Chapter LXXII

Madame de Saint-Méran

A gloomy scene had indeed just passed at the house of M. de Villefort. After the ladies had departed for the ball, whither all the entreaties of Madame de Villefort had failed in persuading him to accompany them, the procureur had shut himself up in his study, according to his custom, with a heap of papers calculated to alarm anyone else, but which generally scarcely satisfied his inordinate desires.

But this time the papers were a mere matter of form. Villefort had secluded himself, not to study, but to reflect; and with the door locked and orders given that he should not be disturbed excepting for important business, he sat down in his armchair and began to ponder over the events, the remembrance of which had during the last eight days filled his mind with so many gloomy thoughts and bitter recollections.

Then, instead of plunging into the mass of documents piled before him, he opened the drawer of his desk, touched a spring, and drew out a parcel of cherished memoranda, amongst which he had carefully arranged, in characters only known to himself, the names of all those who, either in his political career, in money matters, at the bar, or in his mysterious love affairs, had become his enemies.

Their number was formidable, now that he had begun to fear, and yet these names, powerful though they were, had often caused him to smile with the same kind of satisfaction experienced by a traveller who from the summit of a mountain beholds at his feet the craggy eminences, the almost impassable paths, and the fearful chasms, through which he has so perilously climbed. When he had run over all these names in his memory, again read and studied them, commenting meanwhile upon his lists, he shook his head.

'No,' he murmured, 'none of my enemies would have waited so patiently and laboriously for so long a space of time, that they might now come and crush me with this secret. Sometimes, as Hamlet says:

"Foul deeds will rise,
Though all the earth o'erwhelm them, to men's eyes;"

but, like a phosphoric light, they rise but to mislead. The story has been told by the Corsican to some priest, who in his turn has repeated it. M. de Monte Cristo may have heard it, and to enlighten himself— '

'But why should he wish to enlighten himself upon the subject?' asked Villefort, after a moment's reflection, 'what interest can this M. de Monte Cristo or M. Zaccone,—son of a shipowner of Malta, discoverer of a mine in Thessaly, now visiting Paris for the first time,—what interest, I say, can he take in discovering a gloomy, mysterious, and useless fact like this? However, among all the incoherent details given to me by the Abbé Busoni and by Lord Wilmore, by that friend and that enemy, one thing appears certain and clear in my opinion—that in no period, in no case, in no circumstance, could there have been any contact between him and me.'

But Villefort uttered words which even he himself did not believe. He dreaded not so much the revelation, for he could reply to or deny its truth;—he cared little for that *mene, mene, tekel upharsin*, which appeared suddenly in letters of blood upon the wall;—but what he was really anxious for was to discover whose hand had traced them. While he was endeavouring to calm his fears,—and instead of dwelling upon the political future that had so often been the subject of his ambitious dreams, was imagining a future limited to the enjoyments of home, in fear of awakening the enemy that had so long slept,—the noise of a carriage sounded in the yard, then he heard the steps of an aged person ascending the stairs, followed by tears and lamentations, such as servants always give vent to when they wish to appear interested in their master's grief.

He drew back the bolt of his door, and almost directly an old lady entered, unannounced, carrying her shawl on her arm, and her bonnet in her hand. The white hair was thrown back from her yellow forehead, and her eyes, already sunken by the furrows of age, now almost disappeared beneath the eyelids swollen with grief.

pang in her heart, and before she had taken ten steps the count saw her raise her handkerchief to her eyes.

'Do not my mother and you agree?' asked Albert, astonished.

'On the contrary,' replied the count, 'did you not hear her declare that we were friends?'

They re-entered the drawing-room, which Valentine and Madame de Villefort had just quitted. It is perhaps needless to add that Morrel departed almost at the same time.

'Inflexible man!' she murmured. Monte Cristo remained as unmoved as if the reproach had not been addressed to him.

Albert at this moment ran in. 'Oh, mother,' he exclaimed, 'such a misfortune has happened!'

