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"The Helmet of Navarre"

BY BERTHA RUNKLE

XV.

My Lord Mayenne

I KNEW she was shutting the door by the click of the latch; in the next second I made the discovery that she was still on my side of it. "What?" I was beginning, when she laid her hand over my mouth. A line of light showed through the crack. She had not quite closed the door on account of the noise of the latch. She tried again; again it rattled and she desisted. I heard her flattered breathing and I heard something else—a rapid, heavy tread in the corridor without. Into the council room came a man carrying a lighted taper. It was Mayenne.

Mademoiselle, with a whispered "God save us!" sank in a heap at my feet.

I bent over her to find if she had swooned, when she seized my hand in a sharp grip that told me plain as words to be quiet.

Mayenne was yawning; he had a rumpled and dishevelled look like one just roused from sleep. He scooped over to the table, lighted the three-branched candelstick standing there, and seated himself with his back to us, pulling about some papers. I hardly dared glance at him, for fear my eyes should draw his; the crack of our door seemed to call aloud to him to mark it; but the candle-light scarcely pierced the shadows of the room.

More quick footsteps in the corridor. Mayenne hitched his chair about, sideways to the table and to us, facing the outer door. A tall man in black entered, saluting the general from the threshold.

"So you have come back?" spoke the duke in his own tones. It was impossible to tell whether the words were a welcome or a sentence.

"Yes," answered the other in a voice as non-committal as Mayenne's own. He shut the door after him and walked over to the table.

"And how goes it?"

"Badly," the newcomer threw his hat aside and sat down without waiting for an invitation.

"What! Badly, sirrah!" Mayenne exclaimed sharply. "You come to me with that report?"

"I do, monsieur," answered the other with cool insolence, leaning back in his chair. The light fell directly on his face and proved to me what I had guessed at his first word. The duke's night visitor was Lucas. "Yes," he repeated indifferently, "it has gone badly. In fact, your game is up."

Mayenne jumped to his feet, bringing his fist down on the table.

"You tell me this?"

Lucas regarded him with an easy smile.

"Unfortunately, monsieur, I do."

Mayenne turned on him, cursing. Lucas with the quickness of a cat sprang a yard aside, dagger unsheathed.

"Put up that knife!" shouted Mayenne.

"When you put up yours, monsieur."

"I have drawn none."

"In your sleeve, monsieur."

"Liar!" cried Mayenne.

I know not who was lying, for I could not tell whether the blade that flashed now in the duke's hand came from his sleeve or his belt. But if he had not drawn before he had drawn now and rushed at Lucas. He dodged and they circled round each other, wary as two matched cocks. Lucas was strictly on the defensive; Mayenne, the less agile, by reason of his weight, could make no chance to strike. He drew off presently.

"I'll have your neck wrung for this," he panted.

"For what, monsieur?" asked Lucas, impatiently. "For defending myself?"

Mayenne let the charge go by default.

"For coming to me with the tale of your failures. Nom de dieu, do I employ you to do that?"

"We are none of us gods, monsieur. You yourself lost Iry."

Mayenne backed over to his chair and seated himself, laying his knife on the table in front of him. His face smoothed out to good humor—he meant tribute to his power of self-control. For the written words can convey no notion of the maddening insolence of Lucas bearing—an insolence so studied that it almost seemed unconscious and was thereby well-nigh impossible to silence.

"Sit down," bade the duke, "and tell me."

Lucas, standing at the foot of the table, observed:

"They turned you out of your bed, monsieur, to see me. It was unnecessary severity. My tale will keep till morning."

"By Heaven, it shall not!" Mayenne shouted. "Beware how much further you dare anger me, you Satan's cub!"

He was fingering the dagger again as if he longed to plunge it into Lucas's gutlets, and I rather marvelled that he did not, or summon his guard to do it. For I could well understand how infuriating was Lucas. He carried himself with an air of easy familiarity, unbecomingly to the first noble in the land. Mayenne's chosen role was the unmoved, the inscrutable, but Lucas beat him at his own game and drove him out into the open of passion and violence. It was a miracle to me that the man lived—was, indeed, he were a prince in disguise.

"Satan's cub!" Lucas repeated, laughing. "Our late king had called me that, pardieu! But I knew not you acknowledged Satan in the family."

"I ordered him to wake me if you returned in the night," Mayenne went on gruffly. "When I heard you had been here I knew something was wrong—unless the thing were done."

"It is not done. The whole plot is ruined."

"Nom de dieu! If it is by your bungling."

"It was not by my bungling," Lucas answered with the first touch of heat he had shown. "It was fate—and that fool Grammont."

"Explain, then, and quickly, or it will be the worse for you."

Lucas sat down, the table between them.

