

Wingfield Lewis

**The Maid of Honour: A Tale
of the Dark Days of France.**

Volume 2 of 3



Lewis Wingfield

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CHAPTER XI. A CRISIS

The abbé's departure left a void in the household. He had grown to be so conspicuous and necessary a feature in it that even Gabrielle regretted his mercurial presence, while conscious of a feeling of relief in that he no more pursued her. It was but a temporary respite, she knew. He would return ere long, renew the siege, demand an answer. What that answer was to be, she did not feel certain. Her interest in herself had gone. She missed the readings, the soft declamation of the musical voice; for, left more alone than ever, her mind brooded without distraction on the past and the tangled possibilities of the future. The chevalier's attentions were rather irksome than otherwise, for his conversational powers were limited. His position was that of watchdog, and, as all the world knows, watch-dogs are expected to watch and not to talk. He was content to sit staring with vacant eyes at his sister-in-law for an unlimited period, breathing very hard and emitting strong fumes of spirits with a meaningless but complacent expression of conscious rectitude. He was doing his duty, and knew it. Since his rebuff on that moonlight night, now long ago, he had seemed in his slow way to have become possessed by a fixed idea. The prize was not for him. His brother had behaved magnanimously in permitting him to try first for it. Having failed-as he might have known he would-he must keep his promise, and assist him in the chase to the best of his abilities.

He was a remarkable man, his brother, of that he had been convinced for years, who was destined to have his will in all things; and quite right, too, for commanding genius should surely achieve success.

Dreary fat Phebus! Lulled by the monotonous life at Lorge, the little intellect he possessed had gone to sleep. Now and again he had sallied forth to shoot with the gamekeeper, but could never hit it off with him. His oracular remarks were met by silence. Jean Boulot treated him with a sullen and enforced politeness, and it dawned on his sluggish mind by slow degrees that the gamekeeper heartily despised him. He despised by a common country peasant, who, instead of sneering, should have been grateful to be noticed by a half-brother of the Marquis de Gange! The position was so unsatisfactory that the chevalier gave up the chase. He also gave up riding, for his horse would take the direction of Montbazon, the welcome of whose inmates frightened him. Angelique looked so wistful, and the old lady was so effusively hospitable that he quite trembled in his shoes lest he should wake up some morning and find that he was married.

Moping about with no occupation either for mind or body, it was natural that he should have fallen into the trap which is prepared for the idle and empty-pated; that he should while away the laggard hours in the company of the best cognac.

Time hung very heavy on the hands of neglected Gabrielle. Toinon was a sweet girl who strove by many little acts to comfort her stricken heart; but the pride of the chatelaine stood between herself and Toinon. It was bitter to expose her wrongs to the tender touch of a loving foster-sister. Even when engaged on missions to the sick poor, of whom, alack, there were far too many, she could not keep her mind from brooding. "What was, and what might have been," formed a dismal refrain that was for ever ringing in her ears.

The abbé remained a long time absent. His letters were full of interest, though not particularly cheerful. He appeared to have come to the conclusion that affairs in the capital were not improving.

"The king is much to blame," he wrote, "while the queen is rash, and the combination is not fortuitous." He told of the strange and aggressive proceedings of that impudent body, the National Assembly, of the treasonous language employed by some of its members. These impertinent rascals babbled of the Rights of Man in a manner which, to one of superior birth, was disgusting. He related that their majesties had been forcibly taken from Versailles and bidden to dwell in the metropolis, and told stories of Monsieur de Lafayette, whose conduct was the more to be regretted in that he was himself a noble. He had actually proclaimed in a public séance of the rabble who directed affairs, that, "When oppression renders a revolution necessary, insurrection is the most sacred of duties." Good heavens! what next? Political societies had thrown off the mantle of secrecy and openly paraded their abominable sentiments. The "Society of the Jacobins" bade fair to be a dangerous element in the future, although a rival club called the Feuillans had recently been established to counterbalance its baleful influence. Altogether, Pharamond, who was usually so lively, looked at events through darkened spectacles.

The abbé had duly presented his credentials to the Maréchal de Brèze, who had been effusively civil and had wearied him with endless questions about his daughter's happiness. The life at Lorge must be Arcadian, he had declared with satisfaction, or the lovely chatelaine would have returned to the capital long since.

Why, suggested the abbé, did he not make a pilgrimage to visit her?

No, he had replied, shaking his venerable head; happiness was a fragile thing that must not be disturbed. The advent of an old man and an old woman would be like the throwing of a stone into a tarn. He was content to know that Gabrielle was happy, and to write and receive letters. Moreover, he did not wish his darling to return to Paris in its present chaotic state.

These letters of Pharamond's were mumbled out at breakfast by the chevalier.

Clovis had resumed his habit of breakfasting alone—moreover, politics bored him; but mademoiselle made a point of being present, after having given her dear charges their own meal in the distant wing; for she liked to hear the news, indited by the abbé.

Gabrielle seldom spoke. She seemed in a despondent daze which provoked the observant governess. Was the silly creature going out of her mind? Those who are unable to stand up for themselves deserve to be subjected to the yoke. Aglaé's fingers itched to slap the marquise, or give her a sound shaking. But she had been lectured by the abbé before he left, was aware that the dog was watching, and knew that it behoved her to be prudent; not to quarrel with her ally at present. As to Gabrielle, she smiled sometimes a mysterious smile that was more sad than tears. Happy! why, her heart was slowly breaking. Nobody wanted her. Her only desire was to remain secluded—shielded by distance from the searching glances of her father, who, with the eyes of love, could not fail to read her misery.

