

Aimard Gustave

The Buccaneer Chief: A Romance of the Spanish Main



Gustave Aimard

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CHAPTER I

THE HOSTELRY OF THE COURT OF FRANCE

Although the Seine, from Chanceaux, its fountainhead, to Havre, where it falls into the sea, is not more than four hundred miles in length, still, in spite of this comparatively limited course, this river is one of the most important in the world; for, from the days of Cæsar up to the present, it has seen all the great social questions which have agitated modern times decided on its banks.

Tourists, artists, and travellers, who go a long distance in search of scenery, could not find anything more picturesque or more capriciously diversified than the winding banks of this river, which is skirted by commercial towns and pretty villages, coquettishly arranged on the sides of verdant valleys, or half disappearing in the midst of dense clumps of trees.

It is in one of these villages, situated but a few leagues from Paris, that our story began, on March 26th, 1641.

This village, whose origin dates back to the earliest period of the French Monarchy, was at that time pretty nearly what it is now; differing in this respect from all the hamlets that surround it, it has remained stationary; on seeing it you might fancy that centuries have not passed as far as it is concerned. When the neighbouring hamlets became villages, and were finally transformed into large towns, it continually decreased, so that its population at the present day scarce attains the amount of four hundred inhabitants.

And yet its situation is most happy: traversed by a stream and bordered by a river, possessing an historic castle, and forming an important station on one of the railway lines, it seemed destined to become an industrial centre, the more so because its inhabitants are industrious and intelligent.

But there is a spell upon the place. The great landowners who have succeeded each other in the country, and who mostly grew rich in the political commotions, or by risky speculations, have tacitly agreed to impede in every possible way the industrial aspirations of the population – have ever egotistically sacrificed public interest to their private advantage.

Thus the historic castle to which we alluded has fallen into the hands of a man who, sprung from nothing, and feeling himself stifled within its walls, allows them to crumble away before the effects of time, and, to save the expense of a gardener, sows oats in the majestic alleys of a park, designed by Le Nôtre, whose grand appearance strikes with admiration the traveller, who sees it at a distance as he is borne past in the train.

The same thing is going on in the whole of this unhappy hamlet, which is condemned to die of inanition in the midst of the abundance of its neighbours.

This village was composed at the period of our narrative of a single long narrow street, which ran down from the top of a scarped hill, crossed a small rivulet, and terminated only a few yards from the Seine.

This street, through its entire length, was bordered by low, ugly tenements, pressing closely together, as if for mutual support, and mostly serving as pothouses for the waggoners and other people who at this period, when the great network of the French royal roads had not yet been made, continually passed through this village, and sought shelter there for the night.

The top of the street was occupied by a very wealthy, religious community, next to which stood a large building hidden at the end of a spacious garden, and serving as hostelry for the wealthy

personages whom their business or pleasure brought to this place, which was surrounded for ten leagues round by sumptuous seigneurial mansions.

There was nothing externally to cause this building to be recognized as an inn; a low gateway gave access to the garden, and it was not till the traveller had gone along the whole of the latter that he found himself in front of the house.

It had, however, another entrance, looking out on a road but little frequented at the time, and which was employed by horses and coaches, when the traveller had succeeded in obtaining the landlord's leave to put up there.

Although this house, as we said, was a hostelry, its owner did not admit everybody who proposed to lodge there; on the contrary, he was very difficult in the choice of his guests, asserting, rightly or wrongly, that a hostelry, which had been honoured on several occasions by the presence of the King and the Cardinal Minister, must not serve as an asylum either for vagabonds or nightbirds.

In order to justify the right he claimed, the landlord had, a few months previously, had the arms of France daubed on a metal plate by a strolling painter, and inscribed under it in golden letters – "*The Court of France*." This sign he put up over his door.

This inn enjoyed a great reputation, not only in the country, but in all the surrounding provinces, and even as far as Paris – a reputation, we are bound to add, well deserved, for if mine host was particular in the choice of his lodgers, when the latter had succeeded in gaining admission he treated them, men and beasts, with a peculiar care, that had something paternal about it.

Although it was getting on for the end of March, and, according to the almanac, 'Spring had begun some days previously,' the cold was nipping, the rime-laden trees stood out sadly against the leaden sky, and a thick, hardened layer of snow covered the ground for some depth.

Although it was about ten o'clock at night, it was light, and the moon, floating in russet clouds, profusely shed her sickly beams, which rendered it almost as light as day.

All were asleep in the village, or, at least, seemed to be so; the *Court of France* alone emitted a light through its ground floor barred windows, which proved that somebody was still up there.

Still, the inn did not offer shelter to any traveller.

All those who during the day, and since nightfall, had presented themselves, had been mercilessly turned away by the landlord, a stout man, with a rubicund face, intelligent features, and a crafty smile, who was walking at this moment with an air of preoccupation up and down his immense kitchen, every now and then casting an absent glance at the preparations for supper, one portion of which was roasting before a colossal fireplace, whilst the rest was being got ready by a master cook and several assistants.

A middle-aged, short, plump woman, suddenly burst into the kitchen, and addressed the landlord, who had turned round at the noise.

"Is it true," she asked, "Master Pivois, that you have ordered the dais room to be got ready, as Mariette declares?"

Master Pivois drew himself up.

"What did Mariette tell you?" he enquired, sternly.

"Well, she told me to prepare the best bedroom."

"Which is the best bedroom, Dame Tiphaine?"

"The dais room, master, since it is the one in which His Majesty –"

"In that case," mine host interrupted her, in a peremptory tone, "prepare the dais room."

"Still, master," Dame Tiphaine ventured – who possessed a certain amount of credit in the house, in the first place, as legitimate spouse of the landlord himself, and then, again, through sundry very marked traits of character – "with all the respect I owe you, it seems to me –"

"With all the respect I owe you," he exclaimed, stamping his foot passionately, "you're a fool, my good creature, obey my orders, and do not trouble me further!"

Dame Tiphaine comprehended that her lord and master was not in a humour that evening for being contradicted. Like a prudent woman, she bowed her head and withdrew, reserving to herself the right of taking a startling revenge at a future date for the sharp reprimand she had received.

Doubtless satisfied with his display of authority, Master Pivois, after taking a triumphant glance at his subordinates, who were surprised at this unusual act of vigour, though they did not dare show it, walked toward a door that led into the garden; but at the moment when he laid his hand on the key, this door, vigorously thrust from the outside, opened right in the face of the startled landlord, who tottered back to the middle of the room, and a man entered the kitchen.

"At last!" the stranger said, joyously, as he threw his plumed hat on a table and took off his cloak. "By heaven! I almost found myself in a desert."

And before mine host, who was growing more and more astounded at his cool behaviour, had the time to oppose it, he took a chair, and comfortably installed himself in the chimney corner.

The newcomer appeared to be not more than twenty-five years of age; long black curls fell in disorder on his shoulders; his marked features were noble and intelligent; his black eyes, full of fire, announced courage, and the habit of commanding; his countenance had a certain stamp of grandeur, tempered by the cordial smile that played round his wide mouth, full of brilliantly white teeth; his red, and rather swollen lips, were adorned, according to the fashion of the day, with a most carefully waxed moustache, while his square chin, indicative of obstinacy, was covered by a long royale.

His dress, while not rich, was, however, becoming – cut with taste, and affected a certain military air, which was rendered more marked by the brace of pistols the stranger carried in his belt, and the long iron-handled sword that hung at his side.

Altogether, his lofty stature, and muscular, well-developed person, and the air of audacity spread all over him, rendered him one of those men, the breed of whom was so common at the period, and who at the first glance contrived to claim from people with whom accident brought them in contact that respect to which, whether justly or unjustly, they believed they had a right.

In the meanwhile, the landlord, who had slightly recovered from the emotion and surprise he had experienced at what he almost regarded as a violation of his domicile, advanced a few steps toward the stranger, and while bowing lower than he had intended, and doffing his cotton nightcap before the flashing glance the other bent on him, he stammered, in anything but a steady voice —

"My lord —"

But the latter interrupted him without ceremony.

"Are you the landlord?" he asked, sharply.

"Yes," Master Pivois grunted, as he drew himself up, feeling quite constrained at answering when he was preparing to question.

"Very good," the stranger continued; "look after my horse, which I left I know not where in your garden; have him put in the stable, and tell the ostler to wash his withers with a little vinegar and water, for I am afraid he has hurt himself a little."

These words were uttered so carelessly, that the landlord stood utterly confounded, unable to utter a syllable.

"Well," the stranger continued, at the expiration of a moment, with a slight frown, "what are you doing here, ass, instead of obeying my orders?"

Master Pivois, completely subdued, turned on his heels, and left the room, tottering like a drunken man.

The stranger looked after him with a smile, and then turned to the waiting-men, who were whispering together, and taking side-glances at him.

"Come and wait on me," he said; "place a table here before me near the fire, and bring me some supper – make haste, s'dearth, or I shall die of hunger!"

The waiting-men, delighted in their hearts at playing their master a trick, did not let the order be repeated; in a second a table was brought up, the cloth laid, and, on re-entering the room, the landlord found the stranger in the act of carving a magnificent partridge.

Master Pivois assumed at the sight all the colours of the rainbow – at first pale, he turned so red that a fit of apoplexy might be apprehended, so vivid was his emotion.

"By Heaven," he exclaimed, stamping his foot angrily, "that is too much."

"What?" the stranger asked, as he raised his head and wiped his moustache; "What is the matter with you, my good man?"

"Matter, indeed!" mine host growled.

"By the way, is my horse in the stable?"

"Your horse, your horse," the other grumbled, "as if that is troubling me."

"What is it then, if you please, master mine?" the stranger asked, as he poured out a bumper which he conscientiously drained to the last drop. "Ah," he said, "it is Jurançon; I recognise it."

This indifference and this coolness raised the landlord's anger to the highest pitch, and caused him to forget all prudence.

"Cogswounds," he said, boldly seizing the bottle, "it is a strange piece of impudence thus to enter an honest house without the owner's permission; decamp at once, my fine gentleman, unless you wish harm to befall you, and seek a lodging elsewhere, for, as far as I am concerned, I cannot and will not give you one."

The stranger had not moved a feature during this harangue; he had listened to Master Pivois without displaying the slightest impatience: when the landlord at length held his tongue, he threw himself back in his chair, and looked him fixedly in the face.

"Listen to me in your turn, master," he said to him, "and engrave these words deeply on your narrow brain: this house is an inn, is it not? Hence it must be open without hesitation to every stranger who comes here for food and lodging with money in his pocket. I am aware that you claim the right of only receiving such persons as you think proper; if there are people who put up with that, it is their business, but for my part, I do not intend to do so. I feel comfortable here, so I remain, and shall remain as long as I think proper; I do not prevent you from swindling me, for that is your duty as a landlord, and I have no right to object; but, if I am not served politely and dexterously – if you do not give me a proper bedroom to spend the night in – in a word, if you do not perform the duties of hospitality toward me in the way I expect, I promise to pull down your signboard, and hang you up in its place, on the slightest infraction you are guilty of. And now I suppose you understand me?" he added, squeezing the other's hand so hard that the poor fellow uttered a yell of agony, and went tottering against the kitchen wall: "Serve me, then, and let us have no more argument, for you would not get the best of the quarrel if you picked one with me."

And without paying further attention to the landlord, the traveller continued his interrupted supper.

It was all over with the landlord's attempted resistance; he felt himself vanquished, and did not attempt a struggle which had now become impossible. Confused and humiliated, he only thought of satisfying this strange guest who had installed himself by main force in the house.

The traveller did not in any way abuse his victory; satisfied with having obtained the result he desired, he did not take the slightest liberty.

The result was that gradually, from one concession to another – the one offering, the other not refusing – they became on the best possible terms; and toward the end of the supper, mine host and the traveller found themselves, without knowing how, the most affectionate friends in the world.

They were talking together. First of the rain and fine weather, the dearness of provisions, the king's illness, and that of his Eminence the Cardinal; then, growing gradually bolder, Master Pivois poured out a huge bumper of wine for his improvised guest, and collected all his courage.

"Do you know, my good gentleman," he said to him suddenly, shaking his head with an air of contrition, "that you are fearfully in my way?"

"Stuff!" the stranger answered, as he tossed off the contents of his glass, and shrugged his shoulders, "Are we coming back to the old story of just now? I thought that settled long ago."

"Alas! I would it were so for everybody as it is for me."

"What do you mean?"

"Pray do not get into a passion, sir," the landlord continued timidly; "I have not the slightest intention of insulting you."

"In that case explain yourself in the Fiend's name, my master, and come frankly to the point; I do not understand what others beside yourself have to do in the matter."

"That is just the difficulty," said Master Pivois, scratching his head.

"Speak, zounds! I am not an ogre; what is it that causes you such anxiety?"

The landlord saw that he must out with it, and fear giving him courage, he bravely made up his mind.

"Monseigneur," he said, honestly, "believe me that I am too much the man of the world to venture to act with rudeness to a gentleman of your importance – "

"Enough of that," the stranger interrupted, with a smile.

"But – " the host continued.

"Ah! There is a *but*."

"Alas! Monseigneur, there always is one, and today a bigger one than ever."

"Hang it all, you terrify me, master," the stranger remarked, with a laugh; "tell me quickly, I beg of you, what this terrible but is."

"Alas! Monseigneur, it is this: my entire hostelry was engaged a week ago by a party of gentlemen; I expect them to arrive in an hour – half an hour, perhaps, and – "

"And?" the stranger asked, in an enquiring tone, which caused the host to shudder.

