'And what do you suppose is the count's age?' inquired Mercédès, evidently attaching great importance to this question.

'Thirty-five or thirty-six, mother.'

'So young,—it is impossible,' said Mercédès, replying at the same time to what Albert said as well as to her own private reflection.

'It is the truth, however. Three or four times he has said to me, and certainly without the slightest premeditation, "at such a period I was five years old, at another ten years old, at another twelve," and I, induced by curiosity, which kept me alive to these details, have compared the dates, and never found him inaccurate. The age of this singular man, who is of no age, is then, I am certain, thirty-five. Besides, mother, remark how vivid his eye, how raven-black his hair, and his brow, though so pale, is free from wrinkles,—he is not only vigourous, but also young.'

The countess bent her head, as if beneath a heavy wave of bitter thoughts.

'And has this man displayed a friendship for you, Albert?' she asked with a nervous shudder.

'I am inclined to think so.'

'And—do—you—like—him?'

'Why, he pleases me in spite of Franz d'Épinay, who tries to convince me that he is a being returned from the other world.'

The countess shuddered.

'Albert,' she said, in a voice which was altered by emotion, 'I have always put you on your guard against new acquaintances. Now you are a man, and are able to give me advice; yet I repeat to you, Albert, be prudent.'

'Why, my dear mother, it is necessary, in order to make your advice turn to account, that I should know beforehand what I have to distrust. The count never plays, he only drinks pure water tinged with a little sherry, and is so rich that he cannot, without intending to laugh at me, try to borrow money. What, then, have I to fear from him?'

'You are right,' said the countess, 'and my fears are weakness, especially when directed against a man who has saved your life. How did your father receive him, Albert? It is necessary that we should be more than complaisant to the count. M. de Morcerf is sometimes occupied, his business makes him reflective, and he might, without intending it— '

'Nothing could be in better taste than my father's demeanour, madame,' said Albert; 'nay, more, he seemed greatly flattered at two or three

compliments which the count very skilfully and agreeably paid him with as much ease as if he had known him these thirty years. Each of these little tickling arrows must have pleased my father,' added Albert with a laugh. 'And thus they parted the best possible friends, and M. de Morcerf even wished to take him to the Chamber to hear the speakers.'

The countess made no reply. She fell into so deep a reverie that her eyes gradually closed. The young man, standing up before her, gazed upon her with that filial affection which is so tender and endearing with children whose mothers are still young and handsome. Then, after seeing her eyes closed, and hearing her breathe gently, he believed she had dropped asleep, and left the apartment on tiptoe, closing the door after him with the utmost precaution.

'This devil of a fellow,' he muttered, shaking his head; 'I said at the time he would create a sensation here, and I measure his effect by an infallible thermometer. My mother has noticed him, and he must therefore, perforce, be remarkable.'

He went down to the stables, not without some slight annoyance, when he remembered that the Count of Monte Cristo had laid his hands on a 'turnout' which sent his bays down to second place in the opinion of connoisseurs.

'Most decidedly,' said he, 'men are not equal, and I must beg my father to develop this theorem in the Chamber of Peers.'

'They are perfect mother, so perfect, that they surpass by far all I have known in the leading aristocracy of the three proudest nobilities of Europe—the English, the Spanish, and the German.'

The countess paused a moment; then, after a slight hesitation, she resumed.

'You have seen, my dear Albert—I ask the question as a mother—you have seen M. de Monte Cristo in his house, you are quicksighted, have much knowledge of the world, more tact than is usual at your age, do you think the count is really what he appears to be?'

'What does he appear to be?'

'Why, you have just said,—a man of high distinction.'

'I told you, my dear mother, he was esteemed such.'

'But what is your own opinion, Albert?'

'I must tell you that I have not come to any decided opinion respecting him, but I think him a Maltese.'

'I do not ask you of his origin but what he is.'

'Ah! what he is; that is quite another thing. I have seen so many remarkable things in him, that if you would have me really say what I think, I shall reply that I really do look upon him as one of Byron's heroes, whom misery has marked with a fatal brand; some Manfred, some Lara, some Werner, one of those wrecks, as it were, of some ancient family, who, disinherited of their patrimony, have achieved one by the force of their adventurous genius, which has placed them above the laws of society.'