Autumn waned, the winter came and went, and spring came round, and still the abbé was absent. The long evenings, when, try as she would to exorcise them, the procession of her sorrows danced fandangoes in the brain of Gabrielle to the accompaniment of the chevalier's snoring, were becoming unendurable. How long was this martyrdom to continue? – how long?

The cold winds had softened their rigour; the air was growing balmy. There were voices down below in half-whispered converse. Moving to the open window, Gabrielle looked out. How calm and sweet an evening! How placidly the river flowed past the feet of the gloomy castle! How gently the boughs waved opposite beyond the stream to the rhythm of the breeze!

Under the windows of the grand saloon there was a sort of narrow gangway which acted as penthouse to the grilled windows of the dungeons on the water's edge. In old times it had been used as a platform for embarkation in boats, but now it was trodden by few feet, for its flags were slimy and treacherous. The voices were those of Jean and Toinon, who were apparently indulging in a delightful flirtation. They had been out rowing. The clumsy wherry used by the family was moored to a ring a few yards distant. The lovers were exchanging delicious confidences before parting for the night.

Lovers billing and cooing in the moonlight, discoursing, doubtless, on the happiness they should certainly enjoy when married. They believed in human happiness, and looked forward to a future! Gabrielle laughed a hoarse laugh that frightened her, and she retreated to the boudoir in a feverish tingle. What was there to-night that made her feel more desolate than usual? She must be unwell, for her nerves were twanging so that she could not sit still a moment. The children were asleep by this time, for mademoiselle was very careful of them. She deserved, at least, that justice. Asleep and dreaming-not of her; for she rarely saw them now at all, except gambolling like kids in the distance. She felt suddenly impelled to be near the treasures over whom her soul yearned so sorely. She could not see them, of course, for had not mademoiselle made her understand long since that in the nursery she held no authority? The dear ones. Thank God they were happy! She would creep out in the spring air and kiss the wall behind which the children lay! Almost guiltily she took up a silken wrap with trembling fingers and stole forth. It was well the chevalier was in a boozy sleep, or he would insist on following, and in his presence she would have been ashamed to gratify her whim. Away, across the inner yard, through the postern door, of which she wore a golden key upon a bracelet, along the trim alleys of the moat garden to the extreme right wing of the two floors of which mademoiselle had taken possession. As we know, she established herself on arrival in the rooms below the salon; but later, under pretext that it was damp, had removed herself and her charges. In the chamber now used as nursery she had caused a window to be pierced, so as to give access to the garden moat. It was so much better for the children, she had pleaded, to be able to dance out at once upon the sunlit grass instead of threading darksome corridors. How thoughtful! Of course she was right, as usual. Clovis was enchanted with her attention to details, and the window was made forthwith.

A ray of light streamed across the sward. Strange. The casement was open. How imprudent, and the dear ones in bed! In hot and anxious wrath Gabrielle was about to rush forward and remonstrate, when her steps were stayed. They were not in bed, for she could detect their voices prattling with the marquis and their governess. Stealing stealthily nearer she peeped in. Through her breast there shot a pain so sharp that she almost hoped to die. An affecting family group, of which *she* should have been the centre-her legitimate place usurped by that wicked cruel woman! while she, the mistress of the house, was shivering without in the night air! A pariah-a leper-a loathsome thing-cast without the gates. What had she done-what had she done-to deserve this dreadful fate? The marquis was reclining in a low chair, with the complacent calm that comfort brings, while Aglaé, bending over, was carefully bandaging his hand. With what tenderness she folded and tightened the linen. He had injured himself in some slight way with a broken bottle, and was smilingly watching her work whilst hearkening to the babble of the little ones who, in wadded dressing-gowns, were toasting their pink toes before the fire.

"You are so good to all of us," softly remarked Clovis. "Camille and Victor, say, do you appreciate mademoiselle?"

"I try to be a mother to them," was her calm response.

A mother! Clovis sighed and frowned, while the children cried out with blithe accord, "Aglaé? of course we love her."

Camille, stealing up behind, passed her tiny arms about the portly waist, while Aglaé said, quietly, "Be still, my pet, or you will make me hurt your father."

Victor-a wise boy-wagged his head sagely at the hissing hearth, and announced his conviction, "That mademoiselle had come down from heaven. But, never mind," he added, "when she gets back she'll have a higher place than before, on such a nice and pearly cloud."

"How's that?" asked the marquis, amused.

"You'll have a nice place, too," continued the urchin. "Every evening when I say my prayers, I ask heaven to be good to papa and mademoiselle."

The marquise staggered away with fingers tight clasped over dry and burning eyes. "They are complete without me," she moaned, panting like a hunted animal. "There is no place for me! no place in all the world!"

She tottered along the surrounding belt of green like one struck blind, till she came to the end where the moat was closed against the river.

"No place for me! no place for me!" Gabrielle muttered, with teeth that chattered as do those of one in an ague fit. Swaying to and fro she looked into the water and discerned the black bulk of the wherry. A luminous idea shot across her mind. If the boat were found drifting down the stream with naught but a silken wrap in it, they would drag the Loire for the missing chatelaine, and, at least, pretend to be sorry for the accident. Yes! an accident-that was the solution of the difficulty. Her father would deplore her death, but would never know that she had brought it about herself. Why had this never occurred to her before? The maréchal would grieve, but would get over it; for the grief of the old is short-lived, and are not the dead at rest? Happy dead to sleep so sound. She soon would be one of the shadowy phalanx-at rest for evermore.