"Well, Monseigneur," he resumed in a choking voice, "these gentlemen insist on having the hostelry to themselves, and made me swear not to receive any other traveller but themselves, and paid me to that effect."

"Very good," said the stranger, with an air of indifference.

"What do you say; very good? Monseigneur," Master Pivois exclaimed.

"Hang it! What else would you have me say? You have strictly fulfilled your engagement, and no one has the right to reproach you."

"How so, sir?"

"Unless you have someone concealed here," the stranger answered, imperturbably, "which, I confess, would not be at all honourable on your part."

"I have nobody."

"Well, then?"

"But you, monseigneur?" he hazarded timidly.

"Oh, I," the stranger replied laughingly, "that is another affair; let us make a distinction, if you please, master; you did not receive me, far from it; I pressed my company on you, as I think you will allow."

"It is only too true."

"Do you regret it?"

"Far from it, monseigneur," he exclaimed eagerly, for he was not at all desirous of re-arousing the slumbering wrath of the irascible stranger; "I am only stating a fact."

"Very good, I see with pleasure, Master Pivois, that you are a very serious man; you are stating a fact, you say?"

"Alas! yes," the luckless host sighed.

"Very good; now follow my reasoning closely."

"I am doing so."

"When these gentlemen arrive, which according to your statement, will be soon, you will only have one thing to do."

"What is it, monseigneur?"

"Tell them exactly what has passed between us. If I am not greatly mistaken this honest explanation will satisfy them; if it be otherwise – "

"Well, if it be so, what am I to do, sir?"

"Refer them to me, Master Pivois, and I will undertake in my turn to convince them; gentlemen of good birth perfectly understand each other."

"Still, monseigneur – "

"Not a word more on this subject, I must request; but stay," he added, and listened, "I believe your company are arriving."

And he carelessly threw himself back in his chair.

Outside, the trampling of horses on the hardened snow could be distinctly heard, and then several blows were dealt on the door.

"It is they," the host muttered.

"A further reason not to keep them waiting; go and open the door, master, for it is very cold outside."

The landlord hesitated for a moment and then left the room without replying.

The stranger carefully folded himself in his mantle, pulled the brim of his beaver over his eyes, and awaited the entrance of the newcomers, while affecting an air of indifference.

The waiting-men, who had sought shelter in the most remote corner of the room, were trembling in the prevision of a disturbance.

CHAPTER II

A FAMILY SCENE

In the meanwhile the new arrivals were making a great noise in the road, and seemed to be growing impatient at the delay in letting them into the hostelry.

Master Pivois at length decided to open to them, though he was suffering from a secret apprehension as to the consequences which the presence of a stranger in the house might have for him.

As soon as a stable-lad had by his orders, drawn back the bolts, and opened the carriage-gates, several horsemen entered the yard, accompanied by a coach drawn by four horses.

By the light of the lanthorn held by his lad the landlord perceived that the travellers were seven in number; three masters, three servants, and the coachman on the box. All were wrapped up in thick cloaks, and armed to the teeth.

So soon as the coach had entered the yard, the horsemen dismounted; one of them, who appeared to exercise a certain authority over his companions, walked up to the landlord, while the others brought the coach up to the main entrance of the house, and closed the gates.

"Well, master," said the traveller to whom we allude, with a very marked foreign accent, although he expressed himself very purely in French; "have my orders been punctually executed?"

At this question, which was very embarrassing to him, Master Pivois scratched his head, and then replied like the cunning peasant he was —

"As far as possibly, yes, my lord."

"What do you mean, scoundrel?" the traveller resumed roughly; "Your instructions were precise enough."

"Yes, my lord," the landlord said humbly; "and I will even add that I was liberally paid beforehand."

"In that case, what have you to say?"

"That I have done the best I could," Master Pivois replied in growing confusion.

"Ah! I suppose you mean that you have someone in the house?"

"Alas! yes, my lord," the landlord answered, hanging his head.

The traveller stamped his foot passionately.

"S'blood!" he exclaimed; then, at once resuming an apparent calmness, he continued, "Who are the persons?"

"There is only one."

"Ah!" said the traveller, with satisfaction, "If there be only one, nothing is more easy than to dislodge him."

"I fear not," the landlord ventured timidly, "for this traveller, who is a stranger to me, I swear, looks to me like a rude gentleman, and not at all inclined to surrender his place."

"Well, well, I will take it on myself," the traveller remarked carelessly, "where is he?"

"There, in the kitchen, my lord, warming himself at the fire."

"That will do; is the room ready?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Rejoin those gentlemen, and show them the way yourself; none of your people must know what takes place here."

The landlord, delighted at having got off so cheaply, bowed respectfully, and hastily retired in the direction of the garden; as for the traveller, after exchanging a few whispered words with a footman, who remained with him, he pulled his hat over his eyes, opened the door, and boldly entered the kitchen.

It was deserted: the stranger had disappeared.

The traveller looked anxiously around him; the waiting men, probably in obedience to orders previously received from their master, had withdrawn to their attics.

After a few seconds' hesitation, the traveller returned to the garden.

"Well," the landlord asked, "have you seen him, my lord?"

"No," he replied, "but it is of no consequence; not a word about him to the persons who accompany me; he has doubtless left, but if that be not the case, be careful that he does not approach the apartments you have reserved for us."

"Hum," the landlord muttered to himself, "all this is not clear;" and he withdrew very pensively.

Truth to tell, the worthy man was frightened. His new customers had unpleasant faces, and a rough manner, which reassured him but slightly; and then again he fancied he had seen alarming shadows gliding about among the trees in his garden, a fact which he had carefully avoided verifying, but which heightened his secret apprehensions.

Dame Tiphaine, torch in hand, was waiting at the house door, in readiness to light the travellers, and conduct them to their apartments. When the coach had been turned and stopped, one of the travellers went up to it, opened the door, and assisted a lady in getting out.

This lady, who was magnificently dressed, appeared to be suffering, and she walked with difficulty. Still, in spite of her weakness, she declined the arm of one of the travellers offered her in support, and approached Dame Tiphaine, who, compassionate like all women, hastened to offer her the service she seemed to request of her, and helped her to ascend the rather steep staircase that led to the dais room.

The travellers left the driver and a lackey to guard the coach, which remained horsed, and silently followed the sick lady.

The dais room, the finest in the inn, was spacious and furnished with a certain amount of luxury; a large fire crackled on the hearth, and several candles, placed on the furniture, diffused a rather bright light.

A door half hidden by tapestry communicated with a bedroom, that had a door opening on the passage, for the convenience of the attendants.

When the lady had entered the room, she sank into a chair, and thanked the landlady with a bow.

The latter discreetly withdrew, astonished and almost terrified by the gloomy faces which surrounded her.

"Holy Virgin!" she said to Master Pivois, whom she found walking in great anxiety along the passage, "What's going to happen here? These men frighten me; that poor lady is all of a tremble, and the little I saw of her face behind her mask, is as white as a sheet."

"Alas!" Master Pivois said with a sigh, "I am as frightened as you, my dear, but we can do nothing; they are too great people for us – friends of his Eminence. They would crush us without pity; we have only one thing to do, and that is to retire to our room, as we received orders to do, and to keep quiet till our services are required; the house is theirs, at this moment they are the masters."

The landlord and his wife went into their room, and not satisfied with double locking their door, barricaded it with everything that came to hand.

As Master Pivois had said to his wife, the travellers were certainly masters of the inn, or at least believed themselves so.

The stranger, while feigning the deepest indifference, had watched the landlord's every movement: as soon as the latter left the kitchen to open the door for the newcomers, he rose, threw a purse of gold to the scullions, while putting his finger on his lips to recommend silence to them, and carefully wrapping himself in his mantle, left the kitchen.

The scullions, with the intelligence characteristic of the class, comprehended that this action of the stranger concealed some plans in the execution of which it was to their interest not to interfere; they divided the money so generously given them, and remembering the orders they had received from their master, they hastily decamped, and went off to hide themselves.

The stranger, while the landlord was receiving the travellers, had proceeded to the thickest part of the garden.

On reaching the little gate to which we have referred, he whistled gently.

Almost immediately two men seemed to rise from the midst of the darkness, and came up to him.

Each of these men had a long rapier at his side, pistols in his girdle, and a musketoon in his hand.

"What is there new?" the stranger asked; "Have you seen anything, Michael?"

"Captain," the man answered, to whom the question was addressed, "I have seen nothing, but still I fear a trap."

"A trap?" the stranger repeated.

"Yes," Michael continued, "Bowline has taken bearings of several ill-looking fellows who seem desirous of boarding us."

"Stuff! You are mad, Michael. You have seen the travellers who have just arrived at the inn."

"No, captain; on the contrary, they exactly resemble the fellows who have been chasing us ever since the day before yesterday, regular Cardinal's bloodhounds, I'll wager."

The stranger appeared to reflect. "Are they far off?" he at length asked.

"Speak, Bowline, my boy," said Michael, turning to his comrade, "and don't shiver your sails, the captain is hailing you."

"Well, then, Captain," said Bowline, a sturdy Breton, with a crafty look, "I sighted them over the starboard quarter at about four o'clock; I spread all my canvas to distance them, and I fancy I have left them four or five cables length in the rear."

"In that case we have about an hour before us?"

"Yes, about, Captain," Bowline replied.

"That is more than we want; listen, my lads, and swear on your honour as sailors to obey me."

"You may be quite sure we shan't fail, Captain," they answered.

"I reckon on you."

"Shiver my topsails, we know that," Michael replied.

"Whatever may happen to me," the stranger continued, "leave me to act alone, unless I give you express orders to come to my assistance. If the Cardinal's bloodhounds were to arrive while we are up aloft, you will bolt."

"We bolt!" the two sailors exclaimed.

"You must, lads! Who would deliver me if we were all three prisoners?" the stranger asked.

"That's true," Michael answered.

"Well then, that's settled, is it not?"

"Yes, Captain."

"Ah! By the way, if I am arrested you will want money to liberate me; take this."

He placed in their hands a heavy purse, which the sailors accepted without any remark.

"Now follow me, and keep your weather eye open, my lads."

"All right, Captain," Michael answered, "we are on watch."

The stranger then proceeded towards the house, closely followed by the two sailors. He reached the passage, at the end of which the travellers' room was, at the moment when Master Pivois and his wife were locking themselves in their bedroom.

The coach, guarded by the driver and a footman, was still standing in front of the principal entrance, but the three men passed unnoticed.

So soon as the landlady had left the room, the traveller who appeared to have a certain degree of authority over his companions, opened the bedroom door, doubtless to make certain there was no spy listening; then he took a chair, sat down by the fire, and made a sign to his companions to imitate him; the two lackeys alone remained standing near the door, with their hands resting on the muzzles of their carbines, butts of which were on the ground.

For some moments there was a funereal silence in this room, although six persons were assembled in it.

At length the traveller made up his mind to speak, and addressed the young lady, who was reclining in her chair, with her head bent on her breast and pendant arms.

"My daughter," he said, in a grave voice, and speaking in Spanish, "the moment has arrived for a clear and distinct explanation between us, for we have only four leagues to travel ere we reach the end of our long journey. I intend to remain twenty-four hours in this hostelry, in order to give you time to repair your strength, and allow you to appear in a proper state before the man for whom I destine you."

The young lady only replied to this dry address by a hollow groan.

Her father continued, without appearing to notice the utter state of prostration in which she was —

"Remember, my daughter, that if, on the entreaty of your brothers here present, I consented to pardon the fault you have committed, it is on the express condition that you will obey my orders without hesitation, and do all I wish."

"My child?" she murmured, in a voice choked by grief — "What have you done with my child?"

The traveller frowned, and a livid pallor covered his face; but he immediately recovered himself.

"That question again, unhappy girl?" he said, in a gloomy voice; "Do not trifle with my wrath by reminding me of your crime, and the dishonour of my house."

At these words the girl drew herself up suddenly, and with a hurried gesture pulled off the velvet mask that covered her face.

"I am not guilty," she said, in a haughty voice, and looking her father in the face; "and you are perfectly aware of it, for it was you who introduced the Count de Barmont to me. You encouraged our love, and it was by your orders that we were secretly married. You dare not assert the contrary."

"Silence, wretch!" the traveller exclaimed, and rose passionately.

"Father!" the two gentlemen, who had hitherto remained motionless and as if strangers to this stormy interview, exclaimed, as they threw themselves before him.

"Well," he said, as he resumed his seat, "I will restrain myself: I will only ask you one further question, Doña Clara — will you obey me?"

She hesitated for a moment, and then appeared to form a supreme resolution.

"Listen to me, my father," she replied, in a hurried though firm voice; "you told me yourself that the moment for an explanation between us had arrived; very well, let us have this explanation. I, too, am your daughter, and jealous of the honour of our house; that is why I insist on your answering me without equivocation or deception."

While speaking thus, the young lady, who was only sustained by the factitious strength sorrow imparted to her, for she was frail and delicate, was supremely beautiful; with her body bent back, her head haughtily raised, her long and silky black hair falling in disorder on her shoulders, and contrasting with the marble pallor of her face; with her large eyes, inflamed by fever and inundated with tears, that slowly coursed down her cheeks, and with her bosom heaving from the emotion that held mastery over her — there was about her whole person something deathly, which seemed no longer to belong to the earth.

Her father felt involuntarily affected, in spite of his ferocious pride; and it was with a less rough voice he replied —

"I am listening to you."