'What? What has happened?' asked the countess, as though awakening from a sleep to the realities of life; 'did you say a misfortune? Indeed, I should expect misfortunes.'

'M. de Villefort is here.'

'Well?'

'He comes to fetch his wife and daughter.'

'Why so?'

'Because Madame de Saint-Méran is just arrived in Paris, bringing the news of M. de Saint-Méran's death, which took place on the first stage after he left Marseilles. Madame de Villefort, who was in very good spirits, would neither believe nor think of the misfortune, but Mademoiselle Valentine, at the first words, guessed the whole truth, notwithstanding all the precautions of her father; the blow struck her like a thunderbolt, and she fell senseless.'

'And how was M. de Saint-Méran related to Mademoiselle de Villefort?' said the count.

'He was her grandfather on the mother's side. He was coming here to hasten her marriage with Franz.'

'Ah, indeed!'

'So Franz must wait. Why was not M. de Saint-Méran also grandfather to Mademoiselle Danglars?'

'Albert, Albert,' said Madame de Morcerf, in a tone of mild reproof, 'what are you saying? Ah, count, he esteems you so highly, tell him that he has spoken amiss.'

And she took two or three steps forward. Monte Cristo watched her with an air so thoughtful, and so full of affectionate admiration, that she turned back and grasped his hand; at the same time she seized that of her son, and joined them together.

'We are friends; are we not?' she asked.

'Oh, madame, I do not presume to call myself your friend, but at all times I am your most respectful servant.' The countess left with an indescribable

'Oh, sir,' she said; 'oh, sir, what a misfortune! I shall die of it; oh, yes, I shall certainly die of it!'

And then, falling upon the chair nearest the door, she burst into a paroxysm of sobs. The servants, standing in the doorway, not daring to approach nearer, were looking at Noirtier's old servant, who had heard the noise from his master's room, and run there also, remaining behind the others. Villefort rose, and ran towards his mother-in-law, for it was she.

'Why, what can have happened?' he exclaimed, 'what has thus disturbed you? Is M. de Saint-Méran with you?'

'M. de Saint-Méran is dead,' answered the old marchioness, without preface and without expression; she appeared to be stupefied. Villefort drew back, and clasping his hands together, exclaimed:

'Dead!—so suddenly?'

'A week ago,' continued Madame de Saint-Méran, 'we went out together in the carriage after dinner. M. de Saint-Méran had been unwell for some days; still, the idea of seeing our dear Valentine again inspired him with courage, and notwithstanding his illness he would leave. At six leagues from Marseilles, after having eaten some of the lozenges he is accustomed to take, he fell into such a deep sleep, that it appeared to me unnatural; still I hesitated to wake him, although I fancied that his face was flushed, and that the veins of his temples throbbed more violently than usual. However, as it became dark, and I could no longer see, I fell asleep; I was soon aroused by a piercing shriek, as from a person suffering in his dreams, and he suddenly threw his head back violently. I called the valet, I stopped the postilion, I spoke to M. de Saint-Méran, I applied my smelling-salts; but all was over, and I arrived at Aix by the side of a corpse.'

Villefort stood with his mouth half open, quite stupefied.

'Of course you sent for a doctor?'

'Immediately; but, as I have told you, it was too late.'

'Yes; but then he could tell of what complaint the poor marquis had died.'

'Oh, yes, sir, he told me; it appears to have been an apoplectic stroke.'

'And what did you do then?'

'M. de Saint-Méran had always expressed a desire, in case his death happened during his absence from Paris, that his body might be brought to the family

vault. I had him put into a leaden coffin, and I am preceding him by a few days.'

'Oh! my poor mother!' said Villefort, 'to have such duties to perform at your age after such a blow!'

'God has supported me through all; and then, my dear marquis, he would certainly have done everything for me that I performed for him. It is true that since I left him, I seem to have lost my senses. I cannot cry; at my age they say that we have no more tears,—still I think that when one is in trouble one should have the power of weeping. Where is Valentine, sir? It is on her account I am here; I wish to see Valentine.' Villefort thought it would be terrible to reply that Valentine was at a ball; so he only said that she had gone out with her step-mother, and that she should be fetched. 'This instant, sir—this instant, I beseech you!' said the old lady. Villefort placed the arm of Madame de Saint-Méran within his own, and conducted her to his apartment.