Taking a hasty survey of the scene she stepped into the boat and loosed the chain. There was none to look on her, save the blank eyes of the dark chateau. In its history what was a life-an intolerably weary life? Was not its memory green concerning the water-dungeon and the torture-chamber?

"For me there is no place in all the world," repeated the chattering jaws as the boat shot into midstream. As it chanced there were four human eyes watching that she wist not of.

Jean and Toinon were not gone, though they had retreated into shadow. At sound of the loosening chain the latter had shuddered and hidden her face on the ample breast close by.

"Dungeon ghosts-rattling their gyves," Jean observed, quietly. "See-there's another yonder."

Toinon looked up and held her breath. In the broad moonbeams a woman stood erect in a boat! A woman, who slowly divested herself of a drapery and arranged it carefully upon the seat. Then she placed a foot upon the gunwale and deliberately plunged into the stream.

It was all so unexpected-so sudden-that the two stood paralysed. Both knew the slim figure well. They were startled from awe-stricken stupor by shouts above. The chevalier was stamping on a balcony wildly waving his arms. "It is Gabrielle! Gabrielle!" he shrieked. "Save her! save her! save her!" And then, with a despairing yell, he dashed away in the direction of the children's wing.

Jean muttered with contempt: "The useless imbecile," and, disengaging himself from Toinon's encircling arms, leapt from the platform into the water. Breathless and proud of him, Toinon watched his strong strokes as they clove the oily surface. He had hold of her-thank God! and was bearing his burthen to the bank.

There was a hubbub and an outcry in the house approaching nearer. Clovis and the chevalier appeared at a window shouting madly: "Save her!" The marquis disappeared from the balcony, and touching a spring, vanished down a secret staircase which gave upon the slippery gangway, accompanied by Mademoiselle Brunelle, who with a new care upon her brow was swiftly following his lead. De Gange received the inanimate burthen into his arms, while tears poured down his face. "God bless you, Jean," he sobbed, "God bless you. I will never forget this deed. She will live-she has but swooned. Jean, you have saved her from death-me from a life-long remorse."

Aglaé's clouded visage grew more perplexed as he took roughly from her the mantle she had cast over her shoulders to wrap it round his dripping burthen.

"He takes my cloak," she muttered, "not caring if I feel cold!"

"Aglaé, feel," he whispered anxiously. "Am I not right? Does not her pulse still beat?"

Mademoiselle Brunelle roused herself from astonished reverie to attend to the exigencies of the moment. "Yes," she declared, with authoritative promptitude. "The poor crazy lady lives. Toinon, warm a bed without delay. Jean, take horse at once and fetch a doctor. We two will see to her meanwhile."

Moaning and shaking, the scared and palsied chevalier stood helpless by, wringing his hands together. "She went in the boat alone, poor thing," he whimpered, "because she could not trust me. Oh! that fatal night-that fatal night! Of course she would not trust me."

Meanwhile, the marquis and his affinity bore their burthen up the winding stair. Neither spoke till they reached the saloon and laid the unconscious marquise upon a couch. Then Aglaé, more perplexed than ever, sighed.

"Thank God, she's saved; thank God!" Clovis murmured, fervently.

"Who would have ever thought," reflected the governess aloud, "that so long-suffering and useless piece of goods could be goaded to take her life?"

"Hush!" shuddered the marquis. "Ever after I should have deemed myself her murderer!"

"A thousand pities," mused mademoiselle. "If he had only let her drown, at this moment you would be free."

Clovis looked up in horror, blanched to the pallor of a statue.

CHAPTER XII. DIAMOND CUT DIAMOND

With a turn of the kaleidoscope is another pattern formed. Lying in the great state bed with its ponderous carven canopy and heavy curtains of deep blue velvet fringed with gold, Gabrielle wondered whether she had awakened in a kinder world or whether she was dreaming in the old rugose one. No. It was the same gorgeously gloomy chamber in which she had so often wept, with its dim ancestors frowning from the background of mouldering arras.

Yonder, by the tall emblazoned mantel, was the familiar ebony cabinet in which a long bygone De Brèze, who was an alchemist, had been wont to lock his phials. To the left, was the mullioned window, with wide sill, looking out upon the paved courtyard. On the sill was a row of ponderous bronze pots of the Renaissance period, filled with gay plants to hide out the blank wall opposite. Both Madame de Vaux and Angelique had always shuddered when they crossed the threshold of this room, vowing that the big bed, like a funereal catafalque, was a fit resting-place for spectres, not for human beauty. When counselled to move elsewhere, or do up the apartment in more cheerful fashion, the chatelaine had smilingly shaken her head. The ladies of the castle had always occupied this room, and she would follow their precedent, not being afraid of ghosts.

"The precedents of Lorge were pretty ones to follow," retorted her neighbour. "Many of the chatelaines were murdered, poor things! and the rest so wretched that murder, however atrocious, would have been hailed as a release."

Alas! The destiny of the present one was no brighter than that of the others. She had been miserable enough in this tranquil chamber, and had oftentimes prayed for death. But now, somehow, Fortune seemed to be weary of persecution. Was it possible that out of the sinister tangle content might yet be unwound?

There were voices whispering in the antechamber which Gabrielle recognized as those of Jean and Toinon, watchers. Now and again, Toinon would gently open the door and reconnoitre, and seeing the invalid apparently asleep would quietly close it again, but not before the sick lady had caught a glimpse of the chevalier behind, still wearing an expression of dismay.

Wonder of wonders! Sometimes when she woke from fitful dozing, she would see the figure of the marquis standing at the bed-foot anxiously peering down at her. He looked haggard and careworn. Could it be on her account? Hidden away somewhere in a remote recess could there be a flame of affectionate esteem for her still flickering?

