

Literature.

A CELEBRATED CASE.

Continued.

CHAPTER IX.

FROM DREAMS TO WAKING.

What, Raoul! and you, Adrienne?

His voice shook slightly. "Come here, then."

He kissed his daughter, looked fondly into her eyes, and then put her little hand in Raoul's.

"There, I need not tell you to love one another—that you have learned to do without any lessons from me, and having learned it, I believe there is nothing to add to it."

He turned away quickly and met Valentine's tearful eyes regarding him with unspoken admiration, the silent homage offered to a good man's emotion.

Her glance seemed to remind the duke of a forgotten charge and he soon rejoined the merry little group, all crowding around the duchess for kisses, and congratulations.

Even O'Rourke had to press Adrienne's hand in his, and call down upon her head all the blessings in the calendar.

"I think I managed that very judiciously," said the chanoine; "although I have lost my escort by the act. However I have often journeyed alone to Paris."

"Perhaps," said the duke, coming forward, and speaking with emphasis, "there will be another young gentleman setting out for the capital, who can act as escort to the young lady's guardian a favor."

"Indeed! and who may he be?" asked the chanoine.

"Oh, yes, quite well. The truth is, he took me into his confidence, a few days since, in a matter that closely concerns his happiness."

"You interest me," said the chanoine.

"Although noble, handsome, and a brave soldier, the young gentleman is at present, quite embarrassed in regard to fortune. What is worse, he is deeply, passionately in love."

"Oh, dear!—poor, and passionately in love. I pity him. But the young lady, does she return his love?"

"Most decidedly."

"And is she rich?"

"Alas! no; she has no dowry. That is the trouble. The young man would like to try his chances of earning fame and fortune at the court or in the field; but before starting he would like to ask the young lady's guardian a favor."

"Proceed; this is really romantic. What is this boon?"

"Simply that the young lady would be allowed to wait for him, until he is in a position to offer marriage with the requisite attachments—houses, jewels, and so forth."

"Well, I should say that under such very unusual circumstances the guardian might say 'Yes.'"

"Then, my dear chanoine, you must pronounce the word. There is the gentleman, an M. de Monteville. Valentine, here, is the charming 'vixen no longer to win.'"

"The Marquis de Clonone bowed low before the astonished chanoine. Valentine took her hand; but did not speak, her eyes being eloquent enough in their earnest appeal."

"Well, Henri, this is indeed a surprise. I will not say that it is an unpleasant one."

"The young man seized her hand, and pressed it to his lips."

"Do you know that Valentine must for the present remain nameless."

"I know all. Her name is to me a matter of no consequence; I love her for herself!"

"Spend like your father's son. Ah, Henri! I loved him; I could hardly refuse his son anything in my power to bestow upon him. Valentine is to me as my own child; in giving her to you I only join the two whom I love most on earth. There; and having put her hand in yours I can only recall the duke's words; if you love each other you have the best gift possible—the only security for future happiness. And now let me tell you my story. When I was young I loved Henri's father, and he loved me. He was a younger son, so we were separated. He married a lady with a large dowry, and I devoted myself to my present calling. You see I am sympathetic with those whom poverty separates. Ah, well! that is a long time ago. As years went by I became rich, I suppose because money was no longer necessary to my happiness. To-day I am repaid for all my disappointments. This wealth, which has too often been a heavy burden and responsibility on my shoulders, I now divide equally between you and Valentine. You will each have two hundred thousand francs; thus the bride will have her dowry, and the bridegroom will be enabled to regain his embowered estates."

Valentine could only cling to the chanoine and whisper her thanks. The marquis was quite overwhelmed with this generosity.

"You are my fair grandmother," he said; "how shall I thank you, how repay your love?"

"By taking care of my Valentine, Henri. Her future has sometimes troubled me; now I can feel that it is safe. I can trust my child with you. But I fear my other secret is now taken from me. Remember, no more of Paris, the court, or the army. Happiness awaits publicity."

"I have found mine in Providence," said the marquis kissing Valentine's hand.

"Where it belongs," said the chanoine, with emphasis. "Now, as you are all absorbed in bliss, I must leave you, and beg my preparations for to-morrow's journey."