"Look here," he said abruptly, leaning forward over the board. "Have you Mar's boy?"

"What boy?"

"The boy who was with the old defance. You have yet to make the acquaintance of St. Quentin's equestrian regiment of your lansquenets couldn't keep him out."

"Does he never take wife?" Mayenne asked, lifting his hand with shut fingers over the table and then opening them.

"That is easy to say, monsieur, sitting here in your own hotel stuffed with your soldiers. But it was not so easy to do, alone in my enemy's house, when at the least suspicion of me they had broken me on the wheel."

"That is the rub!" Mayenne cried violently. "There is the trouble with all of you. You think more of the safety of your own skins than of accomplishing your work. Mordieu! where should I be today—where would the Cause be—if my first care was my own peril?"

"Then that is where we differ, uncle. Lucas answered with a cold sneer.

"You are, it is well known, a patriot, tolling for the Church and the King of Spain, with never a thought for the welfare of Charles of Lorraine, Lord of Mayenne. But I, Paul of Lorraine, your humble nephew, lord of my brain and hands, freely admit that I am willing for no one but the aforesaid Paul of Lorraine. I should find it most inconvenient to get on without a head on my shoulders, and I shall do my best to keep it there."

"You need not tell me that; I know it well enough," Mayenne answered. "You are each for himself, none for me. At the same time, Paul, you will do well to remember that your interest is to forward my interest."

"To the full, monsieur. And I shall kill you St. Quentin yet. You need not call me a coward; I am working for a dearer stake than any man in your ranks."

"Well," Mayenne rejoined, "get on with your tale."

Lucas went on, Mayenne listening quietly, with no further word of blame, he moved not so much as an eyelid till Lucas told of M. le Duc's departure, when he hung himself forward in his chair with a sharp oath.

"What! by daylight?"

"Aye, he was afraid, after this discovery, of being set on at night."

"He went out in broad day?"

"St. Vigo said, I saw him not," Lucas answered with something of his old nonchalance.

"Moi tonnerre du diable!" Mayenne shouted. "If this is true, he got out in broad day, I'll have the head of the traitor that let him. I'll nail it over his own gate."

"It is not worth your fret, monsieur," Lucas said lightly. "If you did, how long would it avail? Souvent homme trahit; that is the only fixed fact about him. If they pass St. Quentin today, they will pass some one else tomorrow, and some one else still the day after."

Mayenne looked at him, half angry, half startled into some deeper emotion at this deft twisting of his own words.

"Souvent homme trahit, Malhabile qu'il se."

he repeated musingly. He might have been saying over the motto of the house of Lorraine. For the Gunse's believed in no man's good faith, as no man believed in theirs.

"Souvent homme trahit," Mayenne said again, as if in the words he recognized a bitter verity. And that is as true as King Francis's version, I suppose you will be the next, Paul."

"When I give up hope of Lorraine," Lucas said bluntly.

I caught myself suddenly pitying the two of them: Mayenne, because, for all his power and splendor and rank next to a king's and ability second to none, he dared trust no man—not the son of his body nor his brother. He had made his own hell and dwelt in it, and there was no need to wish him any ill. And Lucas, perjured traitor was farther from the goal of his desire than if he had slain him in the Rue Compejarret.

"What next? It appears you escaped the redoubted Vigo," Mayenne went on in his every-day tone; and the vision faded, and I saw him once more as the greatest noble and greatest seconded he had been, and feared and hated him, and Lucas too, as the betrayer of my dear Lord Etienne.

"Trust me for that."

"Then came you here?"

"Not at once. I tracked Mar and the Broux to Mar's old lodgings at the Three Lanterns. When I had dozed them to the door I came here and worked upon Lorraine to write Mar a letter commanding his presence. For I thought that the night was yet young and tomorrow he might be out of my reach. Well, it appears that he had not the courage to come but he sent his boy. I was not sorry. I thought I could settle him more quietly at the inn. The boy went back once and almost ran into me in the court, but he did not see me. I entered and asked for lodgings; but the fat old fool of a host put me through the catechism like an inquisitor, and finally declared the inn was full. I said I would take a garret; but it was no use. Out I must trudge. I did, and paid two men to get into a brawl in front of the house, that the inn people might run out to look. But instead they looked the gate and put up the shutters in the cabaret."

Mayenne burst out laughing.

"It was not your night, Paul."

"And what then? It did not take you till three o'clock to be put out of the inn."

"No," Lucas answered. "I spoke to you of the varlet Pontou with whom Grammont had quarrelled. He had shut him up in a closet of the house in the Rue Compejarret. After the fight in the court we all went our ways forgetting him. So I paid the house a visit; I was afraid some one else might find him and he might tell tales."

"No," said Lucas, "he will tell no tales."

"How about your spy in the Hotel St. Quentin?"

