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The Helmet of Navarre

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(Continued.)

"Not so loud! You will have the guard on us! Yes, he is to go. At first Monsieur did not tell even him, he desired to keep his secret to the king so secret. But this morning he took Vigo into his confidence, and nothing would serve the man but to go. He watches over Monsieur like a hen over a chick."

"Then it will be three to three," I said. I thought of Gervais, Xeu-gris, and Ponton, for of course I would take no part in it.

"Three to two; Lucas will not fight. Lucas must be a poltroon, indeed!"

"But Vigo and Monsieur—" I began.

"Aye, they are quick enough with their swords. Your side must be quicker, that's all. If you are sudden enough you can easily kill the duke before he can withdraw."

"Talk of words like thunderbolts! All the thunder of heaven could not have whistled me like those words. Xeu-gris and his outfit! It was the duke after all! I could not speak. I looked I know not how. But it was dusk in the arch."

"It sounds simple," he went on. "But, three of you as you are, you will have trouble with Vigo. That is all. I have told you all. I must get back before I am missed. Good luck to the enterprise."

"Still I stood like a block of wood."

"Tell M. Gervais to remember me," he said, and opening the door, passed in. I heard him lock and bolt it after him, and his footsteps hurrying down the passageway."

"Then I came to myself and sprang to the door and beat furiously upon it. But if he heard he was afraid to respond. After a futile moment that seemed an hour I rushed out of the arch and around to the great gate."

The grilles were closed as before, but the sentry's face, luckily, was strange to me.

"Open open! I shouted, breathless. "I must see M. le Duc!"

"Who are you?" he demanded, staring.

"My name is Broux. I have news for M. le Duc. Let me in. It's a matter of life and death."

"Why, I suppose, then, I must let you in," that good fellow answered, drawing back the bolts. "But you must wait here!"

The gate was open. I took these advantages of him by sliding under his arm and shooting across the court up the steps to the house. The door stood open, and a couple of lackeys lounged on a bench in the hall.

"M. le Duc!" I cried. "I must see him. They jumped up, the picture of bewilderment."

"Who are you? How came you here?" cried the quicker-tongued of the two.

"The sentry opened for me. Where-am I find M. le Duc? I must see him! I have news!"

"M. le Duc seen no one today," the second lackey announced pompously.

"But I must see him, I tell you," I repeated. I had completely lost what little head I ever had; it seemed to me that if I could not see M. le Duc on the instant I should find him waiting in his room. "I must see him," I cried parrot-like. "It is a matter of life and death!"

"From whom do you come?"

"That's my affair. Enough that I come with news of the highest moment. Me, me!"

"If you do not get me quickly to M. le Duc."

"They looked at each other, somewhat impressed."

"I will go for M. Constant," said the one who had spoken first.

Constant was master of the Household; M. le Duc had inherited him with the estate and kept him in his place with the estate's rule. He was old, fat, and self-important, and withal no friend to me.

"Oh, Vigo will not come. He is with Monsieur. If I bring M. Constant, it is the best I can do for you."

I had recovered myself sufficiently by this time to remember the nature of lackeys, and gave the messenger the last silver piece I had in the world. He registered it contemptuously, but pocketed it and departed in leisurely fashion up the stairs. The other was not too good to cross-examine me.

"What sort of news have you? Do you come from the king?" he asked in a lowered voice.

"No."

"From M. de Valere?"

"No."

"Then who the devil are you?"

"Felix Broux of St. Quentin."

"Ah, St. Quentin," he said, as if he found that rather tame. "You bring news from there?"

"No, I do not. Think you I shall tell you? This news is for Monsieur."

"It won't reach Monsieur unless you learn politeness. I took the gentleman of his household," he retorted.

We were getting into a lively quarrel

when Constant appeared on the stairway—Constant and the lackey who had fetched him, and two more lackeys, and a page, all of whom had somehow scented that something was in the wind. They came flocking about us as I said this, and I saw M. Constant! You know me, Felix Broux of St. Quentin. I must see M. le Duc!

