Chapter XCIII

Valentine

We may easily conceive where Morrel's appointment was. On leaving Monte Cristo he walked slowly towards Villefort's; we say slowly, for Morrel had more than half an hour to spare to go five hundred steps, but he had hastened to take leave of Monte Cristo because he wished to be alone with his thoughts. He knew his time well—the hour when Valentine was giving Noirtier his breakfast, and was sure not to be disturbed in the performance of this pious duty. Noirtier and Valentine had given him leave to go twice a week, and he was now availing himself of that permission.

He arrived; Valentine was expecting him. Uneasy and almost crazed, she seized his hand and led him to her grandfather. This uneasiness, amounting almost to frenzy, arose from the report Morcerf's adventure had made in the world, for the affair at the Opera was generally known. No one at Villefort's doubted that a duel would ensue from it. Valentine, with her woman's instinct, guessed that Morrel would be Monte Cristo's second, and from the young man's well-known courage and his great affection for the count, she feared that he would not content himself with the passive part assigned to him. We may easily understand how eagerly the particulars were asked for, given, and received; and Morrel could read an indescribable joy in the eyes of his beloved, when she knew that the termination of this affair was as happy as it was unexpected.

'Now,' said Valentine, motioning to Morrel to sit down near her grandfather, while she took her seat on his footstool,—'now let us talk about our own affairs. You know, Maximilian, grandpapa once thought of leaving this house, and taking an apartment away from M. de Villefort's.'

'Yes,' said Maximilian, 'I recollect the project, of which I highly approved.'

'Well,' said Valentine, 'you may approve again, for grandpapa is again thinking of it.'

'Bravo,' said Maximilian. 'And do you know,' said Valentine, 'what reason grandpapa gives for leaving this house.' Noirtier looked at Valentine to impose silence, but she did not notice him; her looks, her eyes, her smile, were all for Morrel.

'Oh, whatever may be M. Noirtier's reason,' answered Morrel, 'I can readily believe it to be a good one.'

'An excellent one,' said Valentine. 'He pretends the air of the Faubourg Saint-Honoré is not good for me.'

'Indeed?' said Morrel; 'in that M. Noirtier may be right; you have not seemed to be well for the last fortnight.'

'Not very,' said Valentine. 'And grandpapa has become my physician, and I have the greatest confidence in him, because he knows everything.'

'Do you then really suffer?' asked Morrel quickly.

'Oh, it must not be called suffering; I feel a general uneasiness, that is all. I have lost my appetite, and my stomach feels as if it were struggling to get accustomed to something.' Noirtier did not lose a word of what Valentine said.

'And what treatment do you adopt for this singular complaint?'

'A very simple one,' said Valentine. 'I swallow every morning a spoonful of the mixture prepared for my grandfather. When I say one spoonful, I began by one—now I take four. Grandpapa says it is a panacea.' Valentine smiled, but it was evident that she suffered.

Maximilian, in his devotedness, gazed silently at her. She was very beautiful, but her usual pallor had increased; her eyes were more brilliant than ever, and her hands, which were generally white like mother-of-pearl, now more resembled wax, to which time was adding a yellowish hue.

From Valentine the young man looked towards Noirtier. The latter watched with strange and deep interest the young girl, absorbed by her affection, and he also, like Morrel, followed those traces of inward suffering which was so little perceptible to a common observer that they escaped the notice of everyone but the grandfather and the lover.

time by his wife and son. He soon heard the clatter of the iron step of the hackney-coach, then the coachman's voice, and then the rolling of the heavy vehicle shook the windows. He darted to his bedroom to see once more all he had loved in the world; but the hackney-coach drove on and the head of neither Mercédès nor her son appeared at the window to take a last look at the house or the deserted father and husband.

And at the very moment when the wheels of that coach crossed the gateway a report was heard, and a thick smoke escaped through one of the panes of the window, which was broken by the explosion.

and waistcoat, he put on a sailor's jacket and hat, from beneath which rolled his long black hair. He returned thus, formidable and implacable, advancing with his arms crossed on his breast, towards the general, who could not understand why he had disappeared, but who on seeing him again, and feeling his teeth chatter and his legs sink under him, drew back, and only stopped when he found a table to support his clenched hand.

