pleasant feat, and the nearest tree. The General is a jovial comrade and a good-humored acquaintance; but, as a matter of duty, he would hang his own son and go to dinner afterwards with an appetite none the worse. No, no. Trust to an Austrian's mercy and confess yourself.' I have a better plan than that. The Zingynies are in the village; they held their merry-making here yesterday. I saw their Queen last night after you arrived. I have arranged it all with her. A gipsy's dress, a dyed ekin, and the middle of the troop. Not an Austrian soldier in Hungary that will detect you then. Banishment is better than death. Oh, my boy, my boy, and once more the old man gave way and wept.

'Forward, then, father,' said the younger man, whom I now recognized as my traveling acquaintance, 'there is no time to lose now. How can we get out of the castle without alarming the household? I leave it all to you now. It will be my turn some day. And as he spoke he rose from the steps on which he had been lying when his recumbent form had so alarmed Victor and myself, and accompanied his father down a winding staircase that seemed let into the massive wall of the old building. My curiosity was fearfully excited. I would have given all my playthings to follow them. I crept stealthily on naked feet and all, but I was not close enough behind, and the door shut quietly with a

strung amongst the jetty looks of the Zingyni beauties. The men are not so particular in their attire. One sinewy fellow wears only a goatskin shirt and a string of beads round his neck, but the generality are clad in the coarse cloth of the country, much tattered, and bearing evident symptoms of weather and wear. The little mischievous urchins who are clinging round their mothers' necks, or dragging back from their mothers' hands, and holding on to their mothers' skirts, are almost naked. Small heads and hands and feet, all the marks of what we are accustomed to term high birth are hereditary among the gipsies; and we doubt if the Queen of the South herself was a more queenly-looking personage than the dame now marching in the midst of the throng, and conversing earnestly with her companion, a resolute-looking man scarce entering upon the prime of life, with a gipsy complexion, but a bearing in which it is not difficult to recognize the soldier. He is talking to his protectress—or such she is—with a military frankness and vivacity, which even to that royal personage, accustomed though she be to exact all the respect due to her rank, appear by no means displeasing. The lady is verging on the autumn of her charms (their summer must have been scorching indeed!), and though a masculine beauty, is a beauty nevertheless. Black-browed is she, and deep-colored, with eyes of fire, and looks of jet, even now untinged with grey. Straight and regular are her features, and the wide mouth, with its strong, even dazzling teeth, betokens an energy and force of will which would do credit to the other sex. She has the face of a woman that would care much, labor much, everything but love much. She ought to be a queen, and she is one, none the less despotic for railing over a tribe of gipsies instead of a civilized community.

'None dispute my word here,' says she, 'and my word is pledged to bring you to the Danube. Let me see a soldier of them all lay a hand upon you, and you shall see the gipsy brood show their teeth. A long knife is no bad weapon at close quarters. When you have got to the top of the wheel you will remember me!'

The soldier laughed and lightly replied; 'Yours are the sort of eyes one does not easily forget, mother. I wish I were a prince of the blood in your nation. As I am situated now I can only be dazzled by so much beauty and go my ways.'

The woman checked him sternly, almost savagely, though a few minutes before she had been listening, half-amused, to his gay, and not very respectful conversation.

'Hush! she said, 'trifler. Once more I say, when the wheel has turned, remember me. Give me your hand. I can read it plainer so.'

'What, mother?' laughed out her companion. 'Every gipsy can tell fortunes; mine has been told many a time, but it never came true.'

She was studying the lines on his palm with earnest attention. She raised her dark eyes angrily to his face.

'Blind! blind!' she answered, in a low, eager tone. 'The best of you cannot see a yard upon your way. Look at that white road, winding and winding many a mile before us on the plain. Because it is flat and soft and smooth as far as we can see, will there be no hills on our journey, no rocks to cut our feet—no thorns to tear our limbs? Can you see the Danube rolling on far, far before us? Can you see the river you will have to cross some day, or can you tell me where it leads? I have the map of our journey here in my brain; I have the map of your career here on your hand. Once more I say, when the chiefs are in council, and the hosts are melting like snow before the sun, and the earth quakes, and the heavens are filled with thunder, and the shower that falls scorches and crushes and blasts—remember me. I follow the line of wealth: Man of gold! spoil on; here a horse, there a diamond; hundreds to uphold the right, thousands to spare the wrong; both hands full, and broad lands near a city of palaces, and a king's favor; and a nation of slaves beneath thy foot. I follow the line of pleasure: Costly amber, rich embroidery, dark eyes melting for the Croat; glances unveiled for the shaven head, many and loving and beautiful; a garland of roses, all for one—rose by rose plucked and withered and thrown away; one tender but remaining; cherish it till it blows, and wear it till it dies. I follow the line: it leads towards the rising sun—