Simulating slumber, she would scan him narrowly. He was evidently unhappy, had something on his mind, was unpleasantly preoccupied. Her heart leapt with the thought that it was on her account, perhaps, that he was troubled. He certainly was thinking a good deal about her, for though he did not stop long he often visited the chamber. Although well-nigh beyond belief, Gabrielle could hardly doubt that he was unhappy for her sake. His eyes had been opened! It had come home to him how cruel his neglect had been, and he was sorry. It needed but a kind word of encouragement from her to bring about a tardy reconciliation.

Choosing an opportunity, she gently put forth her hand and clasped that of Clovis with a tender pressure, murmuring the while, "Husband! I was driven to do that wicked thing by a mistake. God will forgive. Can you, too, pardon?"

At sound of her feeble voice, the marquis started guiltily and hung his head; and as he remained silent, his hand inert in hers, she proceeded slowly-

"It is not you who are to blame, dear. Occupied as your mind is, you are unable to conceive what to a loving woman are isolation and indifference. I teased and annoyed you with my jealousy; but then, as a girl, I was so pampered-steeped to the lips in love! Give me confidence and perfect

trust and you shall be vexed no more. Obedient in all things, assuming no right to counsel or rebuke, I will be your faithful life-companion, the half of your very self!"

Much more did she say in the same strain, without reproach, pleading for a modest place within his heart.

Ah me! What a mockery are these earthly unions for better or worse till death do us part! The best are doomed to fling away their wealth of tenderness upon recipients who do not crave for it. Is it a punishment meted in subtle irony for the transgressions of a previous life? For half a lifetime we persist in lavishing our love upon a phantom, and, discovering by chance how evil is the wraith, lie down despairing. A fool's paradise would be a charming residence, were we not pretty certain, sooner or later, to be expelled from it with violence. On this tiny dust grain of the universe-let us hope it is not so in the more important worlds, wherein we hope to sojourn later-we batter our pates at a tender age against the stone wall of disillusion, become early familiar with broken promises. Fortunately, the sustaining angel Hope has more lives than a cat. Pummelled, stoned, and mangled beyond recognition, behold she sits up and rubs herself, charming well again.

What the hapless Gabrielle took for the stir of dormant affection was no more than an ignoble mixture of shame, remorse, and anxiety. The conscience of Clovis had dinned into him long since that he was behaving very ill; that he had espoused a beautiful woman with a fresh and ardent temperament and a well-lined purse; that, thanks to the last, he lived in gilded ease, and gave to its owner in exchange nothing for which she yearned. People are vastly provoking, who clamorously demand that we have not to bestow. How wearisome are those who go on repeating, "I want your love and nothing else," when they ought to know that we have no love to give. Then is sure to follow the phase of reproaches and tears which is more tiresome still. Clovis, when conscience pricked, was very sorry for his helpmeet; and sorry for himself, too, that she should be so worrying. From his point of view, he was justified in withdrawing from the dining-hall the light of his comely countenance. How can a man have any appetite with so rueful a visage opposite? Talk of skeletons at feasts! Here was one at every meal, because speechless no less eloquent. That which is unpleasant and can't be helped, it behoves us in self-defence to put away and forget as quickly as possible. Clovis had (metaphorically) plunged into the magic tub with Aglaé in order to forget his skeleton. He knew he was doing wrong, but was equally aware that it was not in him to do right. Why could not Gabrielle be sensible? If people would only cultivate that humble virtue common sense, how much more smoothly life's wheels would run. Why could not she, realizing-perhaps with pain-that Luna is not in the market as a purchaseable article, sit quietly down with philosophy, and give up crying for the moon?

When the poor lady was impelled to shuffle off her coil, the completeness of the desolation revealed due to her husband's fault, came home to him with a mighty twinge; and he felt angry with her in that she should be capable of inflicting so severe a nip. The estrangement was not his fault, he argued with conscience. It was his misfortune and hers, which it was in the province of neither to remedy. Of course, it was all a pity; but are there not numberless things in this life that are "a pity," but which we are powerless to alter? The brief period of *tête-à-tête* when they first came to live at Lorge had been ghastly dull, and he, like a sensible man, had sought refuge from it in his books. Then merciful Providence had sent a set of people to make his situation more bearable-his and hers also. Why could she not let herself drift in calm content, as he had done? It always came back to that, and every time he was the more convinced of it. His wife was an unreasonable creature, who persisted in pining for what she could not get instead of making the best of what she had. Perhaps he had not behaved quite nicely in the matter of the prodigies. Yet after all, was it not essential that they should receive trained instruction, and had they not of their own accord turned from their mother to the governess? He had never said, "My dears, you must care no longer for mamma, and adore your governess." Was it not evident that mamma wearied them as much as she did him, while their instructress was the most delightful comrade that ever breathed, as well as abnormally clever?

With this course of argument conscience was convinced, or pretended to be, and curled itself up and slept, and would have continued thus in charmed repose, but for this new disturbance. There can be no denying that there must be something radically wrong, when a woman who used to be serene leaps with felonious intent out of a wherry. Though everyone was told that the affair was an accident, nobody believed it. The marquis was ashamed and dreaded a scandal.