When the two lovers were about returning to the city, the girls accompanied them to the great gate, and stood to watch them riding so gaily up the long hill.

It was a warm day, and the road had a dry, dusty effect after the cool, shaded terrace, and the murmuring fountains dotting the lawn.

"I am sorry they had to leave us," said Adrienne. "It is not at all pleasant on the road such a day as this. Oh! Valentine, what is that?"

"What my sensible Valentine growing timid and imaginative! That will never do. Why, you will not have time to miss Valentine, and I shall have time to miss Valentine. I cannot tell. Here is your father, he will come."

The duke came in answer to Adrienne's call, and stood for some minutes watching the approaching object.

"You had better come back to the terrace, my darling. That is something that your innocent eyes have so far been spared the sight of."

He shuddered and turned away, but his daughter pressed nearer to his side, her eyes fixed and dilating with surprise.

"No, Valentine; let me look. What is it father? It surely cannot be—yes, it is composed of men, all dressed alike in red suits; and they seem to be fastened together by a chain."

"Yes, Adrienne; that is a chain of galley-slaves."

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Are they really slaves? asked Adrienne.

"That was the name originally given to them by my child. They formerly worked the oars of the galleys; thus a kind of machinery was made of human beings. You have never seen these galleys, but I remember them when they were fitted up as gun boats, and were sent out of the ports to attack English vessels that might have become disabled or becalmed near the shore. That was during the great war. The galleys-slaves were chained to the oars and benches in the center of these long, narrow ships. They were low built, with only one deck, and sometimes they had sails as well as oars. The guns were placed between the benches where the oars-victs sat and the sides of the vessels."

"But they do not use such vessels now?"

"No; these men work on the public buildings; and the government thus utilizes their time and strength."

"And are they, then, so very badly treated, asked Adrienne, 'that they are called slaves?'"

"I fear they are shamefully used, my dear child. They are sent to the galleys because they are guilty of terrible crimes and they are in the power of brutal men, who make life as hard as possible for them."

"Then their punishment is not adapted to make them any better than they are when sent to prison, said Valentine, looking full in the duke's face."

"On the contrary, they must grow wiser if you reduce a man to the condition of a wild beast, he is very likely to lose every redeeming trait of humanity; and the possession of mental powers will enable him to exceed the animals in wickedness. These men lose their identity. They are given numbers instead of their own names. They are allowed no intercourse with the outer world; their nearest relative loses all traces of them. Oh, it is an outrageous way to treat human beings, no matter of what crimes they may have been proved capable! It is a blot on our prison system!"

"And suppose some of these men were not guilty, said Adrienne."

"Do not suppose such a case; it is too fearful to contemplate. If the punishment is an outrage even on the guiltiest wretch among them, I do not care to imagine what it might be to an innocent man."

"The duke seemed moved by Adrienne's chance remark, and calling to the girls to follow him, he returned toward the house. Adrienne seemed fascinated to the spot."

"I want to see their faces, Valentine! I must see what they resemble after such brutal treatment. Oh, Valentine, or I think, if even one of these men should be suffering unjustly!"

"Adrienne, you let your imagination make you miserable. Why your father, these ideas? Suppose one of them to be innocent; what can we do for him—two helpless girls?"

"But we, Valentine, we are so happy; and they, by the contrast, appear all the more miserable."

"You dear little enthusiast. You would make a good philanthropist to teach us one duty to our fellow creatures. I really believe they are stopping to rest, out on the dusty road, with the hot sun pouring down upon them."

"The girls watched the unfortunate men as they halted in the road. Travel-stained and weary, their dusty little red caps, with no protection from the heat, while the heavy balls which they dragged after them made each walk lame. Their powerful forms, magnificently developed by the nature of their duties, seemed to mock at their downcast despairing features, aged and rigid with toil and hopeless grief. Adrienne gazed in silence, then catching Valentine's hand, she hastened back to the house. The duke was busy with his letters, while the chanoine had offered to take them to Paris."

"Father, those poor men are resting out in the sun; may they come in under the trees? Say yes."

"The duke and the chanoine looked up in amazement. There stood Adrienne and Valentine in their satin dresses and soft laces, their eyes dilating with eager sympathy, their hands clasped in prayer."

"My dear child, they are convicts—criminals of the worst kind."