'Fernand,' cried he, 'of my hundred names I need only tell you one, to overwhelm you! But you guess it now, do you not?—or, rather, you remember it? For, notwithstanding all my sorrows and my tortures, I show you today a face which the happiness of revenge makes young again—a face you must often have seen in your dreams since your marriage with Mercédès, my betrothed!' The general, with his head thrown back, hands extended, gaze fixed, looked silently at this dreadful apparition; then seeking the wall to support him, he glided along close to it until he reached the door, through which he went out backwards, uttering this single mournful, lamentable, distressing cry:

'Edmond Dantès!'

Then, with sighs which were unlike any human sound, he dragged himself to the door, reeled across the courtyard, and falling into the arms of his valet, he said in a voice scarcely intelligible,—'Home, home.'

The fresh air and the shame he felt at having exposed himself before his servants, partly recalled his senses, but the ride was short, and as he drew near his house all his wretchedness revived. He stopped at a short distance from the house and alighted. The door was wide open, a hackney-coach was standing in the middle of the yard—a strange sight before so noble a mansion; the count looked at it with terror, but without daring to inquire its meaning, he rushed towards his apartment.

Two persons were coming down the stairs; he had only time to creep into an alcove to avoid them. It was Mercédès leaning on her son's arm and leaving the house. They passed close by the unhappy being, who, concealed behind the damask curtain, almost felt Mercédès dress brush past him, and his son's warm breath, pronouncing these words:

'Courage, mother! Come, this is no longer our home!'

The words died away, the steps were lost in the distance. The general drew himself up, clinging to the curtain; he uttered the most dreadful sob which ever escaped from the bosom of a father abandoned at the same

'But,' said Morrel, 'I thought this mixture, of which you now take four spoonfuls, was prepared for M. Noirtier?'

'I know it is very bitter,' said Valentine; 'so bitter, that all I drink afterwards appears to have the same taste.' Noirtier looked inquiringly at his granddaughter. 'Yes, grandpapa,' said Valentine; 'it is so. Just now, before I came down to you, I drank a glass of sugared water; I left half, because it seemed so bitter.' Noirtier turned pale, and made a sign that he wished to speak.

Valentine rose to fetch the dictionary. Noirtier watched her with evident anguish. In fact, the blood was rushing to the young girl's head already, her cheeks were becoming red.

'Oh,' cried she, without losing any of her cheerfulness, 'this is singular! I can't see! Did the sun shine in my eyes?' And she leaned against the window.

'The sun is not shining,' said Morrel, more alarmed by Noirtier's expression than by Valentine's indisposition. He ran towards her. The young girl smiled.

'Cheer up,' said she to Noirtier. 'Do not be alarmed, Maximilian; it is nothing, and has already passed away. But listen! Do I not hear a carriage in the courtyard?' She opened Noirtier's door, ran to a window in the passage, and returned hastily. 'Yes,' said she, 'it is Madame Danglars and her daughter, who have come to call on us. Good-bye;—I must run away, for they would send here for me, or, rather, farewell till I see you again. Stay with grandpapa, Maximilian; I promise you not to persuade them to stay.' Morrel watched her as she left the room; he heard her ascend the little staircase which led both to Madame de Villefort's apartments and to hers. As soon as she was gone, Noirtier made a sign to Morrel to take the dictionary. Morrel obeyed; guided by Valentine, he had learned how to understand the old man quickly. Accustomed, however, as he was to the work, he had to repeat most of the letters of the alphabet and to find every word in the dictionary, so that it was ten minutes before the thought of the old man was translated by these words,

'Fetch the glass of water and the decanter from Valentine's room.'

Morrel rang immediately for the servant who had taken Barrois's situation, and in Noirtier's name gave that order. The servant soon returned.

The decanter and the glass were completely empty. Noirtier made a sign that he wished to speak.

'Why are the glass and decanter empty?' asked he; 'Valentine said she only drank half the glassful.'

The translation of this new question occupied another five minutes.

'I do not know,' said the servant, 'but the housemaid is in Mademoiselle Valentine's room: perhaps she has emptied them.'