Of course, when the story reached them, the Montbazou party came trundling over in the shanderydan, with goggling eyes and ears acock, to inquire into the extraordinary tale. Clovis received them with scant courtesy, but the old baroness was not to be put off with a cold shoulder, and Angelique took little trouble to cloak her suspicions. What could madame have been doing-navigating the Loire in the middle of the night, and tumbling overboard? Why choose so strange an hour for a solitary excursion, and why fall out of so clumsy and broad-beamed a craft? Could the dear marquis explain? The dear marquis became testy, and, shrugging his shoulders, advised the ladies to visit madame who was in bed, but well enough to tell them all about it. The ladies sat on either side of the great catafalque, under shadow of the blue velvet curtains, and sniffed at one another with meaning across the counterpane. Cross-questioned by the baron as they drove home, the baroness pursed her lips in ominous silence, while Angelique remarked, "If with those sad eyes welling with tears, she persists that she is happy, and vows that on that night her foot slipped, in courtesy we must pretend to believe her." To which the baron pertinently replied, "Foot slipped, indeed! and in the middle of the river, too. What was it doing on the gunwale?"

Clovis knew that the de Vaux family would spread damaging reports, but he had yet another cause for anxiety. A certain remark had been dropped by Mademoiselle Brunelle as the two were carrying their burthen to the salon, which was like a douche of icy water. "If he had let her drown, you would be free!" What an atrociously cold-blooded sentiment from the lips of the good-natured Aglaé! As to this the marquis's conscience had no suggestion to make, for it had never entered his head to desire his wife's demise.

It is another unpleasing fact with regard to our little earth, that nothing can remain stationary. We must always be on the move-backward if not forward. Clovis, pleased with the situation as it had chosen to develop itself, wished for naught but the continuance of the *status quo*; and now it came rudely home to him that mademoiselle, instead of being satisfied, as he was, had been raising shadowy edifices in cloudland. The glance which accompanied her regretful words had been full of significance. She could look so far forward as to welcome the departure of Gabrielle in order that she might occupy her place. And a governess too-without a shred of a pedigree-who had never heard the name of her grandfather! That a person of low birth, however admirable, should presume to aspire to the coronet of a Marquise de Gange took the breath away! The idea was as wildly fantastic as it was revolting. And yet she had so wormed herself into his life that he knew he could not tear her thence without an awful struggle. If that poor thing had died, could he in course of time have been persuaded to take the governess? Who might prophesy? Most fortunately there was no question of such a possibility, as the lady had been saved and was recovering. Mademoiselle must be his affinity-nor hope for anything more lofty. And yet the more he thought of it, all the more shocked did Clovis feel at the absurdity of such aspirations in one so lowly, and the cold-bloodedness of that remark.

For her part the unlucky speech had been wrung from Aglaé by genuine surprise, for the boating catastrophe had opened to her mind's eye a dazzling vista of actual possibilities as new as they were astonishing. It had certainly occurred to her before that it would be nice some day to be Marquise de Gange, but it had not struck her that the present marquise could be induced to open the door herself to her successor. It was merely in a spirit of casual spite that Aglaé had insolently invited Gabrielle, during their last interview, to retire out of the world.

How surprising are the vagaries of the human animal! No one would have guessed that a quiet reserved woman, who was so feeble as to suppose she could buy the enemy with a bracelet, could be driven to take her life! The discovery suggested for the future a new series of tactics. Owing to

vexatious interference the tragedy had miscarried this time, but surely with deft management a similar condition of mind to that which had led up to it could be brought about again? And the second time precautions might be taken to ensure a different termination. There was no hurry about it. When matters of serious import are under consideration it is a woeful thing to hurry. The mawkish creature was in bed, being fondled and caressed. By and by when she grew better, a progressive series of cunningly-masked attacks would have to be organized which should finally and completely rout the insignificant foe and leave her prone upon the field.

Meanwhile there was something new that rather puzzled the governess. Clovis was so thin-skinned that it was only by surpassing skill that he could be managed. He was so beset with crotchets which required coaxing. There was some bee worrying in his bonnet now, for instead of frisking about the feet of his affinity, according to habit, he slunk away from her approach with uneasy bashfulness, and bestowed his attentions on the invalid.

With regard to the latter there was nothing to dread for the blandishments of the wife invariably had the effect in the long run of alienating the husband. On this score the mind of the schemer was easy. But what if she were indeed to die in a not too distant future? Clovis had shudderingly declared on the fateful night that had she been drowned he would have considered himself a murderer. What a stupid old adage it is which says the dead do not return! How many, when they have passed from sight, are more formidable than when alive! Would it be so with Gabrielle? Is not remorse a more formidable barrier than the imperial wall of China? As it was, mademoiselle could not deny that the marquis had taken to avoiding her, that in his eyes there was a sinister expression, in which fear and distrust were blended. He must have caught a glimpse under her ample skirt of a cloven hoof instead of a substantial foot, and have been alarmed by the spectacle. This alarm must be lulled to rest, or the influence of the affinity might stand in actual peril. It would be odd if in the end he crawled out of her clutches-very odd.

Pooh! She was strong, and he was weak. Had she not proved already that she could bend him like a willow wand? And yet-in front there lay a mist which even sharp-sighted Aglaé was unable to penetrate. She laughed with quiet cynicism when she considered what Clovis's feelings would be if he could read the dark thoughts of his affinity. He had read too much already, and the effect had not been good. Now that she knew what she wanted, it behoved her to consider the attitude which the marquis must be made to assume, for his conduct, whatever it might be, would, of course, be influenced by another will than his own.

Gabrielle was to depart.