"But they cannot harm us," pleaded Adrienne, her soft eyes filling with tears.

"And they are men, and can feel the heat this intense day as much as we do; and the duchess, as usual coming to help the weaker side."

"A heavy gasp, almost a sob, followed the words; and the man again threw himself on the ground, dying with the recollection that his own words had excited to torture and madden him. Adrienne rose excitedly.

"Valentine, I must speak to that man again."

"I beg of you, Adrienne, do not go near him. What can you possibly have to do with him?"

"I cannot tell; but something that can neither explain nor comprehend draws me to him."

"Why, you offered him money, and he would not take it. You could do no more for him."

"How can I be sure of that? I tell you I cannot resist the impulse. If I do not speak to him, Valentine, I shall go mad."

"Her dilating eyes, her trembling hand, her voice full of undefined fear and awe, warned Valentine to let her have her own way; and, scarcely knowing what she was going to say to him, Adrienne again left the terrace, and followed by Valentine, slowly approached the convicts."

"The guard advanced to meet them."

"Looking for your purse, mademoiselle? That man found it, and he had—I cannot help laughing—but he positively wanted to return it to you."

"Which man?" asked Adrienne, starting as the soldier pointed to the one she wished to listen to again. She hesitated, and the soldier came to her relief.

"You would like to reward him, no doubt?"

"Yes, may I?"

"Certainly; speak to him if you wish, he is not dangerous."

The guard laughed, and returned to his post. Adrienne felt her strength and courage failing her as she again approached the sad, motionless figure. Valentine made a last effort to draw her away.

"No, I must, I will speak to him."

Adrienne was off, followed by Valentine. Arm in arm, standing on the green slope, they watched the weary galleyslaves as they came in under the great shade trees and threw themselves on the cool velvety grass. The soldiers, however, remained on guard, and paced to and fro, their monotonous walk extending into the park gates.

Adrienne drew Valentine still nearer, the sunbeams penetrating the arching branches fell on their slender figures lighting up their earnest sad features, and throwing soft shadows on the shimmering satin of their long trains.

"They do not notice us, poor men they are tired, said Adrienne, drawing out her purse. But at the ring of the metal several men started from the ground and held out great brown bags, misshapen and hard with ceaseless toil."

The girls dropped the pieces of money on the broad paths, and received the men's grateful nods and muttered thanks with sympathetic looks. Adrienne had reached a convict who had lain down a short distance from his companions. She stood holding out the coin, but he did not even raise his head to look at her, or appear conscious of her kind glances."

His face bronzed with the sun, and half covered with a short, black beard, had nothing repulsive or hard in its expression; and the large handsome features were stamped with a misery that was in itself a mute appeal for human interest and charity. As he lay, supporting his head on his arm, his eyes fixed on the ground, he seemed to be absorbed in painful thoughts.

Adrienne felt an attraction in this man, who did not even care to look at her.

"Will you not take some money?" she asked.

"What do I want with it. It cannot buy freedom or relief from sorrow."

"But you may want something."

"No, nothing. The food I get is good enough. So long as it is steeped in tears it is all alike bitter, all the same."

"But you could keep it."

"No, no; money given to me does me no good. It brings a curse; why do you press upon me?"

He turned to a spoke, and, raising his eyes, looked steadily into Adrienne's face as if to reproach her.

The purse fell from Adrienne's hands, and, with a low cry, she tottered and would have fallen but for Valentine, who, hearing her voice, was in time to catch her and support her.

"Adrienne, what is the matter with you? You tremble so; you are as white as a ghost."

Adrienne's startled eyes were fixed on the convict, who had sunk back in his old, listless attitude.

"Oh, Valentine, it is he! The man who comes to me in my dreams; the man whose eyes I cannot forget. It is he, the voice, the very voice, that has so often spoken to me!"

"Adrienne, you are excited. You must come away and calm yourself."

For the moment Valentine's strong will prevailed. She put her arm around Adrienne, and they returned to the house. The terrace was deserted. Adrienne sat down near the work-table and hid her face in her hands.

Valentine tried in vain to get an answer on any common-place topic; even the coming departure of the chanoine and Kroul's happiness failed in interest.