"Father," she resumed, leaning her hand on the back of her chair in order to support herself, "I told you that I am not guilty, and I repeat that the Count de Barmont and myself were secretly united in the church of la Merced at Cadiz, and were so by your orders. As you know it, I will not dwell further on this point; my child is, therefore legitimate, and I have a right to be proud of it. How is it, then, that you, the Duke de Peñaflor, belonging to the highest class in Spain, not satisfied with

tearing me on the very day of marriage from the husband yourself selected, and depriving me of my infant on the day of its birth, accused me of committing a horrible crime, and insisted on enchaining me to another husband, while my first is still living? Answer me, my father, so that I may know the nature of that honour about which you so often speak to me, and what is the motive that renders you so cruel to an unfortunate girl, who owes her life to you, and who, ever since she has been in this world, has only felt love and respect for you."

"This is too much, unnatural daughter!" the Duke shouted, as he rose wrathfully – "And as you are not afraid of braving me so unworthily –"

But he suddenly checked himself, and stood motionless, trembling with fury and horror; the bedroom door had suddenly opened, and a man appeared in it, upright, haughty, with flashing eye, and hand on his sword hilt.

"Ludovic, at last!" the young lady shrieked, as she rushed towards him.

But her brothers caught her by the arms, and constrained her to sit down again.

"The Count de Barmont!" the Duke muttered.

"Myself, my lord Duke de Peñaflor," the stranger replied, with exquisite politeness – "you did not expect me, it appears to me?"

And, walking a few paces into the room, while the two sailors who had followed him guarded the door, he proudly put his hat on again, and folded his arms.

"What is going on here?" he asked, in a haughty voice; "And who dares to use violence to the Countess de Barmont?"

"The Countess de Barmont?" the Duke repeated, contemptuously.

"It is true," the other remarked, ironically; "I forget that you expect at any moment a dispensation from the Court of Home, which will declare my marriage null and void, and allow you to give your daughter to the man whose credit has caused you to be nominated Viceroy of New Spain."

"Sir!" the Duke exclaimed.

"What, do you pretend I am in error? No, no, my lord Duke, my spies are as good as yours – I am well served, believe me: thank heaven I have arrived in time to prevent it. Make way there!" he said, repulsing by a gesture the two gentlemen who opposed his passage – "I am your husband, madam; follow me, I shall be able to protect you."

The two young men, leaving their sister, who was in a semi-fainting state, rushed on the Count, and both buffeted him in the face with their gloves, while drawing their swords.

The Count turned fearfully pale at this cruel insult; he uttered a wild beast yell, and unsheathed.

The valets, held in check by the two sailors, had not made a movement.

The Duke rushed between the three men, who were ready for the assault.

"Count," he said, coolly, to the younger of his sons, "leave to your brother the duty of chastising this man."

"Thanks, father," the elder answered, as he fell on guard, while his younger brother lowered the point of his sword, and fell back a pace.

Doña Clara was lying motionless on the floor.

At the first attack the two enemies engaged their swords up to their guard, and then, as if of common accord, each retreated a step.

There was something sinister in the appearance of this inn room at the moment.

This woman, who lay writhing on the floor, suffering from a horrible nervous crisis, and no one dreaming of succouring her.

This old man, with frowning brow, and features contracted by pain, witnessing with apparent stoicism this duel between his elder son and his son-in-law, while his younger son was biting his lips with fury because he could not assist his brother; these sailors, with pistols at the breasts of the lackeys, who were palsied with terror; and in the centre of the room, scarce lighted by a few smoking candles, these two men, sword in hand, watching like two tigers the moment to slay each other.

The combat was not long; too great a hatred animated the two adversaries for them to lose time in feeling each other's strength. The Duke's son, more impatient than the Count, made thrust on thrust, which the other had great difficulty in parrying; at length, the young man feeling himself too deeply engaged, tried to make a second backward step, but his foot slipped on the boards, and he involuntarily raised his sword; at the same moment the Count liberated his blade by a movement rapid as thought, and his sword entirely disappeared in his adversary's chest; then he leaped back to avoid the back thrust, and fell on guard again.

But it was all over with the young man; he rolled his haggard eyes twice or thrice, stretched out his arms, while letting go his sword, and fell his whole length on the floor, without uttering a word.

He was dead.

"Assassin!" his brother screamed, as he rushed sword in hand on the Count.

"Traitor!" the latter replied, as he parried the thrust, and sent the other's sword flying to the ceiling.

"Stay, stay!" the Duke cried, as he rushed half mad with grief between the two men, who had seized each other round the waist, and had both drawn their daggers.

But this tardy interference was useless; the Count, who was endowed with a far from common strength, had easily succeeded in freeing himself from the young man's grasp, and had thrown him on the ground, where he held him by placing his knee on his chest.

All at once a mighty rumour of arms and horses was heard in the house, and the hurried steps of several men hurrying up the stairs became audible.

"Ah!" the Duke exclaimed, with a ferocious joy, "I believe my vengeance is at hand, at last!"

The Count, not deigning to reply to his enemy, turned to the sailors.

"Be off, my lads!" he shouted in a voice of thunder.

They hesitated.

"He goes if you wish to save me," he added.

"Boarders away!" Michael yelled, as he dragged away his comrade; and the two men seizing their musketoons by the barrel, as if to use them as clubs in case of need, and to clear the way, rushed into the passage when they disappeared.

The Count listened anxiously, he heard oaths and the sound of an obstinate struggle; then, at the expiration of a moment, a distant cry, that summons which sailors know so well, reached him.

Then his face grew calmer, he returned his sword to its sheath and coolly awaited the newcomers, muttering to himself —

"They have escaped, one chance is left me."

CHAPTER III

THE ARREST

Almost at the same moment ten or twelve men burst into the room rather than entered it, the noise that continued outside let it be guessed that a great number of others was standing on the stairs and in the passages, ready, were it required, to come to the assistance of the others.

All these men were armed, and it was easy to recognise them at once as guards of the King, or rather of His Eminence the Cardinal.

Only two of them, with crafty looks and squinting eyes, dressed in black like ushers, had no visible weapons; these, in all probability were more to be feared than the others, for beneath their feline obsequiousness they doubtless concealed an implacable will to do evil.

One of these two men held some papers in his right hand, he advanced two or three paces, cast a suspicious glance around him, and then took off his cap with a courteous bow.

"In the King's name! gentleman," he said in a quick sharp voice.

"What do you want?" the Count de Barmont asked, advancing resolutely towards him.

At this movement, which he took for a hostile demonstration, the man in black recoiled with an ill-disguised start of terror, but feeling himself backed up by his acolytes, he at once resumed his coolness, and answered with a smile of evil augury —

"Ah! Ah! The Count Ludovic de Barmont, I believe," he remarked with an ironical bow.

"Yes, sir," the gentleman replied haughtily, "I am the Count de Barmont."

"Captain in the navy," the man in black imperturbably added, "at present, commanding His Majesty's, frigate The Erigone."

"As I told you, sir, I am the person you are in search of," the Count added.

"It is really with you that I have to deal, my lord," he replied, as he drew himself up. "S'death, my good gentleman, you are not easy to catch up; I have been running after you for a week, and was almost despairing about having the honour of a meeting."

All this was said with an obsequious air, a honeyed voice, and with a sweet smile, sufficient to exasperate a saint, and much more the person whom the strange man was addressing, and who was endowed with anything but a placable character.

"By Heaven!" he exclaimed, stamping his foot passionately; "Are we to have much more of this?"

"Patience, my good sir," he replied in the same placid tone; "patience, good Heaven, how quick you are!" then after taking a glance at the papers he held in his hand, "Since by your own confession you allow yourself to be really Count Ludovic de Barmont, captain commanding His Majesty's frigate Erigone, by virtue of the orders I bear, I arrest you in the King's name, for the crime of desertion; for having without authorization abandoned your vessel in a foreign country, that is to say, at the Port of Lisbon, in Portugal." Then raising his head and fixing his squinting eyes on the gentleman, he added, "Surrender your sword to me, my lord."

M. de Barmont shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"The sword of a gentleman of my race shall never be placed in the hands of a scoundrel of your stamp," he said, with contempt; and drawing his sword, he coldly broke the blade across his knee, and threw the fragments through the window panes, which they broke.

Then he drew his pistols from his belt and cocked them.

"Sir, sir!" the myrmidon exclaimed, recoiling in terror, "This is rebellion, remember, rebellion against the express orders of His Majesty and His Eminence the Cardinal Minister."

The Count smiled disdainfully, and raising his pistols in the air, fired them, the bullets being buried in the ceiling; then clasping them by the barrel he threw them also out of the window; after which he crossed his hands on his chest, and said coolly —

"Now do with me what you please."

"Have you surrendered, my lord?" the fellow asked with ill-disguised alarm.

"Yes, from this moment I am your prisoner."

The man in black breathed again; although he was unarmed, the haughty gentleman still made him feel uncomfortable.

"Still," the latter added, "allow me to say a couple of words to this lady;" and he pointed to Doña Clara, who, waited upon by Dame Tiphaine, who had hurried in at the disturbance in spite of her husband's entreaties and orders, was beginning to regain her senses.

"No, not a word, not a syllable," the Duke exclaimed, as he threw himself between his daughter and the Count; "remove the villain, remove him."

But the bailiff, pleased with the facility the Count had displayed in surrendering to him, and not wishing to excite his anger, pleased above all at being able to show his authority without incurring resistance, bravely interposed.

"Pray, sir, allow the gentleman to speak to the lady," he said, "and to unburden his heart."

"But this man is an assassin," the Duke shouted violently, "before us is still lying the corpse of my unhappy son, killed by him."

"I pity you, sir," the myrmidon said without being at all affected; "I cannot offer any remedy for that; and you must make application in the proper quarter. Still, if it can be of any comfort to you, be convinced that I shall make a careful note of the accusation you bring, and will recall it to mind at the right time and place. But you must be equally eager to get rid of us, as we are to get away from here: hence allow this gentleman to bid farewell to the lady quietly, and I am convinced it will not take long."

The Duke darted a ferocious glance at the bailiff; but, not wishing to compromise himself with such a fellow, he did not answer, and fell back with a gloomy air.

The Count had watched this altercation without displaying either impatience or anger; with pale forehead and frowning brow, he waited, doubtless ready to break into some terrible extremity if his request were not granted.

The bailiff only required to take one look at him to guess what was passing in his heart; and, not feeling at all anxious for a fresh contest to begin, he had prudently manoeuvred to avoid it.

"Come," he said, "speak, my worthy gentleman, no one will oppose it."

"Thanks," the Count answered hoarsely and approached Doña Clara, who watched him advance with an ardent gaze fixed on him.

"Clara," he said to her in a firm and deeply marked voice, "do you love me?"

She hesitated for a moment and bowed her head while heaving a profound sigh.

"Do you love me?" he repeated.

"I do love you, Ludovic," she replied in a faint and trembling voice.

"Do you love me, as your husband before God and man, as the father of your child?"

The young lady rose, her black eyes flashed fire, and stretching out her hands before her, she said in a voice choked by emotion —

"In the presence of my father, who is ready to curse me, before the body of my dead brother and in the face of the men who are listening to me, I swear, Ludovic, that I love you as the father of my child, and that I shall remain faithful to you, whatever may happen."

"Very good, Clara," he answered, "God has received your oath and will help you to keep it; remember that, whether dead or alive, you belong to me as I belong to you, and that no person on earth shall break the ties that unite us. Now farewell, and keep your courage."

"Farewell!" she muttered, as she fell back in her chair and buried her face in her hands.

"Let us go, gentlemen! Do with me what you please," the Count said as he turned to the exempt and the guards, who were involuntarily affected by this scene.

The Duke bounded with a tiger leap on his daughter, and seizing her right arm with a frenzied gesture, he forced her to raise her tear-swollen face to his, and fixing on her a glance loaded with all the rage that swelled his heart, he said in a voice which fury rendered sibilant —

"Daughter, prepare to marry within two days, the man I destine for you. As for your child, you will never see it again; it no longer exists for you."

The young lady uttered a cry of despair and fell back deprived of her senses in the arms of Dame Tiphaine.

The Count, who at this moment was leaving the room, stopped short and turned round to the Duke with his arm stretched out toward him:

"Hangman," he shouted in a hoarse voice which chilled his auditors with horror, "I curse you, I swear on my honor as a gentlemen to take on you and yours so terrible a vengeance, that the memory of it shall remain eternal; and if I cannot reach you, you and the whole nation to which you belong shall be buried beneath the implacable weight of my hatred. Between us henceforth there is a war of savages and wild beasts, without truce or mercy; farewell."

And leaving the proud Spaniard horrified by this fearful anathema, the gentleman quitted the room with a firm step, and taking a last loving glance at the woman he adored, from whom he was perhaps eternally separated.

The passages, stairs, and inn garden were filled with armed men; it was evidently a miracle that the two sailors had succeeded in escaping and getting away safe and sound; this gave the Count, hope and he went down the stairs with an assured step, carefully watched by his escort who did not let him out of sight.

The guards had been long before warned that they would have to do with a naval officer possessing an inordinate violence of character, prodigious vigour and indomitable courage; hence the resignation of the prisoner, which they believed to be assumed, only inspired them with very slight confidence, and they were continually on the defensive.

When they came out into the garden the chief of the exempts noticed the coach, which was still standing at the door.

"Why," he said with a grin and rubbing his hands, "here's the very thing we want. In our hurry to get here, we forgot to provide ourselves with a coach; be good enough to get in, my lord," he said as he opened the door.

The Count got in without any further hesitation; and the exempts then addressed the driver who was sitting motionless on his box.

"Come down, scamp," he said in a tone of authority; "I require the use of this coach for an affair of state. Give up your place to one of my men. Wideawake," he added, turning to a tall impudent looking fellow standing by his side, "get up on the box in that man's place — let us be off."