"Constant's face of surprise at me changed to one of malice. Down at St. Quentin he had suffered much from us rages, as a slow, peevish old dotard must have done."

"I had played many a prank on him, but I had not thought he would revenge himself at such times as this. He looked at me with a spiteful grin, and said to the men:

"He lies. I do not know him. I never saw him."

"Never saw me, Felix Broux?" I cried, completely taken aback.

"No," maintained Monsieur to Lucas, "I cannot think it." And to Vigo he said: "I shall accuse you when I accuse myself. But—none knew this thing save our three selves." And his gaze went back to Lucas.

"It is not likely to be he," I said, impelled to be just to him though I did not like him, "for they meant to kill him as well."

Lucas started, then instantly recovered himself.

"A comprehensive plot, Monsieur," he said, with a smile.

"Then who was it?" cried Monsieur to me. "You know. Speak."

"There is a spy in the house—an eavesdropper," I said, and then paused.

"Aye," said Monsieur. "Who?"

Now the answer to this was easy, yet I flinched before it; for I knew well enough what Monsieur would do. He feared no man, and waited on no man's advice. And if he was a good lover, he was a good hater. He would not inform the governor, and await the tardy course of justice, that would probably accomplish nothing. Nor would he consider the troubled times and the danger of his position, and ignore the affair, as many would have deemed best. He would not stop to think what the sixteen might have to say to it. No; he would call out his guards and slay the plotters in the Rue Coujeperre like the wolves they were. It was right he should, but I owed my life to Xeu-gris.

"His name, man, his name!" Monsieur was crying.

"Monsieur," I returned, flushing hot, "Monsieur."

"Do you know his name?"

"Yes, Monsieur, I know his name, but—"

Monsieur looked at me in surprise and frowning impatience. Quickly Lucas struck in:

"Monsieur, I have grave doubts of the boy's honesty."

"Doubt!" cried Monsieur, with a sudden laugh. "It is not a case for doubts. The boy states facts."

He seated himself in his chair, his face growing stern again. The little action seemed to make him no longer merely my questioner, but my judge.

"Now, Felix Broux, let us get to the bottom of this."

"I began, struggling to put the case clearly. 'I learned of the plot by accident. I did not guess for a long time it was you who were the victim. When I found out that I came straight here to you, Monsieur, there were four men in the plot, and one of them has stood my friend.'

"And my assassin!"

"He is a black-hearted villain!" I acknowledged. "For he swore no harm was meant to you, he swore it was only a private grudge against M. Lucas. But

that was Vigo's way. The toughest character I ever touched. He was more sense and fewer airs than any other, he saw at once that I was in earnest; and Constant's voluble protests were as so much wind. The last word made the man. Though Constant was Master of the Household and Vigo only Esquire, yet Vigo ruled every corner of the establishment and every man in it, save only Monsieur, who ruled him."

He said no word to me as we climbed the broad stair; neither reproved me for the fracas nor questioned me about my coming. He would not pry into Monsieur's business; and, save as I concerned Monsieur, he had no interest in me whatsoever. He led the way straight into an antechamber, where a page sprang up to bar our passage.

"No one may enter, M. Vigo, not even you. M. le Duc has ordered it. Why, Felix? You in Paris?"

"I enter," said Vigo; and, sweeping Marcel aside, he knocked loudly.

"I came last night," I found time to say under my breath to my old comrade before the door was opened.

The handsome secretary whom I had taken for the count stood in the doorway looking askance at us. He knew me at once and wondered.

"You cannot enter, Vigo. M. le Duc is occupied."

He made to shut the door, but Vigo's foot was over the sill.

"Nathless, I must enter," he answered unabashed and pushed his way into the room.

"Then you must answer for it," returned the secretary, with a scowl that sat ill on his delicate face.

"You shall answer for it if it turns out a mare's nest," said Vigo, in a low, menacing voice to me. But I hardly heard him. I passed him and Lucas, and flew down the long room to Monsieur.

M. le Duc was seated before a table heaped with paper. He had been watching the scene at the door in surprise and anger. He looked at me with a sharp frown, while the deerhound at his feet rose on its haunches growling.