Adrienne moved after some minutes, and lifting her head, her paleness and agitation were more apparent than ever. Valentine saw her bend forward, so as to keep the convicts in sight, and, following her glance, at once perceived what attracted her. The convict had taken a bundle of valuable papers and some costly jewels, which he begged of one to carry to his daughter, then at Lillie. Then he gave me for myself a purse, in which were three hundred gold pieces. I lived upon a few lines of the paper, and I thought it my duty to take these things home and leave them with my wife. I was a great risk to absent myself without leave, but I knew the reason. I felt sure that I could get the regiment before long; and then—I had not seen my wife and child for two months, and I knew that the next day's battle might be my last."

"Halt! cried the nearest soldier; 'where are you going?'"

The convict suddenly stopped; and he held out the heavy siltken bag, and the present had been roughly recalled to him.

"The lady dropped her purse," he said. She soldier snatched it, examined its shining contents, and with utter amazement in every feature he stared at the man in front of him.

"What return a purse to its owner? You must be a converted thief!"

"I never was a thief!" was the firm reply, in a sad, measured tone. The man drew himself up to his full height and gazed down on his tormentor. The latter, however, felt quite safe in the presence of this unarmed, chained giant, whose broad chest and muscular limbs might well excite his apprehensions.

"What were you, then—a murderer?"

"No; I was a soldier, like you."

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The man again looked at her as if impelled by some secret force, and Adrienne, meeting the earnest, dark eyes, felt her heart throb wildly, as it did in her dreams. Pressing her hands to her heart, she leaned unable to move, against Valentine, who, strong and sensible in her surprise, in turn watched the wretched, outcast, and the timid, delicate girl, whose trembling form she lovingly supported.

The man, as if aroused from a long slumber, suddenly took the purse, and, rising, approached the girls. His voice was gentle and sweet:

"There, I will take the money if you wish me to; but not all this; oh, no; one piece will do."

He drew out the smallest coin, put it in the bosom of his ragged, red blouse, and gave back the purse to Adrienne.

"Poor man! Have you been very long in prison?"

Valentine's lips refused to form the awful word.

"In the galleys? Yes; for twelve years I have worked in the galleys at Brest."

The girl shuddered.

"But you were not a thief?" said Valentine.

"No; I was not a thief."

"Why, why were you put in the galleys?" asked Adrienne, clasping her hands, and speaking with an effort.

"I was accused—falsely accused—of murder."

The gentle voice was now full of indignation and despair. Adrienne's trembling lips and tearful eyes, tender with sympathy, seemed to attract his notice. For the first time in twelve years the outer world of freedom seemed to reach him through the kind curiosity of two delicate innocent girls. The barriers of outraged pride, of dark, embittered despair, were swept away, and the man's whole soul rose in arms against the injustice of his fate, and found voice in the thrilling words:

"I was falsely accused of murder."

"Of murder?" Valentine shuddered.

"Yes; of the murder of my wife, the mother of my child."

"But you did not, you could not do it," cried Adrienne, gazing in the man's face, now quivering with emotion.

"Never! Before the tid of twelve wretched years has permitted me to suffer this agony and injustice, I swear that I am innocent."

"And I believe you," said Adrienne, in earnestness, raising her hands to Heaven.

"If you say that you are innocent, then I swear that I believe you."

"Oh, lady, you cannot tell me what those words are to me; the first of trust or kindness that I have heard since I was sentenced."

"Why do you not say so?" said Valentine, in earnestness, raising her hands to Heaven.

"Excuse me! The sentence was commuted. Would you like to hear my story?"

"Oh, yes, yes! Tell it to us," said Adrienne.

"I was a soldier! The words came slowly, unaccompanied by a rush of almost overwhelming memories. 'The night before last, returning from a six-month's march, I found a man dying in a field. He told me his name, and confided to me a bundle of valuable papers and some costly jewels, which he begged of one to carry to his daughter, then at Lillie. Then he gave me for myself a purse, in which were three hundred gold pieces. I lived upon a few lines of the paper, and I thought it my duty to take these things home and leave them with my wife. I was a great risk to absent myself without leave, but I knew the reason. I felt sure that I could get the regiment before long; and then—I had not seen my wife and child for two months, and I knew that the next day's battle might be my last.'

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