'You say— '

'I say that Monte Cristo is an island in the midst of the Mediterranean, without inhabitants or garrison, the resort of smugglers of all nations, and pirates of every flag. Who knows whether or not these industrious worthies do not pay to their feudal lord some dues for his protection?'

'That is possible,' said the countess, reflecting.

'Never mind,' continued the young man, 'smuggler or not, you must agree, mother dear, as you have seen him, that the Count of Monte Cristo is a remarkable man, who will have the greatest success in the salons of Paris. Why, this very morning, in my rooms, he made his *entrée* amongst us by striking every man of us with amazement, not even excepting Château-Renaud.'

heliotropes in the flower-stands, the sharp and fragrant odor of volatile salts, and he noticed in one of the chased cups on the mantle-piece the countess's smelling-bottle, taken from its shagreen case, and exclaimed in a tone of uneasiness, as he entered:

'My dear mother, have you been ill during my absence?'

'No, no, Albert, but you know these roses, tuberoses, and orange-flowers throw out at first, before one is used to them, such violent perfumes.'

'Then, my dear mother,' said Albert, putting his hand to the bell, 'they must be taken into the antechamber. You are really ill, and just now were so pale as you came into the room— '

'Was I pale, Albert?'

'Yes; a pallor that suits you admirably, mother, but which did not the less alarm my father and myself.'

'Did your father speak of it?' inquired Mercédès eagerly.

'No, madame; but do you not remember that he spoke of the fact to you?' 'Yes, I do remember,' replied the countess.

A servant entered, summoned by Albert's ring of the bell.

'Take these flowers into the anteroom or dressing-room,' said the viscount; 'they make the countess ill.'

The footman obeyed his orders. A long pause ensued, which lasted until all the flowers were removed.

'What is this name of Monte Cristo?' inquired the countess, when the servant had taken away the last vase of flowers, 'is it a family name, or the name of the estate, or a simple title?'

'I believe, mother, it is merely a title. The count purchased an island in the Tuscan archipelago, and, as he told you today, has founded a commandery. You know the same thing was done for Saint Stephen of Florence, Saint George Constantinian of Parma, and even for the Order of Malta. Except this, he has no pretension to nobility, and calls himself a chance count, although the general opinion at Rome is that the count is a man of very high distinction.'

'His manners are admirable,' said the countess, 'at least, as far as I could judge in the few minutes he remained here.'

Chapter XLII

Monsieur Bertuccio

MEANWHILE the count had arrived at his house; it had taken him six minutes to perform the distance, but these six minutes were sufficient to induce twenty young men who knew the price of the equipage they had been unable to purchase themselves, to put their horses in a gallop in order to see the rich foreigner who could afford to give 20,000 francs apiece for his horses.

The house Ali had chosen, and which was to serve as a town residence to Monte Cristo, was situated on the right hand as you ascend the Champs-Élysées. A thick clump of trees and shrubs rose in the centre, and masked a portion of the front; around this shrubbery two alleys, like two arms, extended right and left, and formed a carriage-drive from the iron gates to a double portico, on every step of which stood a porcelain vase, filled with flowers. This house, isolated from the rest, had, besides the main entrance, another in the Rue de Ponthieu. Even before the coachman had hailed the *concierge*, the massy gates rolled on their hinges—they had seen the Count coming, and at Paris, as everywhere else, he was served with the rapidity of lightning. The coachman entered and traversed the half-circle without slackening his speed, and the gates were closed ere the wheels had ceased to sound on the gravel. The carriage stopped at the left side of the portico, two men presented themselves at the carriage-window; the one was Ali, who, smiling with an expression of the most sincere joy, seemed amply repaid by a mere look from Monte Cristo. The other bowed respectfully, and offered his arm to assist the count in descending.

'Thanks, M. Bertuccio,' said the count, springing lightly up the three steps of the portico; 'and the notary?'