withstanding my misgivings about a strange pony, for I was always timid on horseback, I illigly accepted his offer of a mount, and jumped into the saddle almost as readily as my little companion, a true Hungarian, with whom,

Like Mad Tom, the chiefest care
Was horse to ride and weapon wear.

Of course, Victor had a complete establishment of ponies belonging to himself; and equally of course, he had detailed to me at great length their several merits and peculiarities, with an authentic biography of his favorite—a stiff little chestnut, rejoicing in the name of 'Gold-kind,' which, signifying, as it does 'the golden-child,' or darling, he seemed to think an exceedingly happy allusion to the chestnut skin and endearing qualities of his treasure.

Fortunately, my pony was very quiet; and although, when mounted, my playfellow went off at a score, we were soon some miles from Edeldorf, without any event occurring to upset my own equilibrium or the sobriety of my steed. Equally fortunately, we took the road by which the gipsies had travelled. Ere long, we overtook the cavalcade as it wound slowly along the plain. Heads were bowed to Victor, and blessings called down upon the family of De Rohan; for the old count was at all times a friend to the friendless, and a refuge to the poor.

'Good luck to you, young count, shall I tell your fortune?' said one.

'Little, honorable cavalier, give me your hand, and cross it with a 'zwanziger' said another.

'Be silent, children, and let me speak to the young De Rohan,' said the gipsy queen; and she laid her hand upon his bridle, and fairly brought Gold-kind to a halt.

Victor looked half afraid, although he began to laugh.

'Let me go,' said he, tugging vigorously at his rein; 'papa desired me not to have my fortune told.'

'Not by a common Zingynie,' urged the queen, archly; 'but I am the mother of all these. My pretty boy, I was at your christening, and have held you in my arms many a time. Let me tell your happy fortune.'

'Victor began to relent. 'If Vere will have his told first, I will,' said he, turning half bashfully, half eagerly to me.

I proffered my hand readily to the gipsy, and crossed it with one of the two pieces of silver which constituted the whole of my worldly wealth. The gipsy laughed and began to prophesy in German. There are some events a child never forgets; and I remember every word she said as well as if had been spoken yesterday.

'Over the sea, and again over the sea. Thou shalt know grief and hardship and losses, and the dove shall be driven from its nest. And the dove's heart shall become like the eagle's, that flies alone, and flashes her beak in the alain. Beat on, though the poor wings be bruised by the tempest, and the breast be sore, and the heart sink. Beat on against the wind, and seek no shelter till thou find thy resting place at last. The time will come—beat on.'

The woman laughed as she spoke; but there was a kindly tone in her voice and a pitying look in her bright eyes that went straight to my heart. Many a time since in life, when the stars had indeed been bold, and the wings so weary, have I thought of those words of encouragement. 'The time will come—beat on.'

It was now Victor's turn, and he crossed his palm with a golden ducat ere he presented it to the sibyl. This was of itself sufficient to insure him a magnificent future; and as the queen passed the lines on his little hand, with its pink fingers, she indulged in anticipations of magnificence proper to the handsome donation of the child.

'Thou shalt be a 'De Rohan,' my darling, and I can promise thee no brighter lot—broad acres, and blessings from the poor, and horses, and wealth, and honors. And thy sword shall spare thee, and the battle turn aside to let thee pass. And thou shalt wed a fair bride with dark eyes and a queen's brow; but beware of St. Hubert's day. Birth and burial, birth and burial—beware of St. Hubert's Day.'

'But I want to be a soldier,' exclaimed Victor, who seemed much disappointed at the future which was prognosticated for him; 'the De Rohans were always soldiers. Mother, can't you make out that I shall be a soldier?' still holding the little hand open