The driver did not attempt to resist this peremptory order; he descended and his place was immediately taken by Wideawake; the exempt then entered the carriage, seated himself facing his prisoner, closed the door, and the steeds, aroused by a vigorous, lash, dashed forward dragging after them the heavy vehicle round which the twenty odd soldiers were collected.

For a considerable period the coach rolled along without a word being exchanged between the prisoner and his guard.

The Count was thinking, the exempt sleeping, or, to speak more correctly, pretending to sleep.

In the month of March the nights are beginning to shorten; daylight soon appeared, and broad white stripes were beginning to cross the sky.

The Count, who up to this moment had remained motionless, gave a slight start.

"Are you suffering, my lord?" the exempt inquired. This question was addressed to him with an intonation so different from that hitherto employed by the man who had made him prisoner; there

was in the sound of his voice an accent so really gentle and sympathizing, that the Count involuntarily started, and took a fixed look at his singular companion: but so far as he could see by the faint light of coming dawn, the man in front of him still had the same crafty face and the same ironical smile stereotyped on his lips. The Count found himself in error, and throwing himself back, merely uttered one word, "No," in a tone intended to break off any attempt at conversation between his guardian and himself.

But the former was probably in a humour for talking, for he would not be checked; and pretending not to remark the manner in which his advances had been received, he continued —

"The nights are still chill, the breeze enters this coach on all sides, and I feared lest the cold had struck you."

"I am habituated to suffer heat and cold," the Count answered; "besides, it is probable that if I have not yet made my apprenticeship, I am about to undergo one which will accustom me to endure everything without complaining."

"Who knows, my lord?" the exempt said, with a shake of the head.

"What?" the other objected, "Am I not condemned to a lengthened captivity in a fortress?"

"Yes, according to the terms of the order, which it is my duty to carry out."

There was a momentary silence. The Count gazed absently at the country which the first beams of day were beginning to illumine. At length he turned to the exempt.

"May I ask whither you are taking me?" he said.

"I see no objection to your doing so."

"And you will answer my question?"

"Why not? There is nothing to prevent it."

"Then we are going?"

"To the isles of St. Marguerite, my lord."

The Count trembled inwardly. The islands of Lerins, or Sainte Marguerite, enjoyed at that time, even, a reputation almost as terrible as the one they acquired at a later date, when they served as a prison to the mysterious iron mask, whom it was forbidden to take even a glance at under penalty of death.

The exempt looked at him fixedly without speaking.

It was the Count who again resumed the conversation.

"Where are we now?" he asked.

The exempt bent out of the window, and then resumed his seat.

"We are just arriving at Corbeil, where we shall change horses."

"Ah!" said the Count.

"If you wish to rest, I can give orders for an hour's stay. Perhaps you feel a want of some refreshment?"

This singular man was gradually acquiring in the Count's eyes all the interest of an enigma.

"Very good," he said.

Without replying the exempt let down the window.

"Wideawake!" he shouted.

"What is the matter?" the latter asked.

"Pull up at the Golden Lion."

"All right."

Ten minutes later the coach halted in the Rue St. Spire, in front of a door over which creaked a sign representing an enormous gilt cat, with one of its paws on a ball. They had arrived.

The exempt got out, followed by the Count, and both entered the inn: one portion of the escort remained in the saddle in the street, while the others dismounted and installed themselves in the common room.

The Count had mechanically followed the exempt, and on reaching the room, seated himself in a chair by the fire, in a first floor decently furnished room. He was too busy with his own thoughts to attach any great attention to what was going on around him.

When the landlord had left them alone, the exempt bolted the door inside, and then placed himself in front of his prisoner.

"Now," he said, "let us speak frankly, my lord."

The latter, astonished at this sudden address, quickly raised his head.

"We have no time to lose in coming to an understanding, sir; so please to listen without interrupting me," the exempt continued. "I am François Bouillot, the younger brother of your foster father. Do you recognise me?"

"No," the Count replied, after examining him attentively for a moment.

"That does not surprise me, for you were only eight years old the last time I had the honor of seeing you at Barmont Castle: but that is of no consequence; I am devoted to you, and wish to save you."

"What assures me that you are really François Bouillot, the brother of my foster father, and that you are not attempting to deceive me?" the Count answered, in a suspicious accent.

The exempt felt in his pocket, pulled out several papers, which he unfolded, and presented them open to the Count.

The latter looked at them mechanically: they consisted of a baptismal certificate, a commission, and several letters proving his identity. The Count handed him the letters back.

"How is it that you should have been the man to arrest me, and arrived so opportunely to aid me?" he asked.

"In a very simple way, my lord: your order of arrest was obtained from the Cardinal Minister by the Dutch Embassy. I was present when M. de Laffemas, a familiar of his Eminence, who is kind to me, left the Palais Cardinal order in hand: I was there, and he chose me. Still, as I was able to decline, I should have done so, had I not seen your name on the paper, and remembered the kindness your family had shown to me and my brother. Taking advantage of the opportunity my profession of exempt offered me, I resolved to repay you what your friends have done for mine, by attempting to save you."

"That does not seem to me very easy, my poor friend."

"More so than you may fancy, my lord: I will leave here one-half our escort, and then only ten will remain with us."

"Hum! That is a very decent number," the Count replied, involuntarily interested.

"They would be too many if there were not among the ten men seven of whom I am certain, which reduces the number of those we have to fear to three. I have been running after you for a long time, my lord," he added, with a laugh, "and all my precautions are taken: through some excuse, easy to be found, we will pass through Toulon, and on arriving there, we will stop for an hour or two at a hostelry I know. You will disguise yourself as a mendicant monk, and leave the inn unnoticed. I will take care to get rid of the guards I am not certain of. You will proceed to the port furnished with papers I will hand you; you will go on board a charming *chasse-marée*, called the *Seamew*, which I have freighted on your account, and which is waiting for you. The master will recognise you by a password I will tell you, and you will be at liberty to go whither-soever you please. Is not this plan extremely simple, my lord?" he asked, rubbing his hands joyously, "And have I not foreseen everything?"

"No, my friend," the Count answered with emotion, as he offered him his hand; "there is one more thing you have not foreseen."

"What is that, my lord?" he asked, in surprise.

"That I do not wish to fly," the young man answered, with a melancholy shake of the head.

CHAPTER IV

THE ISLE OF SAINTE MARGUERITE

At this answer, which he was so far from anticipating, the exempt gave a start of surprise, and looked at the Count as if he had not exactly understood him.

The gentleman smiled gently.

"That surprises you, does it not?" he said.

"I confess it, my lord," the other stammered, with embarrassment.

The Count went on:

"Yes," he said, "I can understand your surprise at my refusal to accept your generous proposition. It is not often you find a prisoner to whom liberty is offered, and who insists on remaining a captive. I owe you an explanation of this extraordinary conduct; this explanation I will give you at once, so that you may no longer press me, but leave me to act as I think proper."

"I am only the most humble, of your servants, my lord Count. You doubtless know better than I what your conduct should be under the circumstances, you have therefore no occasion to explain it to me."

"It is precisely because you are an old servant of my family, François Bouillot, and because you are giving me at this moment a proof of unbounded devotion, that I believe myself obliged to tell you the motives for this refusal, which has so many reasons to surprise you. Listen to me, then."

"As you insist, my lord, I obey you."

"Very good, take a chair, and place yourself here by my side, as it is unnecessary for others beside yourself to hear what I am going to say."

The exempt took a stool and seated himself by his master's side, exactly as the latter had ordered, while still keeping up a respectful distance between himself and the gentleman.

"In the first place," the Count resumed, "be thoroughly convinced that if I refuse your offer, it is not through any motive of a personal nature as regards yourself. I have full confidence in you, for nearly 200 years your family has been attached to mine, and we have ever had reason to praise their devotion to our interest. This important point being settled, I will go on. I will suppose for a moment that the plan you have formed is successful, a plan which I will not discuss, although it appears to me very difficult to execute, and the slightest accident might, at the last moment, compromise its issue. What will happen? Forced to fly without resources, without friends, I should not only be unable to take the revenge I meditate upon my enemies, but surrendered, so to speak, to their mercy, I should speedily fall into their hands again, and thus become the laughing stock of those whom I hate. I should be dishonoured; they will despise me, and I shall have but one way of escape from a life henceforth rendered useless, as all my plans would be overthrown, and that is blowing out my brains."

"Oh! my lord!" Bouillot exclaimed, clasping his hands.

"I do not wish to fall," the Count continued imperturbably, "in the terrible struggle which has this day begun between my enemies and myself. I have taken an oath, and that oath I will keep, regardless of the consequences. I am young, hardly twenty-five years of age; up to the present, life has only been one long joy for me, and I have succeeded in everything, plans of ambition, fortune and love. Today misfortune has come to lay its hand on me, and it is welcome; for the man who has not suffered is not a perfect man; grief purifies the mind and tempers the heart. Solitude is a good councillor; it makes a man comprehend the nothingness of small things, expands the ideas, and prepares grand conceptions. I require to steel myself through sorrow, in order to be able one day to repay my enemies a hundredfold all that I have suffered at their hands. It is by thinking over my broken career and my ruined future, that I shall find the necessary strength to accomplish my vengeance. When my heart is dead to every other feeling but that of the hatred which will entirely

occupy it, I shall be able pitilessly to trample underfoot all those who today laugh at me and believe they have crushed me, because they have hurled me down; and then I shall be really a man, and woe to those who try to measure their strength with mine. You tremble at what I am saying to you at this moment, my old servant," he added more gently, "what would it be were you able to read in my heart all the hatred, anger, and rage it contains against those who have mercilessly ground me beneath their heel, and who have eternally deprived me of happiness, in order to satisfy the paltry calculations of a narrow and criminal ambition?"

"Oh, my lord Count! Permit an old servant of your family, a man who is entirely devoted to you, to implore you to resign these fearful schemes of vengeance. Alas! You will be the first victim of your hatred."

"Have you forgotten, Bouillot," the Count replied ironically, "what is said in our country, about the members of the family to which I have the honor of belonging?"

"Yes, yes, my lord," he said with a melancholy shake of the head; "I remember it, and will repeat it if you wish."

"Do so."

"Well, my lord, the distich is as follows – "

"The Counts of Barmont Senectaire, Demon-hate and heart of stone."

The Count smiled.

"Well do you fancy that I have degenerated from my ancestors?"

"I suppose nothing, sir, Heaven forbid!" he answered humbly, "I only see with terror that you are preparing a hideous future for yourself."

"Be it so! I accept it in all its rigor, if God will permit me to accomplish my oath."

"Alas! My lord, you know that man proposes; you are at this moment a prisoner of the Cardinal; reflect, I implore you, who knows whether you will ever leave the prison to which I am conducting you? Consent to be free."

"No; cease your entreaties! The Cardinal is not immortal. If not before, my liberty will be restored me on his death, which cannot be long deferred, I hope. And now carefully bear this in mind, my resolution is so fixed, that if in spite of my orders you abandon me here, at the inn where we now are, the first use I should make of the liberty you have given me back, would be to go at once and surrender myself into the hands of his Eminence; you understand me thoroughly, I suppose?"

The old servant bowed his head without answering, and two tears slowly ran down his cheeks.

This dumb grief, so true and so touching, affected the Count more than he would have supposed; he rose, took the poor fellow's hand and shook it several times.

"Let us say no more about this, Bouillot," he remarked to him affectionately, "although I will not profit by it, your devotion has deeply affected me, and I will ever feel eternally grateful to you for it. Come, my old friend, let us not grow foolish; we are men and not childish poltroons, confound it."

"Well, no matter, my lord, I do not consider myself beaten," the exempt replied, as he threw himself into the arms open to receive him; "you cannot prevent me from watching over you, whether near or afar."

"That I do not oppose, my friend," the Count replied with a laugh; "do as you please; besides," he added seriously, "I confess that I shall not be sorry when I am sequestered from the world to know what is going on, and to be kept informed, of passing events; some unforeseen fact might occur which would modify my intentions and make me desire the recovery of my liberty."

"Oh, be sure of that, my lord," he exclaimed, pleased at this quasi victory and conditional promise, "I will arrange so that you shall not be at a loss for news; I have not served his Eminence for six years for nothing; the Cardinal is a good master, I have profited by his teaching, and know several tricks; you shall see me at work."

"Well, that is agreed, and we understand each other now. I think it would be wise to breakfast before continuing our journey, for I feel an appetite that greatly requires appeasing."

"I will give the landlord orders to serve you at once, my lord."

"You will breakfast with me, Bouillot," he said as he gave him a friendly tap on the shoulder; "and I hope it will be always so, until our arrival at the Isle of St. Marguerite."

"It is certainly a great honour for me, sir, but –"

"I expect it; besides are you not almost a member of my family?"

François Bouillot bowed and left the room; after ordering a copious breakfast, he commanded one part of the escort back to Paris; then he returned to the room, followed by the landlord, who, in a second, covered the table with all that was wanted to make a good meal, and withdrew discreetly, leaving his guests to attack the dishes placed before them.

The journey was continued without any incident worthy of note.

The prisoner's conversation with his keeper had been decisive; the latter was too well acquainted with the character of the man with whom he had to deal to attempt to revert to a subject which had been so distinctly disposed of on the first occasion.

At the period when our history takes place, France was not as now intersected by magnificent roads, and the shortest journey demanded an enormous expenditure of time; the coaches, heavy vehicles badly built and worse horsed, had great difficulty in resisting the numerous joltings and the ruts in which they were for the greater portion of the time buried up to the axletree, and hence, in spite of the speed employed, seventeen days elapsed ere the prisoner and his escort arrived at Toulon.