'Rest yourself, mother,' he said.

The marchioness raised her head at this word, and beholding the man who so forcibly reminded her of her deeply-regretted child, who still lived for her in Valentine, she felt touched at the name of mother, and bursting into tears, she fell on her knees before an armchair, where she buried her venerable head. Villefort left her to the care of the women, while old Barrois ran, half-scared, to his master; for nothing frightens old people so much as when death relaxes its vigilance over them for a moment in order to strike some other old person. Then, while Madame de Saint-Méran remained on her knees, praying fervently, Villefort sent for a cab, and went himself to fetch his wife and daughter from Madame de Morcerf's. He was so pale when he appeared at the door of the ball-room, that Valentine ran to him, saying:

'Oh, father, some misfortune has happened!'

'Your grandmamma has just arrived, Valentine,' said M. de Villefort.

'And grandpapa?' inquired the young girl, trembling with apprehension. M. de Villefort only replied by offering his arm to his daughter. It was just in time, for Valentine's head swam, and she staggered; Madame de Villefort instantly hastened to her assistance, and aided her husband in dragging her to the carriage, saying:

'What a singular event! Who could have thought it? Ah, yes, it is indeed strange!'

'No one told me you were, but you have frequently been seen at the Opera with a young and lovely woman.'

'She is a slave whom I bought at Constantinople, madame, the daughter of a prince. I have adopted her as my daughter, having no one else to love in the world.'

'You live alone, then?'

'I do.'

'You have no sister—no son—no father?'

'I have no one.'

'How can you exist thus without anyone to attach you to life?'

'It is not my fault, madame. At Malta, I loved a young girl, was on the point of marrying her, when war came and carried me away. I thought she loved me well enough to wait for me, and even to remain faithful to my memory. When I returned she was married. This is the history of most men who have passed twenty years of age. Perhaps my heart was weaker than the hearts of most men, and I suffered more than they would have done in my place; that is all.'

The countess stopped for a moment, as if gasping for breath. 'Yes,' she said, 'and you have still preserved this love in your heart—one can only love once—and did you ever see her again?'

'Never.'

'Never?'

'I never returned to the country where she lived.'

'To Malta?'

'Yes; Malta.'

'She is, then, now at Malta?'

'I think so.'

'And have you forgiven her for all she has made you suffer?'

'Her,—yes.'

'But only her; do you then still hate those who separated you?'

'I hate them? Not at all; why should I?' The countess placed herself before Monte Cristo, still holding in her hand a portion of the perfumed grapes.

'Take some,' she said.

'Madame, I never eat Muscatel grapes,' replied Monte Cristo, as if the subject had not been mentioned before. The countess dashed the grapes into the nearest thicket, with a gesture of despair.

Mercédès let them fall, and sighed. A magnificent peach was hanging against an adjoining wall, ripened by the same artificial heat. Mercédès drew near, and plucked the fruit.

'Take this peach, then,' she said. The count again refused. 'What, again?' she exclaimed, in so plaintive an accent that it seemed to stifle a sob; 'really, you pain me.'

A long silence followed; the peach, like the grapes, fell to the ground.

'Count,' added Mercédès with a supplicating glance, 'there is a beautiful Arabian custom, which makes eternal friends of those who have together eaten bread and salt under the same roof.'

'I know it, madame,' replied the count; 'but we are in France, and not in Arabia, and in France eternal friendships are as rare as the custom of dividing bread and salt with one another.'

'But,' said the countess, breathlessly, with her eyes fixed on Monte Cristo, whose arm she convulsively pressed with both hands, 'we are friends, are we not?'

The count became pale as death, the blood rushed to his heart, and then again rising, dyed his cheeks with crimson; his eyes swam like those of a man suddenly dazzled.