'He is in the small salon, excellency,' returned Bertuccio.

'And the cards I ordered to be engraved as soon as you knew the number of the house?'

'Your excellency, it is done already. I have been myself to the best engraver of the Palais Royal, who did the plate in my presence. The first card struck off was taken, according to your orders, to the Baron Danglars, Rue de la Chaussée d'Antin, № 7; the others are on the mantle-piece of your excellency's bedroom.'

'Good; what o'clock is it?'

'Four o'clock.'

Monte Cristo gave his hat, cane, and gloves to the same French footman who had called his carriage at the Count of Morcerf's, and then he passed into the small salon, preceded by Bertuccio, who showed him the way.

'These are but indifferent marbles in this antechamber,' said Monte Cristo. 'I trust all this will soon be taken away.'

Bertuccio bowed. As the steward had said, the notary awaited him in the small salon. He was a simple-looking lawyer's clerk, elevated to the extraordinary dignity of a provincial scrivener.

'You are the notary empowered to sell the country house that I wish to purchase, monsieur?' asked Monte Cristo.

'Yes, count,' returned the notary.

'Is the deed of sale ready?'

'Yes, count.'

'Have you brought it?'

'Here it is.'

'Very well; and where is this house that I purchase?' asked the count carelessly, addressing himself half to Bertuccio, half to the notary. The steward made a gesture that signified, 'I do not know.' The notary looked at the count with astonishment.

'What!' said he, 'does not the count know where the house he purchases is situated?'

'No,' returned the count.

'The count does not know?'

'How should I know? I have arrived from Cadiz this morning. I have never before been at Paris, and it is the first time I have ever even set my foot in France.'

'Ah, that is different; the house you purchase is at Auteuil.'

the four hours and a half I have given him, and that I shall find a carriage of some sort ready at the door.'

Albert was used to the count's manner of proceeding; he knew that, like Nero, he was in search of the impossible, and nothing astonished him, but wishing to judge with his own eyes how far the count's orders had been executed, he accompanied him to the door of the house. Monte Cristo was not deceived. As soon as he appeared in the Count of Morcerf's antechamber, a footman, the same who at Rome had brought the count's card to the two young men, and announced his visit, sprang into the vestibule, and when he arrived at the door the illustrious traveller found his carriage awaiting him. It was a *coupé* of Koller's building, and with horses and harness for which Drake had, to the knowledge of all the lions of Paris, refused on the previous day seven hundred guineas.

'Monsieur,' said the count to Albert, 'I do not ask you to accompany me to my house, as I can only show you a habitation fitted up in a hurry, and I have, as you know, a reputation to keep up as regards not being taken by surprise. Give me, therefore, one more day before I invite you; I shall then be certain not to fail in my hospitality.'

'If you ask me for a day, count, I know what to anticipate; it will not be a house I shall see, but a palace. You have decidedly some genius at your control.'

'*Ma foi*, spread that idea,' replied the Count of Monte Cristo, putting his foot on the velvet-lined steps of his splendid carriage, 'and that will be worth something to me among the ladies.'

As he spoke, he sprang into the vehicle, the door was closed, but not so rapidly that Monte Cristo failed to perceive the almost imperceptible movement which stirred the curtains of the apartment in which he had left Madame de Morcerf.

When Albert returned to his mother, he found her in the boudoir reclining in a large velvet armchair, the whole room so obscure that only the shining spangle, fastened here and there to the drapery, and the angles of the gilded frames of the pictures, showed with some degree of brightness in the gloom. Albert could not see the face of the countess, as it was covered with a thin veil she had put on her head, and which fell over her features in misty folds, but it seemed to him as though her voice had altered. He could distinguish amid the perfumes of the roses and

the opportunity of thanking you as I have blessed you, from the bottom of my heart.'

The count bowed again, but lower than before; he was even paler than Mercédès.

'Madame,' said he, 'the count and yourself recompense too generously a simple action. To save a man, to spare a father's feelings, or a mother's sensibility, is not to do a good action, but a simple deed of humanity.'