"Martin, the clerk? Oh, I warned him off before I left," Lucas said easily. "He will lie perdy till we want him again. And Grammont, you see, is dead too. There is no direct witness to the thing but the boy Broux."

"That is as good as to say there is none," Mayenne answered. "For I have the boy."

(To be Continued.)

The postcard hit in England now on sale in Victoria. The multiple postcard, fourteen drop views on one card, each names now and then, Monsieur, M. Etienne's, Grammont's, but the hero of the tale was myself.

"You bet Mar to the duke!" Mayenne cried presently.

the only fixed fact about her. If Lorraine loves Mar today, she will love some one else tomorrow, and some one else still the day after tomorrow. It is not worth while disturbing yourself about it."

"She will not love any one else," Lucas said hoarsely.

Mayenne laughed.

"You are very young, Paul."

"She shall not love any one else! By the throne of heaven, she shall not!"

Mayenne went on laughing. If Lucas had for the moment teased him out of his equanimity, the duke had paid back the score a hundredfold. Lucas's face was scarred with his passions as with the torture iron; he clinched his hands together, breathing hard. On my side of the door I heard a sharp little sound in the darkness, mademoiselle had gritted her teeth.

"It is a little early to sweat over the matter," Mayenne said, "since mademoiselle is not your wife nor ever likely to become so."

"You refuse her to me?" Lucas cried, livid. I thought he would leap over the table at one bound on Mayenne. It occurred to the duke to take up his dagger.

"I promise you to her when you kill me St. Quentin. And you have not killed St. Quentin yet, instead come airily to tell me the scheme—my scheme—is wrecked. Pardieu! it was never my scheme. I never advocated stolen pistoles and suborned witnesses and angered nephews and deceived sons and

Henry's camp to steal you secrets; and the moment my back was turned you are listening to proposals from Mar again."

"Mar is not in the race now. You need not speak of him, nor of your brother Charles, either."

"No! I can well understand that my brother's is not a pleasant name in your ears," Lucas agreed. "You acknowledged one King Charles X.; you would like well to see another Charles X., but it is not Charles of Gunse you mean."

"I have no desire to be King of France," Mayenne began angrily.

"Have you not? That is well, for you will never feel the crown on your brows, good uncle. You are ground between the Spanish hammer and the Bearnais anvil; there will soon be nothing left of you but powder."

"Nom de dieu, Paul!" Mayenne cried, half rising; but Lucas, leaning forward on the table, riveting him with his keen eyes, went on:

"Do not mistake me, monsieur uncle. I think you in bad case, but I am ready to sink or swim with you. So long as the hand of Lorraine is in your bestowing I am your faithful servant. I have not hesitated to risk the gallows to serve you. Last March I made my way here, disguised, to tell you of the king's coming change of birth and of St. Quentin's certain defection. I demanded then my price, my marriage with mademoiselle. But you put me off again, you sent me back to Mantes to tell you St. Quentin."

"I am not sure about Lorraine even then," said Mayenne, reflectively. "Francis de Brie is agitating himself about that young mistress. And he has not made any failures—has he?"

"I will bring you the price."

"You swore to me I should have her," Permit me to remind you again that you have not brought me the price."

"I'll bring you the price."

"Then then," spoke Mayenne, with the smile of the cat standing over the mouse, "even then I might change my mind."

"Then," said Lucas, roundly, "there



LUCAS SAT DOWN THE TABLE BETWEEN THEM.

will be more than one dead duke in France."

Mayenne looked up at him as unmoved as if it were not in the power of mortal man to make him lose his temper. In stirring him to draw dagger, Lucas had achieved an extraordinary triumph. Yet I somehow thought that the man who had shown hot anger was the real man; the man who sat there quiet was the party leader.

He said now, evenly:

"That is a silly way to talk to me, Paul."

"It is the truth for once," Lucas made sullen answer.

So long as he could prick and irritate Mayenne he preserved an air of unshakable composure; but when Mayenne recovered patience and himself began to prick Lucas's guard broke down. His voice rose a key, as it had done when I called him fool; and he burst out violently.

"Mort de dieu! monsieur, what am I doing your dirty work for? For love of my affectionate uncle?"

"It might well be for that. I have been your affectionate uncle, as you say."

"My affectionate uncle, you say? My hater, my suborner! I was a Protestant! I was bred up by the Huguenots! Lucas when my father cast off my mother and me to starve, I had no love for the League or the Lorraines. I was fighting in Navarre's ranks when I was made prisoner at Iry."

"You were spying for Navarre. It was before the fight we caught you. You had been hanged and quartered in the gray dawn, had I not recognized you, after twelve years, as my brother's son. I cut the rope from you and embraced you for your father's sake. You rode forth a cornet in my army, instead of dying like a felon on the gallows."