That much was settled in the mind of the governess. With regard to the husband, two courses were open. Was he to be lulled into forgetting the untoward remark which had so shocked him, or was he to grow accustomed by degrees to its implied suggestion, and be induced tacitly to approve by skilful wheedling? Her bringing-up had led the governess to hold a low opinion of human nature. No one ever lived, she fully believed, so devoid of the leaven of wickedness as to be proof against temptation to crime. It was merely a matter of surroundings and the amount of temptation employed. But then in the case of Clovis, the inertness and hesitancy of his character called for consideration. Moreover, his recent behaviour had shown that he did not care as yet sufficiently warmly for his Aglaé to go all lengths with her. Alarmed for his own safety, he would shrink and run off howling. It is wiser in dealing with some people to do a thing without consulting them, and obtain consent to the act when it is done-irrevocably and irremediably. Clearly, the first course was the most judicious. Clovis must be amused and petted till the temporary access of inconvenient remorse was past, the little speech forgotten-and wake up some fine day in the not too far distant future to find himself bereaved and a widower.

All this was mighty well in theory, but what of the plaguey abbé? He would hear of the water episode and be seriously annoyed. The governess was angered to think of the length of time which must elapse ere her scheme could be brought to a head-and all through the idiotic passion of

Pharamond for the marquise! It would be dangerous to make an open enemy of Pharamond, for were he so minded, he could place many spokes in her wheel; all the more easily at this precise juncture when Clovis was so shocked. As a matter of policy, whereby she might herself benefit, she was quite ready to push Gabrielle into his arms, as quickly as possible, for she reckoned that he was a fickle man, who would soon tire of a toy attained, and so soon as he had done with it, would not care how soon it was broken. But then she was not without grave doubts of his ever succeeding in his suit. Mawkish, milk-and-water women, such as this pale-faced creature, have no passions worthy of the name, but exhale themselves in sighs and prayer.

And here was another awkward point. Given that the abbé was rebuffed, compelled to abandon the siege of the marquise, would he not lose all motive for further assisting the governess? and that before she was prepared to do without him? Of course, he would then cease to sing her praises in the ears of Clovis; would even perhaps, to suit his own interests, endeavour to divide those whom he had assisted in uniting? If the abbé could only be got rid of! But there seemed, peer out into the horizon as she would, no chance of getting rid of him. No. He must be humoured-hoodwinked, if possible. The abbé for the present must be endured, treated as a trusty ally, since it would not do to attack him as an enemy. Mademoiselle guessed that the chevalier would report all that had happened, so concealment was out of the question. When he received tidings of the episode he would, of course, come home, and in an evil mood. With a peevish sigh, she wrote an effusive letter to Pharamond, begging him to return to Lorge, wishing the while that he would break his neck upon the journey. In the letter she artfully stated that she had been guilty of a little error. When you wish to avert a scolding, it is well to be candid and confess; and rather make the most of the peccadillo.

Thus she came vaguely to the conclusion that the alliance must stand good for the present, that she and the abbé must maintain their friendship, outwardly at least, and that, with regard to the fate of Gabrielle, she must wait and watch events. Perhaps destiny in a generous mood would point out some means of clearing the thorn-strewn path by sweeping away the abbé. If he were got rid of, the course of Aglaé would be quite plain; the shrift of the marquise would be a short one.

Pharamond received two letters by the same courier, and boiled with displeasure at the contents of both. With what a culpable stupidity had all of them been behaving in his absence! That the chevalier-useless lump of carrion-should proclaim himself a fool was only to be expected. It had been the height of folly to trust to the discretion of a zany. By his own showing, Phebus had failed to watch properly over the marquise, and the malignant Aglaé had wreaked on her, with impunity, the full venom of her spite. For that when the chance arrived she should be punished, for he had plainly given his instructions before he started, to the effect that the marquise must be made to feel her lonely position so acutely, that she would be inclined to look kindly on a lover. It was not at all a portion of his programme that she should be hunted into a grave. Moreover, was she not the golden goose that fed them? The regrettable catastrophe was due to the governess's disobedience and malignity. Feminine spite is unreasoning, as all the world knows.

"Not guessing that she was so sensitive, I went too far and am deeply distressed," Aglaé mendaciously wrote; "not but what the story you will probably hear is much exaggerated. You have impressed on me more than once that you are my friend. By an artful imposture of sham suicide, the marquise has succeeded in frightening her husband back to her side again. They bill and coo all day, which will not please you any more that it does me. For your own sake, as well as mine, prove that you are my friend, and come."

Yes. Both letters assured him that his presence at Lorge was urgently needed to give form again to chaos; and Pharamond saw that he must leave the capital, although occurrences in Paris were of daily increasing interest. It was dawning on himself and others at last that they stood on the threshold of an entirely new epoch, which was to shatter and blot out the old; that what they had chosen to contemptuously take for harmless effervescence was the commencement of convulsion, from which a newly-cast society would spring. The daring of the lower lieges grew as fast as did the fabled bean-

stalk. A timid contingent of the assailed upper class had already abandoned France, dreading they knew not what, and the remainder were like sheep without a shepherd. What if, though really the notion was too preposterous, the bubbling scum should actually suffocate the elect in its foul and fetid waters? In the world's story there have been many cataclysms. Though the peasants of Touraine had done little damage as yet, they would surely hear of the excesses of the south, and would probably be urged to emulation.

Lorge was a strong place, but precautionary measures of defence must be taken in view of prospective difficulties. For many reasons, then, the return of the abbé to the country might no longer be delayed. It would be a wise measure to summon a meeting of the rural seigneurie, and form a league for mutual protection.

"Her friend!" the abbé laughed with a malevolent twitch of his thin lips as he folded and pocketed his letters. "So long as she is useful, yes—a dear trusty loyal friend—but not an instant longer! If she cannot behave with decency and common prudence, we must unite and sweep her into space."