'Ask her,' said Morrel, translating Noirtier's thought this time by his look. The servant went out, but returned almost immediately. 'Mademoiselle Valentine passed through the room to go to Madame de Villefort's,' said he; 'and in passing, as she was thirsty, she drank what remained in the glass; as for the decanter, Master Edward had emptied that to make a pond for his ducks.'

Noirtier raised his eyes to heaven, as a gambler does who stakes his all on one stroke. From that moment the old man's eyes were fixed on the door, and did not quit it.

It was indeed Madame Danglars and her daughter whom Valentine had seen; they had been ushered into Madame de Villefort's room, who had said she would receive them there. That is why Valentine passed through her room, which was on a level with Valentine's, and only separated from it by Edward's. The two ladies entered the drawing-room with that sort of official stiffness which preludes a formal communication. Among worldly people manner is contagious. Madame de Villefort received them with equal solemnity. Valentine entered at this moment, and the formalities were resumed.

'My dear friend,' said the baroness, while the two young people were shaking hands, 'I and Eugénie are come to be the first to announce to you the approaching marriage of my daughter with Prince Cavalcanti.' Danglars kept up the title of prince. The popular banker found that it answered better than count.

'Allow me to present you my sincere congratulations,' replied Madame de Villefort. 'Prince Cavalcanti appears to be a young man of rare qualities.' 'Listen,' said the baroness, smiling; 'speaking to you as a friend I can say that the prince does not yet appear all he will be. He has about him a little of that foreign manner by which French persons recognize, at first sight, the Italian or German nobleman. Besides, he gives evidence of

I had always known you, and always hated you; and, in short, since the young people of the present day will not fight, it remains for us to do so. Do you think so, sir?'

'Certainly. And when I told you I had foreseen the result, it is the honour of your visit I alluded to.'

'So much the better. Are you prepared?'

'Yes, sir.'

'You know that we shall fight till one of us is dead,' said the general, whose teeth were clenched with rage. 'Until one of us dies,' repeated Monte Cristo, moving his head slightly up and down.

'Let us start, then; we need no witnesses.'

'Very true,' said Monte Cristo; 'it is unnecessary, we know each other so well!'

'On the contrary,' said the count, 'we know so little of each other.'

'Indeed?' said Monte Cristo, with the same indomitable coolness; 'let us see. Are you not the soldier Fernand who deserted on the eve of the battle of Waterloo? Are you not the Lieutenant Fernand who served as guide and spy to the French army in Spain? Are you not the Captain Fernand who betrayed, sold, and murdered his benefactor, Ali? And have not all these Fernands, united, made Lieutenant-General, the Count of Morcerf, peer of France?'

'Oh,' cried the general, as if branded with a hot iron, 'wretch,—to reproach me with my shame when about, perhaps, to kill me! No, I did not say I was a stranger to you. I know well, demon, that you have penetrated into the darkness of the past, and that you have read, by the light of what torch I know not, every page of my life; but perhaps I may be more honourable in my shame than you under your pompous coverings. No—no, I am aware you know me; but I know you only as an adventurer sewn up in gold and jewellery. You call yourself, in Paris, the Count of Monte Cristo; in Italy, Sinbad the Sailor; in Malta, I forget what. But it is your real name I want to know, in the midst of your hundred names, that I may pronounce it when we meet to fight, at the moment when I plunge my sword through your heart.'

The Count of Monte Cristo turned dreadfully pale; his eye seemed to burn with a devouring fire. He leaped towards a dressing-room near his bedroom, and in less than a moment, tearing off his cravat, his coat

'Ah, it is M. de Morcerf,' said Monte Cristo quietly; 'I thought I had not heard aright.'

'Yes, it is I,' said the count, whom a frightful contraction of the lips prevented from articulating freely.

'May I know the cause which procures me the pleasure of seeing M. de Morcerf so early?'

'Had you not a meeting with my son this morning?' asked the general.

'I had,' replied the count.

'And I know my son had good reasons to wish to fight with you, and to endeavour to kill you.'

'Yes, sir, he had very good ones; but you see that in spite of them he has not killed me, and did not even fight.'

'Yet he considered you the cause of his father's dishonor, the cause of the fearful ruin which has fallen on my house.'