This town was even at that early period one of the principal military ports of France, and the Count felt an indescribable pang at heart when he entered it.

It was in this town that his naval career had begun, here for the first time he had set foot aboard a vessel with the rank of midshipman, and had undergone the preparatory trials of that rude naval profession, in which, in spite of his youth, he soon attained a great reputation and almost celebrity.

The coach stopped in the Haymarket, in front of the "Cross of Malta," probably the oldest inn in France, for it is still in existence, although it has undergone many indispensable changes both internally and externally.

So soon as he had installed his prisoner comfortably in the Inn, François Bouillot went out.

If he placed a sentry before the Count's door, it was rather in obedience to his duty, than through any fear of escape, for he had not even taken the trouble to lock the door, so convinced was he beforehand that unfortunately his prisoner would not attempt to pass out of it.

He remained away for about two hours.

"You have been absent a long time," the Count remarked on his return.

"I had some important business to settle," he replied.

The Count, without adding a word, resumed his walk up and down the room which Bouillot's return had interrupted.

There was a momentary silence, Bouillot was evidently embarrassed, he went about the room, pretending to arrange sundry articles of furniture, and disarranging everything; at last seeing that the Count obstinately remained silent and would not perceive that he was in the room, he placed himself in front of him so as to bar his passage, and looked at him intently as he whispered with a stress on the words.

"You do not ask where I have been."

"What is the use?" the Count replied carelessly; "About your own business, of course."

"No, my lord, about yours."

"Ah!" he said.

"Yes, the *Seamew* awaits you."

The Count smiled and slightly shrugged his shoulders.

"Ah, ah, you are still thinking of that; I believed, my dear Bouillot, that it was arranged between us that we should not return to this subject. That was the reason, then, that you lengthened our journey,

by making us pass through Toulon, at which I felt surprised. I could not account for the strange itinerary you were following."

"My lord," he muttered, clasping his hands imploringly.

"Come, you are mad, my dear Bouillot, you ought to know by this time, though, that when I have formed a resolution, good or bad, I never alter it; so no more of this, I beg, it would be quite useless. I pledge you my word as a gentleman."

The old servant uttered a groan that resembled a death rattle.

"Your will be done, my lord," he stammered. "When do we start for Antibes?"

"At once, if you wish it."

"Very good, the sooner the better."

After bowing, the exempt left the room to make all preparations for departure.

As we see, the parts were completely introverted, it was the prisoner who gave orders to his keeper.

One hour later, in fact, the Count quitted Toulon. All along the road the two men, constantly companions, and eating and drinking together, conversed about indifferent matters. Bouillot had at last recognized the fact that it was useless to make any further effort to induce the Count to escape; still he had not given up his scheme, but merely deferred it till a more distant period, reckoning as an ally the annoyance of a prolonged detention, and an inactive and useless life upon an organization so impetuous as that of the prisoner.

So soon as he arrived at Antibes, by the express command of the Count, who seemed to take a certain pleasure in tormenting him, he set out in search of some boat to carry them across to Sainte Marguerite.

His search was neither long nor difficult; as bearer of a Cardinal's order, he laid an embargo on the first fishing boat he came across, and embarked aboard it with all his people.

On leaving the mainland, the Count turned, and a smile of peculiar meaning played round his lips.

Bouillot, deceived by this smile, whose secret intention he did not penetrate, bent down to the Count's ear.

"If you like, there is still time," he whispered.

The Count looked at him, shrugged his shoulders, and without replying, sat down in the stern of the boat.

"Push off," Bouillot then shouted to the master.

The latter seized his boathook, and they were soon under weigh.

The Lerins islands form a group composed of several rocks, and two islands surrounded by shoals; the first known as Isle Sainte Marguerite, the second as Saint Honorat.

At the period of our narration only the first was fortified; the other, inhabited by a few fishermen, merely contained the still considerable ruins of the monastery founded by Saint Honorat circa the year 400.

The Sainte Marguerite island was uninhabited, flat, and only offering along its entire coast, one very unsafe creek for vessels. Although it is extremely fertile, and pomegranates, orange and fig trees, grow there in the open air, no one had thought of taking up his abode there, and we are not aware whether a change has since taken place.

A very important fortress, which, at a later date, attained a melancholy reputation as a state prison, was erected on the island, the greater portion of which it occupied.

This fort was composed of three towers, connected together by terraces, which time had covered with a yellowish moss, while a wide deep moat surrounded the walls.

A few years prior to the beginning of our story, in 1635, the Spaniards had seized it by surprise.

The Cardinal, in order to prevent the repetition of such a calamity, had judged it advisable to protect the fort from a *coup de main*, by placing there a garrison of fifty picked soldiers, commanded

by a major performing the duties of governor. He was an old officer of fortune, whom this post served as a retreat, and who, far from the cares of the world, led a perfect canonical life, thanks to a tacit understanding with the smugglers, who alone cast anchor in these parts.

The officer who commanded the fort at this moment was an old gentleman, tall, thin, and wizened, with harsh features, who had had a leg and arm cut off. His name was Monsieur de l'Oursière; he was constantly scolding and abusing his subordinates, and the day when he left the Crown regiment, in which he held the rank of major, was kept as a holiday by the whole regiment, officers and men; so cordially was the worthy man detested.

Cardinal de Richelieu was a good judge of men; in selecting Major de l'Oursière to make him governor of Sainte Marguerite, and metamorphose him into a gaoler, he had found the exact post which suited his quarrelsome temper, and his cruel instincts.

It was on this amiable personage that the Count de Barmont would have to be dependant for doubtless a considerable period; for, if the Cardinal Minister easily shut the gate of a state prison on a gentleman, to make up for it, he was never in a hurry to open it again, and a prisoner, unless something extraordinary occurred, was almost safe to die forgotten in his dungeon, except when his Eminence had a whim to have his head cut off in broad daylight.

After a number of countersigns had been exchanged with a profuseness of caution which bore witness to the good guard and strict discipline maintained by the governor, the prisoner and his escort were at length introduced into the fortress, and admitted to the Major's presence.

The Major was just finishing his breakfast, when a Cardinal's messenger was announced to him: he buttoned his uniform, put on his sword and hat, and ordered the messenger to be shown in.

François Bouillot entered, followed by the Count, bowed, and presented the order of which he was the bearer.

The governor took it, and read it through; then he turned to the Count, who was standing motionless a few paces in the rear, made him a slight bow, and addressed him in a dry voice, and with a rough accent.

"Your servant, sir," he said to him: "are you the Count de Barmont, whose name is written on this paper?"

"Yes, sir," the Count answered, bowing in his turn.

"I am sorry, sir, truly sorry," the Major resumed; "but I have strict orders with reference to you, and a soldier only knows his duty; still, believe me, sir, hum, hum, that I shall try to reconcile my natural humanity with the rigour that is recommended to me, hum, hum, I know how gentlemen ought to behave to each other, sir; be assured of that."

And the governor, doubtless satisfied at the speech he had just uttered, smiled, and drew himself gracefully up.

The Count bowed, but made no answer.

"You shall be conducted to your apartment at once, sir," the Major went on; "hum, hum! I wish it was handsomer, but I did not expect you; hum, hum, and you know how things are – hum, hum, we will manage to lodge you more comfortably hereafter; la Berloque," he added, turning to a soldier standing near the door, "conduct this gentleman, hum, hum, to room No. 8, in the second turret; hum, hum, I believe it is the most habitable one; your servant, sir, your servant, hum, hum!"

And after having thus unceremoniously dismissed the Count, the Major went into another room.

M. de Barmont, accompanied by Bouillot and the guards, who had brought him, followed the soldier.

The latter led them through several passages, and up various stairs, and then stopped before a door, garnished with formidable bolts.

"It is here," he said.

The Count then turned to Bouillot, and affectionately offered him his hand.

"Farewell, my old friend," he said to him in a gentle but firm voice, while a vague smile played round his lips.

"Farewell, till we meet again," Bouillot said, with a stress on the words. Then he took leave of him, and withdrew, with his eyes full of tears.

The door closed with a mournful sound on the prisoner.

"Oh!" the old servant muttered, as he pensively went down the turret stairs, "Woe to those who venture to oppose the Count, if ever he leaves his prison again! And he shall do so, I swear it, even if I must risk my life in securing his escape."

CHAPTER V

A BACKWARD GLANCE

The family of the Count de Barmont Senectaire was one of the most ancient and noble in Languedoc; their origin went back to an antiquity so remote, that we may declare without fear of contradiction that it was lost in the mist of ages.

A Barmont Senectaire fought at Bouvines by the side of Philip Augustus.

The chronicle of Joinville mentions a Barmont Senectaire, knight banneret, who died of the plague at Tunis, in 1270, during the second crusade of King Louis IX.

Francis I. on the evening of the battle of Marignano, gave the rank of Count on the battlefield itself to Euguerrand de Barmont Senectaire, captain of one hundred men at arms, to reward him for his grand conduct and the sturdy blows he had seen him deal during the whole period of that combat of giants.

Few noble families have such splendid title deeds among their archives.

The Counts de Barmont were always military nobles, and they gave France several celebrated generals.

But in the course of time, the power and fortune of this family gradually diminished: during the reign of Henri III. it was reduced to a condition bordering on poverty. Still, justly proud of a stainless past, they continued to carry their heads high in the province, and if the Count de Barmont endured hard privations in order to support his name worthily, nothing of this was visible externally, and everybody was ignorant of the fact.

The Count had attached himself to the fortunes of the King of Navarre as much through the hope of regaining a position through the war, as through admiration of this prince, whose genius he had probably divined. A brave soldier, but young, impetuous, and handsome, the Count had several affairs of gallantry. One among others with a lady of the Town of Cahors, affianced to a very rich Spanish noble, whom he succeeded in carrying off on the very day before that appointed for the marriage. The Spaniard, who was very strict in matters affecting his honour, considered this joke in bad taste, and demanded satisfaction of the Count; the latter gave him two sword thrusts, and left him dead on the ground. This affair attracted great attention, and gained the Count much honor among people of refinement; but the Spaniard, contrary to expectation, recovered from his wounds. The two gentlemen fought again, and this time the Count so ill treated his adversary that the latter was constrained to give up all thoughts of a new meeting. This adventure disgusted the Count with gallantry, not that he personally feared the results of the hatred which the Duke of Peñaflor had sworn against him, for he never heard of him again, but because his conscience reproached him with having, for the satisfaction of a caprice which passed away so soon as it was satisfied, destroyed the happiness of an honourable man, and he felt remorse for his conduct in the affair.

After bravely fighting by the side of the King during all his wars, the Count finally retired to his estates, about the year 1610, after the death of that Prince, disgusted with the Court, and feeling the necessity of repose after such an amount of fatigue.

Here, four or five years later, wearied with the solitude in which he lived, and, perhaps, in the hope of expelling from his mind a troublesome recollection, which, in spite of the time that had elapsed, did not cease to torture him, the Count resolved to marry, and selected for his wife a young lady belonging to one of the best families in the province – charming and gentle, but as poor as himself; this circumstance was far from bringing ease into the family, whose position daily became more difficult.

The union, however, was a happy one; in 1616 the Countess was delivered of a son, who at once became the joy of the poor household.

This son was Count Ludovic, whose story we have undertaken to tell.

In spite of his fondness for the boy, the Count, however, brought him up strictly, wishing to make of him a rude, brave, and loyal gentleman, like himself.

Young Ludovic felt at an early hour, on discovering what misery was concealed behind the apparent splendour of his family, the necessity of creating for himself an independent position, which would allow him not only to be no longer a burden to parents whom he loved, and who sacrificed to him the greater portion of their income, but to restore also the eclipsed lustre of the name he bore.

Contrary to the custom followed by his ancestors, who had all served the king or his armies, his tastes led him to the navy.

Owing to the assiduous care of an old and worthy priest, who had become his tutor through attachment to his family, he had received a solid education, by which he had profited; accounts of voyages, which constituted his principal reading, inflamed his imagination; all his thoughts were turned to America, where, according to the statements of sailors, gold abounded, and he had but one desire – to land himself in this mysterious country, and take his part of the rich crop which everybody garnered there.

His father, and his mother even more, for a long time resisted his entreaties. The old man, who had fought during so many years, could not understand why his son should not do the same, or prefer the navy to a commission in the army. The Countess, in her heart, did not wish to see her son either soldier or sailor, for both professions terrified her; she feared for her son the unknown perils of distant excursions, and her tenderness was alarmed by the thought of what might be an eternal separation.

Still, something must be done, and as the young man obstinately adhered to his resolution, his parents were compelled to yield and consent to what he desired, whatever might be the future consequences of this determination.

The Count still had some old friends at Court, among them being the Duke de Bellegarde, who stood on terms of great intimacy with King Louis XIII., surnamed the "*Just*" during his lifetime, because he was born under the sign of Libra.

Monsieur de Barmont had also been connected at an earlier date with the Duke d'Epernon, created Admiral of France in 1587; but he had a repugnance in applying to him, owing to the rumours that were spread at the time of the assassination of Henri IV. Still, in a case so urgent as the present one, the Count comprehended that for the sake of his son he must silence his private feelings, and at the same time as he addressed a letter to the Duke de Bellegarde, he sent another to Epernon, who at this period was Governor of Guyenne.

The double answer the Count expected was not long deferred; M. de Barmont's two old friends had not forgotten him, and hastened to employ their credit on his behalf.

The Duke d'Epernon especially, better situated through his title of Admiral to be useful to the young man, wrote that he would gladly undertake the duty of pushing him on in the world.

This took place at the beginning of 1631, when Ludovic de Barmont had reached his sixteenth year.