'Certainly, we are friends,' he replied; 'why should we not be?'

The answer was so little like the one Mercédès desired, that she turned away to give vent to a sigh, which sounded more like a groan. 'Thank you,' she said. And they walked on again. They went the whole length of the garden without uttering a word.

'Sir,' suddenly exclaimed the countess, after their walk had continued ten minutes in silence, 'is it true that you have seen so much, travelled so far, and suffered so deeply?'

'I have suffered deeply, madame,' answered Monte Cristo.

'But now you are happy?'

'Doubtless,' replied the count, 'since no one hears me complain.'

'And your present happiness, has it softened your heart?'

'My present happiness equals my past misery,' said the count.

'Are you not married?' asked the countess.

'I, married?' exclaimed Monte Cristo, shuddering; 'who could have told you so?'

And the wretched family departed, leaving a cloud of sadness hanging over the rest of the evening. At the foot of the stairs, Valentine found Barrois awaiting her.

'M. Noirtier wishes to see you tonight,' he said, in an undertone.

'Tell him I will come when I leave my dear grandmamma,' she replied, feeling, with true delicacy, that the person to whom she could be of the most service just then was Madame de Saint-Méran.

Valentine found her grandmother in bed; silent caresses, heartwrung sobs, broken sighs, burning tears, were all that passed in this sad interview, while Madame de Villefort, leaning on her husband's arm, maintained all outward forms of respect, at least towards the poor widow. She soon whispered to her husband:

'I think it would be better for me to retire, with your permission, for the sight of me appears still to afflict your mother-in-law.' Madame de Saint-Méran heard her.

'Yes, yes,' she said softly to Valentine, 'let her leave; but do you stay.'

Madame de Villefort left, and Valentine remained alone beside the bed, for the procureur, overcome with astonishment at the unexpected death, had followed his wife. Meanwhile, Barrois had returned for the first time to old Noirtier, who having heard the noise in the house, had, as we have said, sent his old servant to inquire the cause; on his return, his quick intelligent eye interrogated the messenger.

'Alas, sir,' exclaimed Barrois, 'a great misfortune has happened. Madame de Saint-Méran has arrived, and her husband is dead!'

M. de Saint-Méran and Noirtier had never been on strict terms of friendship; still, the death of one old man always considerably affects another. Noirtier let his head fall upon his chest, apparently overwhelmed and thoughtful; then he closed one eye, in token of inquiry.

Barrois asked, 'Mademoiselle Valentine?'

Noirtier nodded his head.

'She is at the ball, as you know, since she came to say good-bye to you in full dress.' Noirtier again closed his left eye.

'Do you wish to see her?' Noirtier again made an affirmative sign.

'Well, they have gone to fetch her, no doubt, from Madame de Morcerf's; I will await her return, and beg her to come up here. Is that what you wish for?'

'Yes,' replied the invalid.

Barrois, therefore, as we have seen, watched for Valentine, and informed her of her grandfather's wish. Consequently, Valentine came up to Noirtier, on leaving Madame de Saint-Méran, who in the midst of her grief had at last yielded to fatigue and fallen into a feverish sleep. Within reach of her hand they placed a small table upon which stood a bottle of orangeade, her usual beverage, and a glass. Then, as we have said, the young girl left the bedside to see M. Noirtier.

Valentine kissed the old man, who looked at her with such tenderness that her eyes again filled with tears, whose sources he thought must be exhausted. The old gentleman continued to dwell upon her with the same expression.

'Yes, yes,' said Valentine, 'you mean that I have yet a kind grandfather left, do you not.' The old man intimated that such was his meaning. 'Ah, yes, happily I have,' replied Valentine. 'Without that, what would become of me?'

It was one o'clock in the morning. Barrois, who wished to go to bed himself, observed that after such sad events everyone stood in need of rest. Noirtier would not say that the only rest he needed was to see his child, but wished her good-night, for grief and fatigue had made her appear quite ill.

The next morning she found her grandmother in bed; the fever had not abated, on the contrary her eyes glistened and she appeared to be suffering from violent nervous irritability.