'It is true, sir,' said Monte Cristo with his dreadful calmness; 'a secondary cause, but not the principal.'

'Doubtless you made, then, some apology or explanation?'

'I explained nothing, and it is he who apologized to me.'

'But to what do you attribute this conduct?'

'To the conviction, probably, that there was one more guilty than I.'

'And who was that?'

'His father.'

'That may be,' said the count, turning pale; 'but you know the guilty do not like to find themselves convicted.'

'I know it, and I expected this result.'

'You expected my son would be a coward?' cried the count.

'M. Albert de Morcerf is no coward!' said Monte Cristo.

'A man who holds a sword in his hand, and sees a mortal enemy within reach of that sword, and does not fight, is a coward! Why is he not here that I may tell him so?'

'Sir,' replied Monte Cristo coldly, 'I did not expect that you had come here to relate to me your little family affairs. Go and tell M. Albert that, and he may know what to answer you.'

'Oh, no, no,' said the general, smiling faintly, 'I did not come for that purpose; you are right. I came to tell you that I also look upon you as my enemy. I came to tell you that I hate you instinctively; that it seems as if

great kindness of disposition, much keenness of wit, and as to suitability, M. Danglars assures me that his fortune is majestic—that is his word.'

'And then,' said Eugénie, while turning over the leaves of Madame de Villefort's album, 'add that you have taken a great fancy to the young man.'

'And,' said Madame de Villefort, 'I need not ask you if you share that fancy.'

'I?' replied Eugénie with her usual candour. 'Oh, not the least in the world, madame! My wish was not to confine myself to domestic cares, or the caprices of any man, but to be an artist, and consequently free in heart, in person, and in thought.'

Eugénie pronounced these words with so firm a tone that the colour mounted to Valentine's cheeks. The timid girl could not understand that vigourous nature which appeared to have none of the timidities of woman.

'At any rate,' said she, 'since I am to be married whether I will or not, I ought to be thankful to Providence for having released me from my engagement with M. Albert de Morcerf, or I should this day have been the wife of a dishonored man.'

'It is true,' said the baroness, with that strange simplicity sometimes met with among fashionable ladies, and of which plebeian intercourse can never entirely deprive them,—'it is very true that had not the Morcerfs hesitated, my daughter would have married Monsieur Albert. The general depended much on it; he even came to force M. Danglars. We have had a narrow escape.'

'But,' said Valentine, timidly, 'does all the father's shame revert upon the son? Monsieur Albert appears to me quite innocent of the treason charged against the general.'

'Excuse me,' said the implacable young girl, 'Monsieur Albert claims and well deserves his share. It appears that after having challenged M. de Monte Cristo at the Opera yesterday, he apologized on the ground today.'

'Impossible,' said Madame de Villefort.

'Ah, my dear friend,' said Madame Danglars, with the same simplicity we before noticed, 'it is a fact. I heard it from M. Debray, who was present at the explanation.'

Valentine also knew the truth, but she did not answer. A single word had reminded her that Morrel was expecting her in M. Noirtier's room. Deeply engaged with a sort of inward contemplation, Valentine had ceased for a moment to join in the conversation. She would, indeed, have found it impossible to repeat what had been said the last few minutes, when suddenly Madame Danglars' hand, pressed on her arm, aroused her from her lethargy.

'What is it?' said she, starting at Madame Danglars' touch as she would have done from an electric shock.

'It is, my dear Valentine,' said the baroness, 'that you are, doubtless, suffering.' 'I?' said the young girl, passing her hand across her burning forehead.

'Yes, look at yourself in that glass; you have turned pale and then red successively, three or four times in one minute.'

'Indeed,' cried Eugénie, 'you are very pale!'

'Oh, do not be alarmed; I have been so for many days.' Artless as she was, the young girl knew that this was an opportunity to leave, and besides, Madame de Villefort came to her assistance.

'Retire, Valentine,' said she; 'you are really suffering, and these ladies will excuse you; drink a glass of pure water, it will restore you.'

Valentine kissed Eugénie, bowed to Madame Danglars, who had already risen to take her leave, and went out.

'That poor child,' said Madame de Villefort when Valentine was gone, 'she makes me very uneasy, and I should not be astonished if she had some serious illness.'