At these words, uttered with the most exquisite sweetness and politeness, Madame de Morcerf replied:

'It is very fortunate for my son, monsieur, that he found such a friend, and I thank God that things are thus.'

And Mercédès raised her fine eyes to heaven with so fervent an expression of gratitude, that the count fancied he saw tears in them. M. de Morcerf approached her.

'Madame,' said he. 'I have already made my excuses to the count for quitting him, and I pray you to do so also. The sitting commences at two; it is now three, and I am to speak.'

'Go, then, and monsieur and I will strive our best to forget your absence,' replied the countess, with the same tone of deep feeling. 'Monsieur,' continued she, turning to Monte Cristo, 'will you do us the honour of passing the rest of the day with us?'

'Believe me, madame, I feel most grateful for your kindness, but I got out of my travelling carriage at your door this morning, and I am ignorant how I am installed in Paris, which I scarcely know; this is but a trifling inquietude, I know, but one that may be appreciated.'

'We shall have the pleasure another time,' said the countess; 'you promise that?'

Monte Cristo inclined himself without answering, but the gesture might pass for assent.

'I will not detain you, monsieur,' continued the countess; 'I would not have our gratitude become indiscreet or importunate.'

'My dear Count,' said Albert, 'I will endeavour to return your politeness at Rome, and place my coupé at your disposal until your own be ready.'

'A thousand thanks for your kindness, viscount,' returned the Count of Monte Cristo 'but I suppose that M. Bertuccio has suitably employed

At these words Bertuccio turned pale.

'And where is Auteuil?' asked the count.

'Close by here, monsieur,' replied the notary—'a little beyond Passy; a charming situation, in the heart of the Bois de Boulogne.'

'So near as that?' said the Count; 'but that is not in the country. What made you choose a house at the gates of Paris, M. Bertuccio?'

'I,' cried the steward with a strange expression. 'His excellency did not charge me to purchase this house. If his excellency will recollect—if he will think— '

'Ah, true,' observed Monte Cristo; 'I recollect now. I read the advertisement in one of the papers, and was tempted by the false title, "a country house."'

'It is not yet too late,' cried Bertuccio, eagerly; 'and if your excellency will intrust me with the commission, I will find you a better at Enghien, at Fontenay-aux-Roses, or at Bellevue.'

'Oh, no,' returned Monte Cristo negligently; 'since I have this, I will keep it.'

'And you are quite right,' said the notary, who feared to lose his fee. 'It is a charming place, well supplied with spring-water and fine trees; a comfortable habitation, although abandoned for a long time, without reckoning the furniture, which, although old, is yet valuable, now that old things are so much sought after. I suppose the count has the tastes of the day?'

'To be sure,' returned Monte Cristo; 'it is very convenient, then?'

'It is more—it is magnificent.'

'*Peste!* let us not lose such an opportunity,' returned Monte Cristo. 'The deed, if you please, Mr. Notary.'

And he signed it rapidly, after having first run his eye over that part of the deed in which were specified the situation of the house and the names of the proprietors.

'Bertuccio,' said he, 'give fifty-five thousand francs to monsieur.'

The steward left the room with a faltering step, and returned with a bundle of bank-notes, which the notary counted like a man who never gives a receipt for money until after he is sure it is all there.

'And now,' demanded the count, 'are all the forms complied with?'

'All, sir.'

'Have you the keys?'

'They are in the hands of the concierge, who takes care of the house, but here is the order I have given him to install the count in his new possessions.'

'Very well;' and Monte Cristo made a sign with his hand to the notary, which said, 'I have no further need of you; you may go.'

'But,' observed the honest notary, 'the count is, I think, mistaken; it is only fifty thousand francs, everything included.'

'And your fee?'

'Is included in this sum.'

'But have you not come from Auteuil here?'

'Yes, certainly.'

'Well, then, it is but fair that you should be paid for your loss of time and trouble,' said the count; and he made a gesture of polite dismissal.

The notary left the room backwards, and bowing down to the ground; it was the first time he had ever met a similar client.

'See this gentleman out,' said the count to Bertuccio. And the steward followed the notary out of the room.