'Oh, dear grandmamma, are you worse?' exclaimed Valentine, perceiving all these signs of agitation.

'No, my child, no,' said Madame de Saint-Méran; 'but I was impatiently waiting for your arrival, that I might send for your father.'

'My father?' inquired Valentine, uneasily.

'Yes, I wish to speak to him.'

Valentine durst not oppose her grandmother's wish, the cause of which she did not know, and an instant afterwards Villefort entered.

'Sir,' said Madame de Saint-Méran, without using any circumlocution, and as if fearing she had no time to lose, 'you wrote to me concerning the marriage of this child?'

'Yes, madame,' replied Villefort, 'it is not only projected but arranged.'

'Your intended son-in-law is named M. Franz d'Épinay?'

'Yes, madame.'

Chapter LXXI

Bread and Salt

MADAME de Morcerf entered an archway of trees with her companion. It led through a grove of lindens to a conservatory.

'It is too warm in the room, was it not, count?' she asked.

'Yes, madame; and it was an excellent idea of yours to open the doors and the blinds.' As he ceased speaking, the count felt the hand of Mercédès tremble. 'But you,' he said, 'with that light dress, and without anything to cover you but that gauze scarf, perhaps you feel cold?'

'Do you know where I am leading you?' said the countess, without replying to the question.

'No, madame,' replied Monte Cristo; 'but you see I make no resistance.'

'We are going to the greenhouse that you see at the other end of the grove.'

The count looked at Mercédès as if to interrogate her, but she continued to walk on in silence, and he refrained from speaking. They reached the building, ornamented with magnificent fruits, which ripen at the beginning of July in the artificial temperature which takes the place of the sun, so frequently absent in our climate. The countess left the arm of Monte Cristo, and gathered a bunch of Muscatel grapes.

'See, count,' she said, with a smile so sad in its expression that one could almost detect the tears on her eyelids—'see, our French grapes are not to be compared, I know, with yours of Sicily and Cyprus, but you will make allowance for our northern sun.' The count bowed, but stepped back.

'Do you refuse?' said Mercédès, in a tremulous voice.

'Pray excuse me, madame,' replied Monte Cristo, 'but I never eat Muscatel grapes.'

have lasted for a century, so much was expressed in that one look. He offered his arm to the countess; she took it, or rather just touched it with her little hand, and they together descended the steps, lined with rhododendrons and camellias. Behind them, by another outlet, a group of about twenty persons rushed into the garden with loud exclamations of delight.

'Is he not the son of General d'Épinay who was on our side, and who was assassinated some days before the usurper returned from the Island of Elba?'

'The same.'

'Does he not dislike the idea of marrying the granddaughter of a Jacobin?'

'Our civil dissensions are now happily extinguished, mother,' said Villefort; 'M. d'Épinay was quite a child when his father died, he knows very little of M. Noirtier, and will meet him, if not with pleasure, at least with indifference.'

'Is it a suitable match?'

'In every respect.'

'And the young man?'

'Is regarded with universal esteem.'

'You approve of him?'

'He is one of the most well-bred young men I know.'

During the whole of this conversation Valentine had remained silent.

'Well, sir,' said Madame de Saint-Méran, after a few minutes' reflection, 'I must hasten the marriage, for I have but a short time to live.'

'You, madame?'

'You, dear mamma?' exclaimed M. de Villefort and Valentine at the same time.

'I know what I am saying,' continued the marchioness; 'I must hurry you, so that, as she has no mother, she may at least have a grandmother to bless her marriage. I am all that is left to her belonging to my poor Renée, whom you have so soon forgotten, sir.'

'Ah, madame,' said Villefort, 'you forget that I was obliged to give a mother to my child.'

'A stepmother is never a mother, sir. But this is not to the purpose,—our business concerns Valentine, let us leave the dead in peace.'

All this was said with such exceeding rapidity, that there was something in the conversation that seemed like the beginning of delirium.