Meanwhile, Valentine, in a sort of excitement which she could not quite understand, had crossed Edward's room without noticing some trick of the child, and through her own had reached the little staircase.

She was within three steps of the bottom; she already heard Morrel's voice, when suddenly a cloud passed over her eyes, her stiffened foot missed the step, her hands had no power to hold the baluster, and falling against the wall she lost her balance wholly and toppled to the floor. Morrel bounded to the door, opened it, and found Valentine stretched out at the bottom of the stairs. Quick as a flash, he raised her in his arms and placed her in a chair. Valentine opened her eyes.

bedroom and raised with a constricted hand the curtain of a window overlooking the courtyard. He remained there ten minutes, motionless and dumb, listening to the beating of his own heart. For him those ten minutes were very long. It was then Albert, returning from his meeting with the count, perceived his father watching for his arrival behind a curtain, and turned aside. The count's eye expanded; he knew Albert had insulted the count dreadfully, and that in every country in the world such an insult would lead to a deadly duel. Albert returned safely—then the count was revenged.

An indescribable ray of joy illumined that wretched countenance like the last ray of the sun before it disappears behind the clouds which bear the aspect, not of a downy couch, but of a tomb. But as we have said, he waited in vain for his son to come to his apartment with the account of his triumph. He easily understood why his son did not come to see him before he went to avenge his father's honour; but when that was done, why did not his son come and throw himself into his arms?

It was then, when the count could not see Albert, that he sent for his servant, who he knew was authorized not to conceal anything from him. Ten minutes afterwards, General Morcerf was seen on the steps in a black coat with a military collar, black pantaloons, and black gloves. He had apparently given previous orders, for as he reached the bottom step his carriage came from the coach-house ready for him. The valet threw into the carriage his military cloak, in which two swords were wrapped, and, shutting the door, he took his seat by the side of the coachman. The coachman stooped down for his orders.

'To the Champs-Élysées,' said the general; 'the Count of Monte Cristo's. Hurry!'

The horses bounded beneath the whip; and in five minutes they stopped before the count's door. M. de Morcerf opened the door himself, and as the carriage rolled away he passed up the walk, rang, and entered the open door with his servant.

A moment afterwards, Baptistin announced the Count of Morcerf to Monte Cristo, and the latter, leading Haydée aside, ordered that Morcerf be asked into the drawing-room. The general was pacing the room the third time when, in turning, he perceived Monte Cristo at the door.

Monte Cristo was beginning to think, what he had not for a long time dared to believe, that there were two Mercédès in the world, and he might yet be happy. His eye, elate with happiness, was reading eagerly the tearful gaze of Haydée, when suddenly the door opened. The count knit his brow.

'M. de Morcerf!' said Baptistin, as if that name sufficed for his excuse. In fact, the count's face brightened.

'Which,' asked he, 'the viscount or the count?'

'The count.'

'Oh,' exclaimed Haydée, 'is it not yet over?'

'I know not if it is finished, my beloved child,' said Monte Cristo, taking the young girl's hands; 'but I do know you have nothing more to fear.'

'But it is the wretched— '

'That man cannot injure me, Haydée,' said Monte Cristo; 'it was his son alone that there was cause to fear.'

'And what I have suffered,' said the young girl, 'you shall never know, my lord.'

Monte Cristo smiled. 'By my father's tomb,' said he, extending his hand over the head of the young girl, 'I swear to you, Haydée, that if any misfortune happens, it will not be to me.'

'I believe you, my lord, as implicitly as if God had spoken to me,' said the young girl, presenting her forehead to him. Monte Cristo pressed on that pure beautiful forehead a kiss which made two hearts throb at once, the one violently, the other secretly.

'Oh,' murmured the count, 'shall I then be permitted to love again? Ask M. de Morcerf into the drawing-room,' said he to Baptistin, while he led the beautiful Greek girl to a private staircase.

We must explain this visit, which although expected by Monte Cristo, is unexpected to our readers. While Mercédès, as we have said, was making a similar inventory of her property to Albert's, while she was arranging her jewels, shutting her drawers, collecting her keys, to leave everything in perfect order, she did not perceive a pale and sinister face at a glass door which threw light into the passage, from which everything could be both seen and heard. He who was thus looking, without being heard or seen, probably heard and saw all that passed in Madame de Morcerf's apartments. From that glass door the pale-faced man went to the count's

'Oh, what a clumsy thing I am,' said she with feverish volubility; 'I don't know my way. I forgot there were three more steps before the landing.'