Scarcely was the count alone, when he drew from his pocket a book closed with a lock, and opened it with a key which he wore round his neck, and which never left him. After having sought for a few minutes, he stopped at a leaf which had several notes, and compared them with the deed of sale, which lay on the table, and recalling his *souvenirs*—

'"Auteuil, Rue de la Fontaine, № 28;" it is indeed the same,' said he; 'and now, am I to rely upon an avowal extorted by religious or physical terror? However, in an hour I shall know all. Bertuccio!' cried he, striking a light hammer with a pliant handle on a small gong. 'Bertuccio!'

The steward appeared at the door.

'Monsieur Bertuccio,' said the count, 'did you never tell me that you had travelled in France?'

'In some parts of France—yes, excellency.'

'You know the environs of Paris, then?'

'No, excellency, no,' returned the steward, with a sort of nervous trembling, which Monte Cristo, a connoisseur in all emotions, rightly attributed to great disquietude.

'But, monsieur,' said the Count of Morcerf, 'for a man of your merit, Italy is not a country, and France opens her arms to receive you; respond to her call. France will not, perhaps, be always ungrateful. She treats her children ill, but she always welcomes strangers.'

'Ah, father,' said Albert with a smile, 'it is evident you do not know the Count of Monte Cristo; he despises all honours, and contents himself with those written on his passport.'

'That is the most just remark,' replied the stranger, 'I ever heard made concerning myself.'

'You have been free to choose your career,' observed the Count of Morcerf, with a sigh; 'and you have chosen the path strewed with flowers.'

'Precisely, monsieur,' replied Monte Cristo with one of those smiles that a painter could never represent or a physiologist analyze.

'If I did not fear to fatigue you,' said the general, evidently charmed with the count's manners, 'I would have taken you to the Chamber; there is a debate very curious to those who are strangers to our modern senators.'

'I shall be most grateful, monsieur, if you will, at some future time, renew your offer, but I have been flattered with the hope of being introduced to the countess, and I will therefore wait.'

'Ah, here is my mother,' cried the viscount.

Monte Cristo, turned round hastily, and saw Madame de Morcerf at the entrance of the salon, at the door opposite to that by which her husband had entered, pale and motionless; when Monte Cristo turned round, she let fall her arm, which for some unknown reason had been resting on the gilded door-post. She had been there some moments, and had heard the last words of the visitor. The latter rose and bowed to the countess, who inclined herself without speaking.

'Ah! good heavens, madame,' said the count, 'are you ill, or is it the heat of the room that affects you?'

'Are you ill, mother?' cried the viscount, springing towards her.

She thanked them both with a smile.

'No,' returned she, 'but I feel some emotion on seeing, for the first time, the man without whose intervention we should have been in tears and desolation. Monsieur,' continued the countess, advancing with the majesty of a queen, 'I owe to you the life of my son, and for this I bless you. Now, I thank you for the pleasure you give me in thus affording me

curtains, and read on the careworn and livid features of the count a whole history of secret griefs written in each wrinkle time had planted there.

'The countess,' said Morcerf, 'was at her toilet when she was informed of the visit she was about to receive. She will, however, be in the salon in ten minutes.'

'It is a great honour to me,' returned Monte Cristo, 'to be thus, on the first day of my arrival in Paris, brought in contact with a man whose merit equals his reputation, and to whom fortune has for once been equitable, but has she not still on the plains of Mitidja, or in the mountains of Atlas, a marshal's staff to offer you?'

'Oh,' replied Morcerf, reddening slightly, 'I have left the service, monsieur. Made a peer at the Restoration, I served through the first campaign under the orders of Marshal Bourmont. I could, therefore, expect a higher rank, and who knows what might have happened had the elder branch remained on the throne? But the Revolution of July was, it seems, sufficiently glorious to allow itself to be ungrateful, and it was so for all services that did not date from the imperial period. I tendered my resignation, for when you have gained your epaulets on the battle-field, you do not know how to manœuvre on the slippery grounds of the salons. I have hung up my sword, and cast myself into politics. I have devoted myself to industry; I study the useful arts. During the twenty years I served, I often wished to do so, but I had not the time.'