'It shall be as you wish, madame,' said Villefort; 'more especially since your wishes coincide with mine, and as soon as M. d'Épinay arrives in Paris— '

'My dear grandmother,' interrupted Valentine, 'consider decorum—the recent death. You would not have me marry under such sad auspices?'

'My child,' exclaimed the old lady sharply, 'let us hear none of the conventional objections that deter weak minds from preparing for the future. I also

was married at the death-bed of my mother, and certainly I have not been less happy on that account.'

'Still that idea of death, madame,' said Villefort.

'Still?—Always! I tell you I am going to die—do you understand? Well, before dying, I wish to see my son-in-law. I wish to tell him to make my child happy; I wish to read in his eyes whether he intends to obey me;—in fact, I will know him—I will!' continued the old lady, with a fearful expression, 'that I may rise from the depths of my grave to find him, if he should not fulfil his duty!'

'Madame,' said Villefort, 'you must lay aside these exalted ideas, which almost assume the appearance of madness. The dead, once buried in their graves, rise no more.'

'And I tell you, sir, that you are mistaken. This night I have had a fearful sleep. It seemed as though my soul were already hovering over my body, my eyes, which I tried to open, closed against my will, and what will appear impossible above all to you, sir, I saw, with my eyes shut, in the spot where you are now standing, issuing from that corner where there is a door leading into Madame Villefort's dressing-room—I saw, I tell you, silently enter, a white figure.'

Valentine screamed.

'It was the fever that disturbed you, madame,' said Villefort. 'Doubt, if you please, but I am sure of what I say. I saw a white figure, and as if to prevent my discrediting the testimony of only one of my senses, I heard my glass removed—the same which is there now on the table.'

'Oh, dear mother, it was a dream.'

'So little was it a dream, that I stretched my hand towards the bell; but when I did so, the shade disappeared; my maid then entered with a light.'

'But she saw no one?'

'Phantoms are visible to those only who ought to see them. It was the soul of my husband!—Well, if my husband's soul can come to me, why should not my soul reappear to guard my granddaughter? the tie is even more direct, it seems to me.'

'Oh, madame,' said Villefort, deeply affected, in spite of himself, 'do not yield to those gloomy thoughts; you will long live with us, happy, loved, and honoured, and we will make you forget— '

ones; she saw Albert attempt to persuade the count, but he obstinately refused. Albert rejoined his mother; she was very pale.

'Well,' said she, 'you see he refuses?'

'Yes; but why need this annoy you?'

'You know, Albert, women are singular creatures. I should like to have seen the count take something in my house, if only an ice. Perhaps he cannot reconcile himself to the French style of living, and might prefer something else.'

'Oh, no; I have seen him eat of everything in Italy; no doubt he does not feel inclined this evening.'

'And besides,' said the countess, 'accustomed as he is to burning climates, possibly he does not feel the heat as we do.'

'I do not think that, for he has complained of feeling almost suffocated, and asked why the Venetian blinds were not opened as well as the windows.'

'In a word,' said Mercédès, 'it was a way of assuring me that his abstinence was intended.'

And she left the room.

A minute afterwards the blinds were thrown open, and through the jessamine and clematis that overhung the window one could see the garden ornamented with lanterns, and the supper laid under the tent. Dancers, players, talkers, all uttered an exclamation of joy—everyone inhaled with delight the breeze that floated in. At the same time Mercédès reappeared, paler than before, but with that imperturbable expression of countenance which she sometimes wore. She went straight to the group of which her husband formed the centre.

'Do not detain those gentlemen here, count,' she said; 'they would prefer, I should think, to breathe in the garden rather than suffocate here, since they are not playing.'

'Ah,' said a gallant old general, who, in 1809, had sung *Partant pour la Syrie*,—'we will not go alone to the garden.'

'Then,' said Mercédès, 'I will lead the way.'

Turning towards Monte Cristo, she added, 'count, will you oblige me with your arm?'

The count almost staggered at these simple words; then he fixed his eyes on Mercédès. It was only a momentary glance, but it seemed to the countess to