'You have hurt yourself, perhaps,' said Morrel. 'What can I do for you, Valentine?'

Valentine looked around her; she saw the deepest terror depicted in Noirtier's eyes.

'Don't worry, dear grandpapa,' said she, endeavouring to smile; 'it is nothing—it is nothing; I was giddy, that is all.'

'Another attack of giddiness,' said Morrel, clasping his hands. 'Oh, attend to it, Valentine, I entreat you.'

'But no,' said Valentine,—'no, I tell you it is all past, and it was nothing. Now, let me tell you some news; Eugénie is to be married in a week, and in three days there is to be a grand feast, a betrothal festival. We are all invited, my father, Madame de Villefort, and I—at least, I understood it so.'

'When will it be our turn to think of these things? Oh, Valentine, you who have so much influence over your grandpapa, try to make him answer—Soon.'

'And do you,' said Valentine, 'depend on me to stimulate the tardiness and arouse the memory of grandpapa?'

'Yes,' cried Morrel, 'make haste. So long as you are not mine, Valentine, I shall always think I may lose you.'

'Oh,' replied Valentine with a convulsive movement, 'oh, indeed, Maximilian, you are too timid for an officer, for a soldier who, they say, never knows fear. Ha, ha, ha!'

She burst into a forced and melancholy laugh, her arms stiffened and twisted, her head fell back on her chair, and she remained motionless. The cry of terror which was stopped on Noirtier's lips, seemed to start from his eyes. Morrel understood it; he knew he must call assistance. The young man rang the bell violently; the housemaid who had been in Mademoiselle Valentine's room, and the servant who had replaced Barrois, ran in at the same moment. Valentine was so pale, so cold, so inanimate that without listening to what was said to them they were seized with the fear which pervaded that house, and they flew into the passage crying for help. Madame Danglars and Eugénie were going out at that moment; they heard the cause of the disturbance.

'I told you so!' exclaimed Madame de Villefort. 'Poor child!'

'But you will not make me your confidant, Maximilian?' said the count, in a tone which showed how gladly he would have been admitted to the secret.

'I showed you this morning that I had a heart, did I not, count?' Monte Cristo only answered by extending his hand to the young man. 'Well,' continued the latter, 'since that heart is no longer with you in the Bois de Vincennes, it is elsewhere, and I must go and find it.'

'Go,' said the count deliberately; 'go, dear friend, but promise me if you meet with any obstacle to remember that I have some power in this world, that I am happy to use that power in the behalf of those I love, and that I love you, Morrel.' 'I will remember it,' said the young man, 'as selfish children recollect their parents when they want their aid. When I need your assistance, and the moment arrives, I will come to you, count.'

'Well, I rely upon your promise. Good-bye, then.'

'Good-bye, till we meet again.'

They had arrived in the Champs-Élysées. Monte Cristo opened the carriage-door, Morrel sprang out on the pavement, Bertuccio was waiting on the steps. Morrel disappeared down the Avenue de Marigny, and Monte Cristo hastened to join Bertuccio.

'Well?' asked he.

'She is going to leave her house,' said the steward.

'And her son?'

'Florentin, his valet, thinks he is going to do the same.'

'Come this way.' Monte Cristo took Bertuccio into his study, wrote the letter we have seen, and gave it to the steward. 'Go,' said he quickly. 'But first, let Haydée be informed that I have returned.'

'Here I am,' said the young girl, who at the sound of the carriage had run downstairs and whose face was radiant with joy at seeing the count return safely. Bertuccio left. Every transport of a daughter finding a father, all the delight of a mistress seeing an adored lover, were felt by Haydée during the first moments of this meeting, which she had so eagerly expected. Doubtless, although less evident, Monte Cristo's joy was not less intense. Joy to hearts which have suffered long is like the dew on the ground after a long drought; both the heart and the ground absorb that beneficent moisture falling on them, and nothing is outwardly apparent.