'These are the ideas that render your nation superior to any other,' returned Monte Cristo. 'A gentleman of high birth, possessor of an ample fortune, you have consented to gain your promotion as an obscure soldier, step by step—this is uncommon; then become general, peer of France, commander of the Legion of honour, you consent to again commence a second apprenticeship, without any other hope or any other desire than that of one day becoming useful to your fellow-creatures; this, indeed, is praiseworthy,—nay, more, it is sublime.' Albert looked on and listened with astonishment; he was not used to see Monte Cristo give vent to such bursts of enthusiasm.

'Alas,' continued the stranger, doubtless to dispel the slight cloud that covered Morcerf's brow, 'we do not act thus in Italy; we grow according to our race and our species, and we pursue the same lines, and often the same uselessness, all our lives.'

'It is unfortunate,' returned he, 'that you have never visited the environs, for I wish to see my new property this evening, and had you gone with me, you could have given me some useful information.'

'To Auteuil!' cried Bertuccio, whose copper complexion became livid—'I go to Auteuil?'

'Well, what is there surprising in that? When I live at Auteuil, you must come there, as you belong to my service.'

Bertuccio hung down his head before the imperious look of his master, and remained motionless, without making any answer.

'Why, what has happened to you?—are you going to make me ring a second time for the carriage?' asked Monte Cristo, in the same tone that Louis XIV. pronounced the famous, 'I have been almost obliged to wait.' Bertuccio made but one bound to the antechamber, and cried in a hoarse voice:

'His excellency's horses!'

Monte Cristo wrote two or three notes, and, as he sealed the last, the steward appeared.

'Your excellency's carriage is at the door,' said he.

'Well, take your hat and gloves,' returned Monte Cristo.

'Am I to accompany you, your excellency?' cried Bertuccio.

'Certainly, you must give the orders, for I intend residing at the house.' It was unexampled for a servant of the count's to dare to dispute an order of his, so the steward, without saying a word, followed his master, who got into the carriage, and signed to him to follow, which he did, taking his place respectfully on the front seat.

It would have required the penetration of Œdipus or the Sphinx to have divined the irony the count concealed beneath these words, apparently uttered with the greatest politeness. Morcerf thanked him with a smile, and pushed open the door above which were his arms, and which, as we have said, opened into the salon. In the most conspicuous part of the salon was another portrait. It was that of a man, from five to eight-and-thirty, in the uniform of a general officer, wearing the double epaulet of heavy bullion, that indicates superior rank, the ribbon of the Legion of honour around his neck, which showed he was a commander, and on the right breast, the star of a grand officer of the order of the Saviour, and on the left that of the grand cross of Charles III., which proved that the person represented by the picture had served in the wars of Greece and Spain, or, what was just the same thing as regarded decorations, had fulfilled some diplomatic mission in the two countries.

Monte Cristo was engaged in examining this portrait with no less care than he had bestowed upon the other, when another door opened, and he found himself opposite to the Count of Morcerf in person.

He was a man of forty to forty-five years, but he seemed at least fifty, and his black moustache and eyebrows contrasted strangely with his almost white hair, which was cut short, in the military fashion. He was dressed in plain clothes, and wore at his button-hole the ribbons of the different orders to which he belonged.

He entered with a tolerably dignified step, and some little haste. Monte Cristo saw him advance towards him without making a single step. It seemed as if his feet were rooted to the ground, and his eyes on the Count of Morcerf.

'Father,' said the young man, 'I have the honour of presenting to you the Count of Monte Cristo, the generous friend whom I had the good fortune to meet in the critical situation of which I have told you.'

'You are most welcome, monsieur,' said the Count of Morcerf, saluting Monte Cristo with a smile, 'and monsieur has rendered our house, in preserving its only heir, a service which insures him our eternal gratitude.'

As he said these words, the count of Morcerf pointed to a chair, while he seated himself in another opposite the window.

Monte Cristo, in taking the seat Morcerf offered him, placed himself in such a manner as to remain concealed in the shadow of the large velvet