Everyone was glad to see Pharamond home again, or affected to be so. He assumed the highest spirits, although his news was little reassuring, and he was privately much vexed at the changed positions of his puppets.

The chevalier, when rated for his drunken incapacity, excused himself by swearing that but for his timely outcry, Gabrielle would have perished. He wept alcoholic tears and babbled incoherent nonsense, in which he deplored his numerous transgressions. "If only she could have loved me," he whimpered with clasped hands more aspen than of yore, "she would have been made so happy, and now she is plunged in misery, and I can do nothing to prevent it. Console her, brother, since you are the favoured one; make her smile again and I will be your slave for life!" and so on, with trickling jeremiads and idle expressions of penitence.

As for mademoiselle, she expressed herself so full of contrition, and so anxious to promote the abbé's suit, and altogether made herself so agreeable, that he pretended loftily to pardon her, registering a private vow that she must be ousted at the earliest moment. A woman who could act so foolishly as to frighten the admirer she intended to cajole, was but a contemptible enemy to battle with in a game of diamond cut diamond. For the achievement of his own plans he must put up with her just now, and make good the incipient breach. Aglaé must be washed clean in the eyes of the remorseful marquis of having caused his wife's rash act. Whatever might happen by-and-by, the neophyte and his affinity must be brought close together again for a while, and to that end Pharamond loyally exerted all his influence. He fairly laughed his brother into the belief that he was a deluded simpleton; that the suicide was a stage device got up by Phebus and the victim. "What a ninny to be taken in!" He said, "A bit of jealous temper, nothing more, for which she is sorry now, for she has gained naught by the dramatic ducking except an attack of illness."

Aglaé was gushing in her gratitude, which served only to increase the contempt of Pharamond, who, like her, heartily despised the virtues. She was a tool to be used and blunted, then carelessly thrown away. Meanwhile, she was laughing in her sleeve in that he should so easily be hoodwinked by her comedy. He never guessed what a new and portentous idea was surging in her brain, and she was careful to drop no hint of it.

We will not endeavour to excuse the error in judgment of so accomplished a manipulator of marionettes as the Abbé Pharamond, in that he should have esteemed so lightly the talents of Mademoiselle Brunelle. Perhaps he was led astray by the crafty display of helplessness shown in her last epistle. You are not inclined to suspect, when a lady candidly confesses weakness and craves help, that she has a private set of schemes in the background, of which she tells you nothing. As Aglaé was prepared (since she could not help it) to put up with Pharamond for a period, so was the abbé prepared to endure Aglaé until he had quite done with her, feeling less and less doubt that when she was no longer useful he could administer the final push.

Thus schemed the schemers, labouring each for self, masking their batteries one from the other till the propitious moment should come for rupture. If the muse of history had not intervened as Marplot at this moment, there is no telling which way the scale would have turned, for it was nicely balanced. If Pharamond was being deceived, so was Aglaé, for she failed to gauge the extent of the shock she had inflicted on the marquis. He was too timid to express his feelings openly, to confess that he had become genuinely afraid of his affinity, perceiving that on occasion she could be more unscrupulous than his feeble soul was prepared to contemplate. Even strong-minded men do not care to have a Lady Macbeth in the *ménage* who "lays the daggers ready." He clung to Aglaé because he could not do without her; but at the same time he leaned heavily on Pharamond. But for that muse of history this tale might have had a different ending. The schemes of both conspirators required time. As it was, something happened which awoke them with a start, and entirely changed the face of affairs, for they became aware that what they intended to do must be done quickly or be left undone. The shuttle of the muse flew apace across the loom. An event occurred which came upon the country like a thunder-clap, spreading terror and dismay in one camp, causing the wildest exultation in the other. Rumour brought the news that their majesties had fled from France.

The situation was so grave that it behoved the country seigneurie to look to themselves in earnest and at once. Perforce dismissing for the moment arrangements of a private nature, Pharamond galloped hither and thither, vastly busy, suggesting, advising, arranging. The Marquis de Gange, much as he disliked politics, was compelled to rouse himself from his ease and his remorse. He became quite energetic; ceased to worry about his wife, and even forgot the tub. Old de Vaux came cantering over on his pony, followed by a multitude of booby squires, who, grouped in solemn conclave in the banquet-hall of Lorge, sat dumb before the wisdom of the governess. In important deliberations sage counsellors of either sex are to be courted, and Aglaé in all emergencies shone forth with special brilliancy. Her mind worked so nimbly and practically, that the eyes of the enraptured gentry were round with awe. They vowed in chorus that the marquis was a lucky man to have captured this pearl of price. All were agreed, and impressed the fact on him. As there was no dissentient voice, his uneasy terrors waned; suspicion gave place to a renewal of admiration, in which fear was tempered with respect.

It never occurred to anyone to consult Gabrielle, and she had no desire to be consulted. The white chatelaine knew too well that as a leader she was a failure. It was enough to feel quite assured at last with numbing, wearing pain, that Clovis cared no jot for her.

That illusion had been put to flight for ever, for she had perceived that his courtesy was awkward and unreal, a mask assumed by sluggish duty to conceal ennui. Well, however evil the fate which should pursue her in the future, she deserved it all, and would accept it meekly as a penance. It was wicked to have made a deliberate attempt upon the life which was not her own to destroy. Each night and morning she fervently prayed for pardon, vowing that she would try to endure all henceforth by aid of such support as was vouchsafed.

Of a sudden there came a second thunder-clap, and the booby squires shut themselves up, each in his own domain, unable to comprehend its meaning.