"Roland!" I said. The dog sprang up and came to me.

"Monsieur," Monsieur exclaimed, with his quick, warm smile—a smile no man in France could match for radiance. I had no thought of kneeling, of making obeisance, of waiting permission to speak.

"Monsieur," I cried, half choked, "there is a plot—a vile plot to murder you!"

"They set on you on your way—three of them—to run you through before you can draw."

"But, ventre bleu! Monsieur is not alone."

"No," he walks between you and M. Lucas."

Not one of them spoke. They stared at me as if I were something uncanny. I, a raw country boy, disclosing a perfect knowledge of their most intimate plans!

"How know you this?" Monsieur demanded of me. But he was not looking at me. His keen glance went first to Lucas, then to Vigo, the two men who had shared his confidence. The secretary cried out:

"You cannot think, Monsieur, that I betrayed you?"

Vigo said nothing. His steady eyes never left Monsieur's face.

"No," answered Monsieur to Lucas, "I cannot think it." And to Vigo he said: "I shall accuse you when I accuse myself. But—none knew this thing save our three selves." And his gaze went back to Lucas.

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when one of them let out the truth I came straight to you."

"That is likely true," said Vigo, "for he was ready to kill the men who barred his way."

"You were in a plot to kill my secretary!"

"Ah, Monsieur!" I cried.

"You—Felix Broux!"

I curled with shame.

"M. Lucas had struck me," I muttered; "I thought the fight was fair enough. And they threatened my life."

Monsieur's contemptuous eyes shrivelled me so flame shrivels a leaf.

"You—a Broux of St. Quentin!"

Lucas, who had watched me close all the while as they three did, said now:

"I believe he is a cheat, Monsieur. There is no plot. He has learned of your plan through the eavesdropper he speaks of and thinks to make credit out of a trumped-up tale of murder."

"No," answered Monsieur. "You may think that, Lucas, for he is a stranger to you, but I know him. He was a fool sometimes, but he was never dishonest. You used to be fond of me, Felix. What has happened to make you consort with my enemies?"

"Ah, Monsieur, I love you. I have always loved you." "I cried. "I am not lying now, nor cheating you. There is a plot I learned it and came straight to you, though I was under oath not to betray them."

"Then in Heaven's name, Felix," burst out Vigo, "which side are you on?"

Monsieur began to laugh.

"That's what I should like to know. For by St. Quentin, I can make nothing of it."

"Monsieur," insisted Lucas, "whatever he was once, I believe him a trickster now."

Monsieur bent his keen eyes on me.

"No, he is plainly in earnest. Therefore with patience I look to get some sense out of the snarl of a story. Something is there we have not yet fathomed."

"Will Monsieur let me speak?"

"I have done naught but urge you to do so for some time past," he answered dryly.

"Monsieur, you know my father would not let me leave St. Quentin with you, three months back. But at length he said I should come, and I reached Paris last night and, since it was late, lodged at the inn. This morning I came to your gate, but the guard would not let me enter. I was so mad to see you, Monsieur, that when you drove out I sprang up on your coach-step."

"Ah," said Monsieur, a new light breaking upon him, "that was you, Felix? I did not know you! I was thinking of other matters. And Lucas took you for a miscreant. Now I am sorry."

If I had been a noble he could not have spoken franker apology. But at once he was stern again.

"And because my secretary took you in all good faith for a possible assassin and struck you to save and you turn traitor and take part in a plot to slay on him and kill him! I had believed that of some hireling lackey, not of a Broux."

"Monsieur, I was wrong—a thousand times wrong. I knew that as soon as I had sworn. And when I found it was you they meant, I came to you, oath or no oath."

"There spoke the Broux!" cried Monsieur with his brilliant smile. "Now you are Felix. Who are my would-be-murderers?"

"We had come round in a circle to the place where we had stood before, and here we stood again."

"Monsieur, I would tell you all before you could count ten—tell you their names, their whereabouts, everything—were it not for one man who stood my friend."

(To be continued.)



"M. le Duc, let me in, it is a matter of life and death."

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