Being very tall, with a proud and haughty air, and endowed with rare vigour and great agility, the young man seemed older than he in reality was. It was with the liveliest joy that he learned how his wishes had been fulfilled, and that nothing prevented him from embracing a maritime career.

The Duke d'Epernon's letter requested the Count de Barmont to send his son as speedily as possible to Bordeaux, so that he might at once place him aboard a man-of-war, to commence his apprenticeship.

Two days after the receipt of this letter the young man tore himself with difficulty from the embraces of his mother, bade his father a respectful farewell, and took the road to Bordeaux, mounted on a good horse, and followed by a confidential valet.

The navy had for a long time been neglected in France; and left during the middle ages in the hands of private persons, as the government, following the example of the other continental powers,

did not deign to try and secure a respectable position on the seas, much less a supremacy; thus we see during the reign of Francis I., who was, however, one of the warlike Kings of France, Ango, a ship broker of Dieppe, from whom the Portuguese had taken a vessel during a profound peace, authorized by the King, who was unable to procure him justice, to equip a fleet at his own expense. With this fleet Ango, we may remark incidentally, blockaded the port of Lisbon, and did not cease hostilities until he had forced the Portuguese to send to France ambassadors humbly to ask peace of the King.

The discovery of the New World, however, and the no less important one of the Cape of Good Hope, by giving navigation a greater activity and a more extended sphere, at the same time as they widened the limits of commerce, caused the necessity to be felt of creating a navy, intended to protect merchant vessels against the attacks of corsairs.

It was not till the reign of Louis XIII. that the idea of creating a navy began to be carried into execution. Cardinal de Richelieu, whose vast genius embraced everything, and whom the English fleets had caused several times to tremble during the long and wearying siege of Rochelle, passed several decrees relating to the navy, and founded a school of navigation, intended to educate those young gentlemen who desired to serve the King aboard his vessels.

It is to this great minister, then, that France is indebted for the first thought of a navy; this navy was destined to contend against the Spanish and Dutch fleets, and during the reign of Louis XIV., to acquire so great an importance, and momentarily hold in check the power of England.

It was this school of navigation created by Richelieu that the Viscount de Barmont entered, thanks to the influence of the Duke d'Epernon.

The old gentleman strictly kept the pledge he had given his former comrade in arms; he did not cease to protect the young man, which, however, was an easy task, for the latter displayed an extraordinary aptitude, and a talent very rare at that date in the profession he had embraced.

Hence, in 1641, he was already a captain in the navy, and had the command of a twenty-six gun frigate.

Unfortunately, neither the old Count de Barmont nor his wife was able to enjoy the success of their son or the new era opening for their house; they both died a few days apart from each other, leaving the young man an orphan at the age of two-and-twenty.

As a pious son, Ludovic, who really loved his parents, lamented and regretted them, especially his mother, who had always been so kind and tender to him; but, as he had been accustomed for so many years to live alone during his long voyages, and only to trust to himself, he did not feel the loss so painfully as he would have done had he never left the paternal roof.

Henceforth the sole representative of his house, he regarded life more seriously than he had hitherto done, and redoubled his efforts to restore to his name its almost eclipsed lustre, which, thanks to his exertions, was beginning to shine again with renewed brilliancy.

The Duke d'Epernon still lived, but a forgotten relic of an almost entirely departed generation – a sickly octogenarian, who had quarrelled long ago with Cardinal de Richelieu, his influence was null, and he could do nothing for the man he had so warmly protected a few years previously.

But the Count did not allow this to prey on his mind; the naval service was not envied by the nobility, good officers were rare, and he believed that if he cautiously avoided mixing himself up in any political intrigue, he might have a brilliant career.

An accident, impossible to foresee, was fated to destroy all his ambitious plans, and ruin his career forever.

This is how the affair occurred: – The Count de Barmont, at the time commanding the *Erigone*, twenty-six gun frigate, after a lengthened cruise in the Algerian waters to protect French merchant vessels against the Barbary pirates, steered for the states of Gibraltar, in order to reach the Atlantic, and return to Brest, whither he had orders to proceed at the end of his cruise; but just as he was about to pass through the Straits, he was caught by a squall, and after extraordinary efforts to continue his course, which almost cast him on to the coast of Africa, owing to the strength of the wind and the

rough, chopping sea, he was obliged to stand off and on for several hours, and finally take refuge in the port of Algeciras, which was to windward of him, on the Spanish coast.

So soon as he had anchored, and made all snug, the commandant, who knew from experience that two or three days would elapse ere the wind veered, and allowed him to pass the Straits, ordered his boat, and went ashore.

Although the town of Algeciras is very old, it is very small, badly built, and scantily populated; at this period, more especially, it only formed, as it were, a poor market town. It was not till after the English had seized Gibraltar, situated on the other side of the bay, that the Spaniards comprehended the importance of Algeciras to them, and have converted it into a regular port.

The Captain had no other motive for landing at Algeciras, than the restlessness natural to sailors, which impels them to leave their vessel as soon as they have cast anchor.

Commercial relations were not established at that time, as they now are. The government had not yet fallen into the custom of sending to foreign ports residents ordered to watch over their countrymen, and protect their transactions – in a word, consulates had not yet been created: only those ships of war, which accident might lead to any port, now and then undertook to procure justice for those of their countrymen, whose interests had been encroached on.

After landing, and giving orders to his coxswain to come and fetch him at sunset, the Captain, merely followed by a sailor, of the name of Michael, to whom he was greatly attached, and who accompanied him everywhere, turned into the winding streets of Algeciras, curiously examining everything that offered itself to view.

This Michael, to whom we shall have several occasions to refer, was a tall fellow, with an intelligent face, about thirty years of age, and who had vowed an eternal devotion to his captain since the day when the latter had risked his life in saving his, by jumping into a boat during a terrible storm four years before, to help him when he had fallen into the sea while going up the shrouds to ease the mainsail.

Since that day Michael had never left the Count, and had always contrived to sail with him. Born in the vicinity of Pau, the country of Henri IV., he was like the king, his fellow countryman, gay, mocking, and even sceptical. An excellent sailor, endowed with tried bravery, and far from ordinary vigour, Michael offered in his person the perfect type of the Béarnaise Basque, a strong and rough, though loyal and faithful race.

Only one individual shared in Michael's heart the unbounded friendship he felt for his chief. This privileged being was a Breton sailor, gloomy and taciturn, who formed a complete antithesis to him, and whom, owing to his slowness, the crew had favoured with the characteristic name of Bowline, which he had accepted, and was so accustomed to answer to it, that he had almost forgotten the name he previously bore.

The service the Count had done Michael, the latter had rendered to Bowline: hence he was attached to the Breton through this very service, and while mocking and teasing him from morning till night, he had a sincere friendship for him.

The Breton understood Michael, and so far as his reserved and slightly demonstrative nature permitted, he testified on every occasion his gratitude to the Basque, by letting himself be completely directed and governed by him in all the actions of his life, without ever attempting to revolt against the frequent exorbitant demands of his mentor.

If we have dwelt so long on the character of these two men, it is because they are destined in the course of this work to play an important part; and the reader must be acquainted with them, in order to understand the facts we shall have to record.

The Count and his sailor continued to advance along the streets, the one reflecting and amusing himself the other remaining, through respect, a few paces in the rear, and desperately smoking a pipe, whose stem was so short that the bowl almost touched his lips.

While walking thus straight before them, the promenaders soon reached the end of the town, and turned into a lane bordered by aloes, which led, with a rather steep incline, to the top of a hill, whence could be enjoyed the entire panorama of the bay of Algeciras, which, we may remark in a parenthesis, is the finest in the world.

It was about two in the afternoon, the hottest moment of the day. The sun profusely poured down its torrid beams, which made the pebbles in the road sparkle like diamonds.

Hence everybody had gone within doors to enjoy the siesta, so that, since landing, the two sailors had not met a living creature; and if the Arabian Nights, which were not translated till a century later, had been known at the time, the Count, without any great effort of the imagination, might have believed himself transported to that city where all the inhabitants had been sent to sleep by a wicked impostor, so complete was the silence around him, while the landscape had the aspect of a desert. To complete the illusion, the breeze had fallen, there was not a breath of air, and the vast expanse of water stretched out at their feet was as motionless as if composed of ice.

The Count stopped, pensively gazing with an absent eye at his frigate, which at this distance was scarce as large as a skiff.

Michael smoked more than ever, and admired the country with straddling legs, and his arm behind his back, in that position so liked by sailors.

"Hilloh!" he said suddenly.

"What is the matter with you?" the Count asked him, as he turned round.

"Nothing the matter with me, Captain," he replied, "I am only looking at a lady who is coming up here at a gallop. What a fancy to go at that pace in such a heat as this."

"Where is she?" asked the Count.

"Why, there, Captain," he said, stretching out his hand to larboard.

The Count turned his eyes in the direction which Michael indicated to him.

"Why, that horse has bolted," he exclaimed, a moment later.

"Do you think so, Captain?" the sailor remarked, calmly.

"Zounds! I am certain of it. Look, now that she is nearer to us. The rider is clinging despairingly to the mane. The unhappy girl is lost!"

"Very possibly," Michael said, philosophically.

"Quick, quick, my lad!" the Captain shouted, as he rushed to the side where the horse was coming up. "We must save the lady, even if we perish!"

The sailor made no answer; he merely took the precaution of withdrawing his pipe from his mouth and placing it in his pocket, and then he set out at a run behind his captain.

The horse came on like a whirlwind. It was a barb of the purest Arab race, with a small head, and legs fine as spindles. It bounded furiously with all four legs on the narrow path it was following, with eyes full of flashes, and apparently snorting fire through its dilated nostrils. The lady on its back, half reclining on its neck, had seized its long mane with both hands, and, half insane with terror, as she felt herself lost, she uttered stifled cries at intervals.

Very far in the rear, several horsemen, who formed almost imperceptible dots on the horizon, were coming up at full speed.

The track on which the horse was engaged, was narrow and rocky, and led to a precipice of frightful depth, toward which the animal was dashing with a headlong speed.

A man must either be mad, or endowed with a lion's courage, to try and save this unhappy woman under such conditions, when he had ninety-nine chances in a hundred of being crushed, without succeeding in rescuing her from death.

The two sailors, however, made no reflections of this nature, and without hesitation resolved to make a supreme effort. They stood facing each other on either side of the track, and waited without exchanging a word. They understood one another.

Two or three minutes elapsed, and then the horse passed like a tornado; but with the speed of thought the two men dashed forward, seized it by the bridle, and, hanging their whole weight on it, allowed themselves to be dragged onward by the furious animal.

There was for a moment a terrible struggle between intelligence and brute strength. At length the brute was conquered. The horse stumbled, and fell panting on the ground.

At the moment of its fall, the Count removed in his arms, the lady so miraculously saved, and he bore her to the side of the road, where he respectfully laid her down.

Terror had certainly deprived her of consciousness.

The Count guessing that the horsemen coming up, were relations or friends of her to whom he had just rendered so great a service, repaired the disorder in his clothes and awaited their arrival, while gazing admiringly at the young lady lying at his feet.

She was a charming young creature, scarce seventeen years of age, with a delicate waist, and marked and adorably beautiful features; her long black silky hair had escaped from the comb that confined it and fell in perfumed curls over her face, on which a slight flush presaged a speedy return to life.

The young lady's dress, which was very rich and remarkably elegant, would have led to the supposition that she was of high rank, had not the stamp of aristocracy, spread over her entire person, removed all doubts on that score.

Michael, with his characteristic coolness which nothing ever upset, had remained by the side of the horse which, calmed by the fall and trembling in all its limbs, had allowed itself to be raised without offering the slightest resistance; the Basque after removing the saddle, had plucked a wisp of grass, and began rubbing the horse down, while admiring it, and muttering every now and then.

"I don't care, it's a noble and beautiful animal! It would have been a pity had it rolled over that frightful precipice; I am glad it is saved."

The worthy sailor did not think the least bit in the world of the young lady, for his entire interest was concentrated on the horse.

When he had finished rubbing down, he put the saddle and bridle on again and led the horse up to the Count.

"There," he said with an air of satisfaction, "now the horse is calm; poor creature, a child could guide it with a thread."

In the meanwhile the horsemen rapidly approached, and soon came up to the two French sailors.

CHAPTER VI

LOVE AT FIRST SIGHT

These horsemen were four in number. Two of them appeared to be persons of importance, the other two were domestics.

On coming within a few steps of the Count, the first two dismounted, threw their bridles to the footman and advanced, hat in hand, towards the gentleman, whom they saluted with exquisite politeness.

The Count courteously returned their greeting, while taking a side-glance at them.

The first was a man of about sixty; he was tall, his demeanour was graceful and his face appeared handsome at the first glance, for the expression was imposing, although gentle and even kind. Still, on examining it with greater attention, it was possible to see from the gloomy fire of his glance, which seemed at times to emit magnetic flashes, that this gentleness was merely a mask intended to deceive the vulgar; his projecting cheek bones, his wide retiring forehead, his nose bent like a bird's beak and his square chin denoted a cold cruelty blended with a strong dose of obstinacy and pride.

This man wore a handsome hunting dress covered with lace, and a heavy gold chain, called a *fanfaronne*, was passed several times round his ostrich plumed hat.

This fanfaronne had been brought into fashion by the adventurers who returned from New Spain; and though very ridiculous, it had been enthusiastically adopted by the haughty Castilians.

This gentleman's companion, much younger than he, but dressed quite as richly, had one of those faces whose features at the first glance appear so commonplace and insignificant, that you do not take the trouble of looking at them, and an observer might pass close by without seeing them, but his small grey eyes sparkling with cleverness, half hidden under bushy eyebrows, and the curl of his thin sarcastic lip, would have completely contradicted any physiognomist, who might take this person for a man of common intellect and ordinary capacity.