Rumour had brought a second budget more disquieting in effect than the first. Their majesties had not succeeded in escaping. They had been caught at Varennes, to be conducted back to Paris by Barnave and Pétion, deputies. The King and Queen of France were prisoners! Actually they were in custody of King Mob—a more powerful potentate than they—who had locked them up in a gilded jail, yclept the Palace of the Tuileries. For a moment all sections of society paused and held their breath.

If Louis and Marie Antoinette had crossed the frontier it would have been to return at the head of an avenging army, which would by force have replaced their diadems. But prisoners! — for though not dubbed so openly as yet, their power of free action had departed. The innocent king, the unfortunate queen, the saintly Madame Elizabeth, had been drawn through the streets of the capital, a helpless raree-show, for the delectation of the populace, like the Parisian "Bœuf Gras" or the London

Guido Fawkes! The scum themselves were so taken aback by the prodigious spectacle that many burst into tears, while others stood dumbfounded. Then, the shock of surprise over, there followed inevitably excess, the boisterous stretching of untried limbs, for the first time free. In some parts of the country this took the form of a meaningless upheaval, just to test the new-found liberty. Chateaux of unpopular proprietors were sacked and burnt. The dwelling of the de Vaux family was somewhat injured, and its inmates alarmed for their property; but, at a critical moment, Jean Boulot appeared upon the scene and scornfully rated the rioters for their cowardice. "Shame!" he cried, "ye are indeed worthy of liberty if your first use of it is to slay or insult old men and women! Next, I suppose, you will pay us a visit, and repay with brand and pitchfork the debt you all owe to the marquise?" The crowd desisted from the work of destruction and shamefacedly dispersed. No, no-they grumbled. Jean Boulot was a fine fellow, to whose harangues they all liked to listen, but his tongue sometimes was sharp, his sayings bitter. Attack Lorge? Never. What! the home of the white chatelaine, whose hands were ever stretched forth to do good, at sight of whose beautiful sad face everyone sighed with pity?

People are naturally so perverse that they are ever apt to plume themselves upon results that are due to others. The abbé and Mademoiselle Brunelle, and with them the Marquis de Gange, were quite assured that the impunity from attack enjoyed by Lorge was due to the strength of its walls and the ingenuity of their tactics. Jean's speech at Montbazon was not reported to them-he was not one to boast of his own deeds, and they were too infatuated to realize that the pale, weak, fragile woman, whose reserve and resignation daily exasperated Aglaé, was the real author of their safety.

CHAPTER XIII. DOMESTIC SURGERY

These were exciting times-no doubt of it-even to humdrum provincials, remote from the madding crowd. The web on the muse's loom grew so rapidly that the eye could not follow the shuttle. Were the dogs of war to be unloosed upon the land? Was fair France to be invaded and torn by the enemy from without as well as by one within? On the 6th of July the Emperor of Austria appealed to the sovereigns to unite for the delivery of Louis. On the 11th a formal demand was made in the Constituent Assembly for his dethronement. His majesty's brothers, after having solemnly sworn that they would not leave their native soil, were gone; and the stream of emigration increased in volume daily. The Minister of War announced that no less than nineteen hundred officers had abandoned their regiments and fled. It was decreed that the property of emigrants should be confiscated for the public good. Meanwhile, the upheaval of the peasantry continued to be intermittent. Sometimes they merely growled; sometimes they rushed about like madmen, leaving, as locusts do, a trail of destruction in their wake.

Then the question of money, or rather of no money, became a burning one. In October there was a famine and a deadlock. Farmers refused to take paper in payment for corn, and somehow there was naught else to pay them with. The occupants of Lorge watched vigilantly, awaiting a crisis which they could not but feel was imminent; and the two conspirators considered their broken plans with the palpitating woe of ants when somebody treads upon their hill. The abbé and the governess consulted frequently, each assuming the ingenuousness of infancy, whilst reconnoitring with wary eye the position of the other. Though they made believe to sit in one boat and caulk it, the attention of either was directed to a private craft (cunningly concealed from sight) in which the other was to find no seat, and which must be rendered taut and trim to face the coming storm.

A conviction that leaks were numerous, and that there was no time for elaborate operations, oppressed them both; a prophetic instinct whispered that such materials as were at hand must serve, or, when the wind rose presently, their frail coracles would founder and go to the bottom.

The Marquise de Gange was the pivot upon which the schemes of both plotters turned-the listless lady who took no further interest in the world's doings; who, excluded alike from family councils and domestic interests, gave herself up to devotions and to almsgiving.

Time being just now so precious an article, it seemed to both schemers that the victim had been brought into as auspicious a state for operation as was likely to be attained without long waiting. It would, in all probability, become necessary ere long to follow the stream of emigration, and abandon France till the Saturnalia which convulsed the motherland should have passed away. Now it was clear to Pharamond that prudent persons are bound to prepare themselves for any fate. If Gabrielle accepted his terms, as reflection would doubtless lead her to do, it was obvious that he and she would, some of these days, quietly elope, leaving the husband and his affinity to discover, too late, with teeth-gnashing, that the golden goose was gone. An adroit display of sympathy combined, perhaps, with a gentle and artistic touch of coercion, would bring this about. When the moment for departure came she would follow him, and from a safe point of vantage overtures could be made to the maréchal with regard to the question of finance. Of course, after what she had suffered there, she would be only too glad to turn her back upon the dismal chateau, which must be as odious to her as to him. What happened to the besotted Clovis and the impudent Aglaé would concern neither any more.

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