"You had your ends to serve," Lucas muttered.

"I took you into my household," Mayenne went on. "I let you wear the name of Lorraine. I did not deny you the hand of my cousin and ward, Lorraine de Montcluc."

"Deny me! No, you did not. Neither did you grant it me, but put me off with lying promises. You thought then you could win back the faltering house of St. Quentin by a marriage between your cousin and the Comte de Mar. Afterward, when my brother Charles dashed into Paris, and the people clamored for his marriage with the infant, you conceived the scheme of forcing Lorraine on him. But it would not do, and again you promised her to me. If I could get you certain information from the royal army, returned in the guise of an escaped prisoner to

"Aye, And you have been about it these four months, and you have not killed him."

Lucas reddened with ire.

"I am no Jacques Clement to stab and be massacred. You cannot buy such a service of me, M. de Mayenne. If I do bravo's work for you, I choose my own time and way. I brought the duke to Paris, delivered him up to you to deal with as it liked you. But you with your army at your back were afraid to kill him. You flinched and waited. You dared not shoulder the onus of his death. Then I to help you out of your strait, planned to make his own son's hand that should do the deed; to kill the duke and ruin his heir; to put not only St. Quentin but Mar out of your way."

"Let us be accurate, Paul," Mayenne said. "Mar was not in my way; he was of no consequence to me. You mean put him out of your way."

"He was in your way, too. Since he would not join the Cause he was a hindrance to it. You had as much to gain as by his ruin."

"Something—much. I did not want him killed. I preferred him to Valere."

"Nor did I want him killed; so our views jibe."

"Why not, then? Did you prefer him as your wife's lover to some other who might appear?"

"I do not intend that my wife shall have lovers," Lucas answered.

Mayenne broke into laughing.

"Nom d'un chien, where will you keep her? In the Bastille? Lorraine and no more."

"I mean none whom she favors."

"Then why do you leave Mar alive? She adores the fellow," Mayenne said. "I had no idea whether he really thought it or only said it to annoy Lucas. At any rate it had its effect. Lucas's brows were knotted; he spoke with an effort, like a man under stress of physical pain."

"I know she loves him now, and she would love him dead, but she would not love him a paricide."

"Is that your creed? Pardieu! you don't know women. The blacker the villain, the more they adore him."

"I know it is true, monsieur," Lucas said smothering, "that you have had success."

Mayenne started forward with half an oath, changing to a laugh.

"So it is not enough for you to possess the fair body of Lorraine; you must also have her love."

"She will love me," Lucas answered uneasily. "She must."

"It is not worth your fret," Mayenne declared. "If she did, how long would it last? Souvent femme varie—that is

the rest of your combeous machinery. I would have had you stab him as he bent over his papers, and walk out of the house before they discovered him. But you had not the pinch for that; you must needs plot and reptil to make some one else do your work. Now, after months of intriguing and waiting, you come to me to tell me you have failed. Mordieu! is there any reason why I should not have you kicked into the gutter, as no true son of the valorous Le Balaise?"

Lucas' hand went to his belt again; he made one step as if to come round the table. Mayenne's angry eye was on him but he did not move; and Lucas made no more steps. Controlling himself with an effort, he said:

"It was not my fault, monsieur. No man could have labored harder or planned better than I. I have been diligent, I have been clever. I have made my worst enemy my willing tool—I have made Monsieur's own son my out-paw. I have left no end loose, no contingency unprovided for—and I am ruined by a freak of fate."

"I never knew a failure yet but what the fault was fate," Mayenne returned.

"Call it accident, then; call it the devil, call it what you like," Lucas cried. "I still maintain it was not my fault. Listen, monsieur."

He sat down again, and began his story, striving as he talked, to rehearse something of his old coolness.

"The thing was ruined by the advent of this boy, Mar's lackey. I spoke of you. You said he had not been here."

"You may go to Lorraine with that question," Mayenne answered. "I have something else to attend to than the intrigues of my wife's maids."

"It started, I thought some one would have the sense to keep him. Mordieu! I will find from Lorraine whether she saw him."

He fell silent, gnawing his lip. I could see that his thought had traveled away from the plot to the sore subject of mademoiselle's affections.

"Well," said Mayenne sharply, "what about your boy?"

It was a moment before Lucas answered. When he did he spoke low and hurriedly, so that I could scarce catch the words. I knew it was no fear of listeners that kept his voice down. They had shouted at each other as if there was no one within a mile. I guessed that Lucas, for all his bravado, took little pride in his tale, nor felt happy about its reception. I could catch names now and then, Monsieur, M. Etienne's, Grammont's, but the hero of the tale was myself.

"You bet Mar to the duke!" Mayenne cried presently.

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