The elder of the two riders bowed a second time.

"Sir," he said, "I am the Duc de Peñaflor; the person whose life you have saved by running such a risk of losing your own, is my daughter, Doña Clara de Peñaflor."

As the Count came from Languedoc, he spoke Spanish as purely as his mother tongue.

"I am delighted, sir," he replied with a graceful bow, "at having served as the instrument of providence to preserve a child for her father."

"I think," the second rider observed, "that it would be as well to offer Doña Clara some succour; my dear cousin seems to be seriously indisposed."

"It is only emotion," the young man replied; "that caused this fainting fit, which, if I am not mistaken, is beginning to wear off."

"Yes indeed," said the Duke, "I think I saw her make a slight movement, it will be better not to trouble her, but let her regain her senses quietly; in that way, we shall avoid a shock whose results are sometimes very dangerous to delicate and nervous organisations, like that of my dear child."

All this was spoken with a cold, dry, steady voice, very different to what a father ought to have employed, whose daughter had just miraculously escaped death.

The young officer did not know what to think of his real or feigned indifference.

It was only Spanish hauteur. The Duke loved his daughter as much as his proud and ambitious nature allowed him to do, but he would have been ashamed to let it be seen, especially by a stranger.

"Sir," the Duke resumed a moment later, as he stepped aside to display the gentlemen who accompanied him, "I have the honour of presenting to you my cousin and friend, Count Don Stenio de Bejar y Sousa."

The two gentlemen bowed to each other.

The Count had no motive to maintain an incognito, and saw that the moment had arrived to make himself known.

"Gentlemen," he said, "I am Count Ludovic de Barmont Senectaire, Captain in the Navy, and commanding the French frigate the *Erigone*, now anchored in Algeciras Bay."

On hearing the Count's name pronounced, the Duke's face turned frightfully pale; he frowned till his eyebrows joined, and he gave him a strangely meaning glance.

But this emotion did not last longer than a flash: by a violent effort of the will the Spaniard thrust back to the bottom of his heart, the feelings that agitated him; his previous impassiveness returned to his face, and he bowed with a smile.

The ice was broken between the three gentlemen, for they saw they were equals; their manner at once changed, and they became as affable as they had at first been stiff and reserved.

The Duke was the first to renew the conversation in the most friendly voice.

"You are doubtless taking advantage of the truce made a short time back, between our two nations, my lord, to visit our country?"

"Pardon me, my lord Duke, I was not aware that hostilities had ceased between our two armies. I have been at sea for a long time, and without news of France; chance alone brought me to this coast a few hours ago, and I sought shelter in Algeciras Bay, to await a change of wind to pass the Straits."

"I bless the accident, Count, since I owe to it my daughter's safety."

Doña Clara had opened her eyes, and, though still very weak, she was beginning to account for the position in which she found herself.

"Oh," she said, in a soft and humorous voice, and with an inward shudder, "had it not been for that gentleman, I should be dead!" and she attempted to smile, while fixing on the young man her large eyes full of tears, with an expressive gratitude it is impossible to describe.

"How do you feel, my daughter?" the Duke asked. "I am quite well, now, I thank you, papa," she replied; "when I felt that Moreno no longer obeyed the bit, and was running away, I believed myself lost, and terror caused me to faint; but where is my poor Moreno?" she added a moment after, "Has any misfortune happened to him?"

"Reassure yourself, señorita," the Count replied with a smile, and pointing to the horse, "here he is, all right, and quite calmed; if you like you can ride back on him without the slightest apprehension."

"I certainly will mount my good Moreno," she said, "I bear him no ill will for his prank, although it nearly cost me dear."

"My lord," the Duke then said, "I venture to hope that we shall not part thus, and that you will deign to accept the cordial hospitality which I offer you at my castle."

"My time is not my own, unfortunately, my lord Duke, and duty demands my immediate presence on board. Be assured I deeply regret my inability to accept your kind offer."

"Do you then expect to set sail so soon?"

"No, sir; on the contrary, I hope," he replied, laying a certain stress on the words, "to remain here some time longer."

"In that case," the Duke remarked with a smile, "I do not consider myself beaten. I am certain we shall meet again soon, and become more intimate acquaintances."

"That is my most eager desire, sir," the young man said, taking a side glance at Doña Clara, who hung her head with a blush.

The Count then took leave, and proceeded in the direction of Algeciras, while the horsemen slowly retired in exactly the opposite direction.

The Captain walked on very thoughtfully, reflecting on the singular adventure of which he had so suddenly been the hero; recalling the slightest details, and admiring in memory the beauty of the young lady, whose life he had been so fortunate as to save.

Being constantly absorbed by the thousand claims of his rude profession, and nearly always at sea, the Count, though almost twenty-five years of age, had never yet loved; he had not even thought

about it; the few women he had hitherto met had produced no effect on his heart, his mind had always remained free in their presence, and no serious engagement had as yet disturbed its tranquillity. Hence it was with a certain terror mingled with astonishment, that while reflecting on the meeting which had suddenly interrupted his quiet walk, he perceived that the beauty of Doña Clara and her gentle voice had left a powerful impression on his mind, that her image was ever present, and that his memory with implacable fidelity ever recalled even its apparently most indifferent details, the short interview he had had with her.

"Come, come," he said, shaking his head several times as if to drive away a troublesome thought; "I am mad."

"Well, Captain," said Michael, who took advantage of this exclamation, to give a free course to the reflections which he burned to express aloud, "I don't care, but you must confess it was very lucky all the same for that young lady, that we were there at the very nick of time."

"Very lucky, indeed, Michael," the Count replied, delighted at this diversion; "had we not been there the unhappy young lady would have been lost."

"That is true, and hopelessly so; poor little thing."

"What a frightful fate! So young, and so lovely."

"I allow that she is well built, although I fancy her lines are a little too fine, and she is a trifle too pale." The Count smiled, but made no reply to the sailor's rather venturesome opinion.

The latter, feeling himself encouraged, went on —

"Will you allow me to give you a bit of advice, Captain?"

"What is it, my lad? Speak without fear."

"As for fear, deuce take me if I feel that, but I should not like to pain you."

"Pain me, about what?"

"Well, all the worse, I must out with it. When you mentioned your name, Captain, to the old Duke —"

"Well, what happened?"

"On hearing it pronounced, he suddenly turned as pale as a corpse; he frowned upon you so terrible a look that I fancied for a moment that he wished to assassinate you; don't you consider that funny, Captain?"

"What you say is impossible; you are mistaken."

"You did not notice it, because you had your head down, but I was looking at him without seeming to do so, and am quite certain about what I say."

"But reflect, Michael, I do not know this nobleman, I never saw him before today; how can he possibly feel hatred for me; you are rambling, my good fellow."

"Not at all, Captain, I am certain of what I state; whether you know him or not is no business of mine, but as for him, I will wager that he knows you, and intimately too; the impression you produced on him was too strong for it to be otherwise."

"I will admit, if you like, that he knows me, but one thing I can certify, that I never offended him."

"That is a point on which a man can never be sure, Captain; look you, I am a Basque, and have known the Spaniards for a long time; they are a strange people — proud as cocks, and rancorous as fiends; believe me, distrust them always; that can do no harm, and especially that old gentleman, who has a crafty face I do not like at all."

"All that has no common sense, Michael, and I am as mad as yourself in listening to you."

"Very well," the sailor said with a toss of the head, "we shall see hereafter whether I am mistaken."

The conversation ended here; still Michael's remarks occupied the Captain more than he would have liked to show, and he returned on board with a very thoughtful air. On the next morning at about ten o'clock an excellent pleasure yacht hailed the frigate.

This vessel contained the Duc de Peñafior, and his silent cousin, Count de Bejar y Sousa.

"On my faith, my dear Count," the Duke said, good-humouredly, after the first compliments, "you are going to find me very unceremonious, for I have come to carry you off."

"Carry me off?" the young man replied with a smile.

"On my word, yes. Just imagine, Count, my daughter insists on seeing you; she only speaks of you, and as she does pretty well what she pleases with me – a thing that will not surprise you greatly. She sent me to you to tell you that you must absolutely accompany me to the castle."

"So it is," Don Stenio said with a bow, "the Señorita Doña Clara insists on seeing you."

"Still – " the other objected.

"I will listen to nothing," the Duke remarked quickly, "you must make up your mind, my dear Count, you can only obey, for you are aware that ladies cannot be thwarted; so come, reassure yourself, though, I am not going to take you far, for my castle is scarce two leagues from here."

The Count, who in his heart, felt a lively desire to see Doña Clara again, did not allow himself to be pressed one bit more than was correct: then, after giving the necessary orders to his second in command, he accompanied the Duc de Peñafior, followed by Michael, who seemed to be the Captain's shade.

This was the way in which began a connection which was soon to be changed into love, and have, at a later date, such terrible consequences for the unhappy officer.

The Duke and his eternal cousin who never quitted him, overwhelmed the Count with protestations of friendship, granted him the most perfect liberty at the castle, and appeared not at all to notice the intelligence which was soon established between Doña Clara and the young man.

The latter, completely subjugated by the passion he experienced for the young lady, yielded to his love with the confident and unreflecting abandonment of all hearts that love for the first time.

Doña Clara, a simple girl, brought up with all the rigid strictness of Spanish manners, but an Andalusian from head to foot, had listened with a quiver of delight to the confession of this love which she had shared from the first moment.

Everybody, therefore, was happy at the castle; Michael alone formed an exception, with his stolid face, which was never unwrinkled; the more rapidly he saw matters tending to the conclusion the young people desired, the more gloomy and anxious he became.

In the meanwhile the frigate had left Algeciras for Cadiz.

The Duke, his daughter, and Don Stenio had made the passage on board; the Duc de Peñafior wanted to go to Seville, where he had large estates, hence he accepted with eager demonstrations of joy the proposal the Count made him, of conveying him on board his frigate to Cadiz, which is only some twenty leagues from Seville.

On the day after the frigate's arrival at Cadiz, the Captain put on his full uniform, went ashore, and proceeded to the Duke's palace.

The Duke, doubtless warned of his visit, received him with a smile on his lips, and with a most affectionate air.

Emboldened by this reception, the Count, overcoming his timidity, requested leave to marry Doña Clara.

The Duke received it favourably; said that he had expected this request, and that it satisfied all his wishes, since it caused the happiness of a daughter he loved.

"Still," he remarked to the Count, "although there was a truce between the two countries, a peace was not yet signed. Though, according to all appearance it would be soon carried out, for all that, he feared lest the news of this marriage might injure the Count's future, by rendering the Cardinal ill disposed toward him."

This reflection had several times offered itself to the young officer's mind; hence he hung his head, not daring to reply, because, unluckily, he had no valid reason to offer, that would remove the Duke's objections.

The latter came to his assistance by saying that there was a very simple way of arranging matters to the general satisfaction, and removing this apparently insurmountable difficulty.

The Count quivering with fear and pleasure, asked what this method was.

The Duke then explained to him that he meant a secret marriage. As long as the war lasted, silence would be maintained, but once peace was concluded and an ambassador sent to Paris, the marriage should be publicly announced to the Cardinal, who then would probably not feel offended by the union.

The young man had been too near seeing his dream of bliss eternally destroyed to raise the slightest objection to this proposition; secret or not, the marriage would not be the less valid and he cared little for the rest. Hence he consented to all the conditions imposed on him by the Duke, who insisted that the marriage might be effected in such a way as to keep him in ignorance of it, so that in the event of his Eminence attempting to turn the King against him, he might employ this pretended ignorance in foiling the ill will of those who might attempt to ruin him.

The Count did not exactly understand what the King of Spain had to do with his marriage; but as the Duke spoke with an air of conviction, and seemed to be greatly alarmed about the King's displeasure, he consented to everything.

Two days later at nightfall, the young couple were married at the Church of la Merced, by a priest, who consented for a heavy sum to lend his ministration to this illegal act.

Michael the Basque and Bowline served as witnesses of the captain, who, on the pressing recommendation of the Duke, was unwilling to let any of his officers into his secrets, while he was sure of the silence of the two sailors.

Immediately after the ceremony, the new bride was taken off on one side by her witnesses, while her husband withdrew greatly annoyed on the other, and went aboard the frigate.

When the Count on the next morning presented himself at the Duke's palace, the latter informed him that, in order to remove any pretext for malevolence, he had thought it advisable to send away his daughter for a while, and she had gone to stay with a relation residing at Grenada.

The Count did not allow his disappointment to be seen; he withdrew, pretending to accept as gospel the somewhat specious reasoning of the Duke.

Still, he was beginning to find the Duke's conduct towards him very extraordinary, and he resolved to clear up the doubts that arose in his mind.

Michael and Bowline were sent into the country to reconnoitre.

The Count learned from them, not without surprise, at the end of two days' researches that Doña Clara was not at Grenada, but merely at Puerto Santa Maria, a charming little town facing Cadiz on the opposite side of the road.

The Captain, so soon as he possessed the information for the success of the plan he meditated, managed by the intervention of Michael, who spoke Spanish like an Andalusian, to send a note to Doña Clara, and at nightfall, followed by his two faithful sailors, he landed at Santa Maria.

The house inhabited by the young lady was rather isolated; he set the two sailors on sentry to watch over her safety, and walked straight up to the house.

Doña Clara herself opened the door for him. The joy of the couple was immense, and the Count retired shortly before sunrise; at about ten o'clock, he went as usual to pay a visit to his father-in-law, in whose presence he continued to feign the most complete ignorance as to Doña Clara's abode, and was most kindly welcomed.

This state of things went on for nearly a month. One day the Count suddenly received information of the resumption of the hostilities between Spain and France; he was himself forced to quit Cadiz, but wished to have a final interview with the Duke, in order to ask him for a frank explanation of his conduct; in the event of this explanation not satisfying him, he was resolved to carry his wife off.

When he arrived at the Duke's palace, a confidential servant informed him that his master, suddenly summoned by the king, had started an hour previously to Madrid, without, to his great regret, having had time to take leave of him.

On hearing this, the Count had a presentiment of evil; he turned pale, but succeeded in overcoming his emotion, and calmly asked the valet whether his master had not left a letter for him; the servant answered in the affirmative and handed him a sealed note.

The Count broke the seal with a trembling hand and ran through the letter, but his emotion was so great on perusing the contents that he tottered, and had not the valet sprang forward to support him, he would have fallen to the ground.

"Ah!" he muttered, "Michael was right," and he crumpled the paper savagely.

But suddenly recovering himself, he overcame his grief and, after giving the valet several louis, hurried away.

"Poor young man!" the valet muttered with a sorrowful shake of the head and re-entered the palace, the gates of which he closed after him.

CHAPTER VII

DESPAIR

A few yards from the palace the Count met Michael, who was coming towards him.

"A boat, quick, quick, my good Michael," he shouted, "'tis a matter of life and death."

The sailor, terrified at the condition in which he saw his commandant, wished to ask him what the matter was, but the Count roughly imposed silence on him by repeating his order to procure a boat at once.

Michael bowed his head.

"Woe is me. I foresaw this," he muttered, with mingled grief and anger, and he ran off towards the port.

It is not a difficult task to find a boat at Cadiz, and Michael had only to choose; comprehending that the Count was in a hurry, he selected one pulled by ten oars.

The Count arrived at the same moment.

"Twenty louis for you and your crew if you are at Puerto in twenty minutes," he shouted, as he leaped into the boat, which was almost capsized by the violence of the shock.

The boat started, the sailors bent over their oars, and made her fly through the water.

The captain with his eyes obstinately fixed on Santa Maria, and striking his clenched fist on the boat's gunwale, in spite of the excessive speed at which it was going, incessantly repeated in a choking voice —

"Quicker, quicker, muchachos."

He passed like an arrow across the bows of the frigate, whose crew were preparing to weigh anchor. At length they reached Puerto.

"No one is to follow me," the captain cried, as he leaped ashore.

But Michael did not heed this order, and at the risk of what might happen to him, he set out in pursuit of the Count, whom he would not abandon in his present frightful condition.

It was fortunate he did so, for when he reached the house Doña Clara had inhabited, he saw the young man lying senseless on the ground.

The house was deserted, and Doña Clara had disappeared.

The sailor took his captain on his shoulders and conveyed him to the boat, where he laid him as comfortably as he could in the stem sheets.

"Where are we going?" the master asked.

"To the French frigate; and make haste," Michael replied.

When the boat was alongside the frigate, Michael paid the master the promised reward, and then aided by several of the crew, conveyed the captain to his cabin. As it was eminently necessary to keep the Count's secret, and avoid arousing suspicions, the sailor in his report to the first commandant, ascribed to a violent fall from a horse, the condition in which the captain was; then, after making a signal to Bowline to follow him, he returned to the cabin.

M. de Barmont was still as motionless as if he were dead; the chief surgeon of the frigate in vain bestowed the greatest care on him without succeeding in recalling life, which seemed to have fled forever.

"Send away your assistants; Bowline and myself will suffice," Michael said to the doctor, with a meaning glance.

The surgeon comprehended, and dismissed the mates. When the door had closed on them the sailor drew the doctor into a gun berth, and said to him, in so low a voice as to be scarce audible —

"Major, the Commandant has just experienced a great sorrow, which produced the terrible crisis he is suffering from at this moment. I confide this to you because a surgeon is like a confessor."

"All right, my lad," the surgeon replied; "the Captain's secret has been trusted to sure ears."

"I am convinced of that, Major; the officers and crew must suppose that the Captain has been thrown from his horse, you understand. I have already told the lieutenant so in making the report."

"Very good; I will corroborate your statement, my lad."

"Thanks, Major; now I have another thing to ask of you."

"Speak."

"You must obtain the lieutenant's leave that no one but Bowline and myself may wait on the Captain. Look you, Major, we are old sailors of his, he can say what he likes before us; and then, too, he will be glad to have us near him; will you get this leave from the lieutenant?"

"Yes, my lad; I know that you are a good fellow, sincerely attached to the Captain, and that he places entire confidence in you; hence, do not feel alarmed – I will settle that with the lieutenant, and you and your companion shall alone come in here with me so long as the Captain is ill."

"Thanks, Major; if an opportunity offers itself I will repay you this; on the faith of a Basque, you are a worthy man."

The surgeon began laughing.

"Let us return to our patient," he said, in order to cut short the conversation.

In spite of the intelligent care the doctor paid him the Count's fainting fit lasted the whole day.

"The shock was frightful," he said – "it was almost a congestion."

It was not till night, when the frigate had been for a long time at sea, and had left Cadiz roads far behind it, that a favourable crisis set in, and the Captain became slightly better.

"He is about to regain his senses," the doctor said.

In fact, a few convulsive movements agitated the Count's body, and he half-opened his eyes; but his glances were wild and absent; he looked all around him, as if trying to discover where he was, and why he was thus lying on his bed.

The three men, with their eyes fixed on him, anxiously watched this return to life, whose appearance was anything but reassuring to them.

The surgeon, more especially, seemed restless; big forehead was wrinkled, and his eyebrows met, through the effort of some internal emotion.

All at once the Count hurriedly sat up, and addressed Michael, who was standing by his side.

"Lieutenant," he said to him, in a quick, sharp voice, "let her fall off a point, or else the Spanish vessel will escape – why have you not beat to quarters, sir?"

The surgeon gave Michael a sign.

"Pardon, Commandant," the latter replied, humouring the sick man's fancy, "we have beaten to quarters, and the tops are all manned."

"Very good," he answered; then suddenly changing his ideas, he muttered – "She will come, she promised it me. But no, she will not come; she is dead to me henceforth – dead! dead!" he repeated, in a hollow voice, with different intonations; then he uttered a piercing cry – "Oh, heaven! How I suffer!" he exclaimed, bursting into sobs, while a torrent of tears inundated his face.

He buried his head in his hands, and fell back on his bed.

The two sailors anxiously examined the surgeon's impassive face, trying to read in his features what they had to hope or fear.

The latter uttered a deep sigh of relief, passed his hand over his damp forehead, and turning to Michael, said —

"Heaven be praised! He sheds tears – he is saved."

"Heaven be praised!" the sailors repeated, crossing themselves devoutly.

"Do you think he is mad, Major?" Michael asked, in a trembling voice.

"No, it is not madness, but delirium; he will soon fall asleep – do not leave him; when he awakes he will remember nothing. If he ask for drink give him the potion I have prepared, and which is on that table."

"Yes, Major."

"Now I am going to retire; if any unforeseen accident occur, warn me at once; but, in any case, I shall look in again tonight."

The surgeon left the cabin; his provisions were soon realised, M. de Barmont gradually fell into a calm and peaceful sleep.

The two sailors stood motionless by his bedside; no nurse could have watched a patient with greater care and more delicate attention than did these two men, whose exterior seemed so hard, but whose hearts were really so kind.

The whole night passed away thus; the surgeon had come in several times, but after a few minutes' examination he withdrew with an air of satisfaction, and laying a finger on his lips.

About morning, at the first sunbeam that entered the cabin, the Count made a slight movement, opened his eyes, and slightly turned his head.

"My good Michael, give me some drink," he said, in a feeble voice.

The sailor handed him a glass.

"I feel crushed," he muttered; "have I been ill?"

"Yes, a little," the sailor replied; "but now it is all over, thank heaven! You need only have patience."

"I feel the motion of the frigate – are we under weigh?"

"Yes, Commandant."

"And who gave the orders?"

"Yourself, last night."

"Ah!" he remarked, as he handed back the glass. His head fell heavily on the pillow again, and he was silent.

Still, he did not sleep; his eyes were opened, and gazed anxiously all around.

"I remember," he murmured, while two tears welled in his eyes; then he suddenly addressed Michael.

"It was you who picked me up and brought me aboard?"

"Yes, Captain, 'twas."

"Thanks! and yet it would have perhaps been better to leave me to die."

The sailor shrugged his shoulders disdainfully.

"That is a fine idea, strike me!" he grumbled.

"Oh, if you only knew," he said, sorrowfully.

"I knew all; did I not warn you of it the first day?"

"That is true; I ought to have believed you – but, alas! I already loved her."

"Zounds! I knew that, and she deserved it."

"Does she still love me?"

"Who can doubt it, poor dear creature?"

"You are a good man, Michael."

"I am just."

There was another silence.

At the expiration of a few minutes the Count renewed the conversation.

"Did you find the letter?" he asked. "Where is it?"

"Here," he said, as he handed it to him.

The Count eagerly clutched it.

"Have you read it?" he asked.

"For what purpose?" said Michael. "Zounds, it must be a tissue of lies and infamies! And I am not curious about reading such things."

"There, take it," said the Count.

"To tear it up?"

"No, to read it."

"What's the good?"

"You must know the contents of the letter – I order it."

"That is different – give it here."

He took the letter, opened, and ran through it.

"Read it aloud," said the Count.

"That is a pretty job you give me, Commandant. Still, as you wish it, I must obey you."

"I implore you, Michael."

"Enough, Captain."

And he began reading the strange missive aloud.

It was short and laconic, but on that very account it necessarily produced a more terrible effect, because every word was carefully chosen to go straight home.

The following was its tenor: —

MY LORD,

You have not married my daughter: I defrauded you by a false marriage. You shall never see her again – she is dead to you. For many years there has been an implacable hatred between your family and mine. I should not have gone to seek you, but Heaven itself brought you in my way. I understood that it was desired I should avenge myself, and I obeyed. I believe that I have succeeded in breaking your heart forever. The love you have for my daughter is sincere and deep. All the better, for you will suffer the more cruelly. Farewell, my lord. Believe me, you had better not try to find me, for, if you succeed, my vengeance will be even more terrible. My daughter will marry in a month the man she loves, and whom alone she has ever loved.

"Don Estevan de Sylva, Duc de Peñaflor."

When the sailor had finished reading he turned an enquiring glance to his chief. The latter shook his head several times, but made no other reply.

Michael handed back the letter, which the Captain at once concealed beneath his pillow.

"What do you intend to do?" the sailor asked him, a moment after.

"You shall know hereafter," the Count answered, in a hollow voice. "I could not form a determination now, for my head is still heavy, and I require to reflect."

Michael gave a nod of assent.

At this moment the doctor came in. He appeared delighted at seeing his patient in so good a state, and with a joyous rubbing of his hands, promised that he should leave his bed in a week at the latest.

In fact, the surgeon was not mistaken, for the Count rapidly recovered; ere long he was able to rise, and at the end of a few days, were it not for a cadaverous pallor spread over his face, and which he ever retained, his strength seemed to have entirely come back to him.

M. de Barmont steered his frigate up the Tagus, and anchored before Lisbon. So soon as the vessel was moored the Captain summoned the second in command to his cabin, and had a long conversation with him, after which he went ashore with Michael and Bowline.

The frigate remained under the command of the first lieutenant: the Count had abandoned it for ever.

This deed almost constituted a desertion; but M. de Barmont was resolved on returning to Cadiz at all hazards.

During the few days that had elapsed since his conference with Michael, the Count had reflected, as he promised the sailor.

The result of his reflections was, that Doña Clara had been deceived by the Duke like himself, and believed herself really married – indeed, the whole of the young lady's behaviour to him proved the fact. In desiring to insure his vengeance too thoroughly, the Duke had gone beyond his object:

Doña Clara loved him, he felt certain of that. She had only obeyed her father under the constraint of force.

This admitted, only one thing was left the Count to do; to return to Cadiz, collect information, find the Duke, and have a solemn explanation with him in his daughter's presence.

This plan drawn up in his mind, the young man immediately set, about carrying it out, leaving the command of his vessel to the lieutenant, at the risk of destroying his career and being pursued as a traitor, as the war was raging between France and Spain. He freighted a coaster; and, followed by his two sailors, to whom he had frankly explained his intention, but who would not leave him, he returned to Cadiz.

Thanks to the thorough knowledge of Spanish he possessed, the Count did not arouse any suspicions in that city, where it was easy for him to obtain the information he desired.

The Duke had really set out for Madrid. The Count at once proceeded to that city. A gentleman of the importance of the Duc de Peñafior, a grandee of Spain of the first class, a *caballero cubierto*, could not travel without leaving traces, especially when nothing led him to suspect that he was followed. Hence the Count had not the slightest difficulty in discovering the route he had taken, and he arrived at Madrid, persuaded that he should soon have with the Duke the explanation he so ardently desired.

But his hopes were foiled. The Duke, after being honored with a private audience by the King, had set out for Barcelona.

Fatality interfered, but the Count would not be baffled: he mounted his horse, crossed Spain, and arrived at Barcelona.

The Duke had embarked for Naples on the previous day.

This pursuit was assuming the proportions of an Odyssey: it seemed as if the Duke felt that he was being pursued.

It was not so, however. He was carrying out a mission with which his sovereign had entrusted him.

The Count made enquiries, and learnt that the Duc de Peñafior was accompanied by his daughter, and two sons.

Two days later, M. de Barmont was sailing to Naples, on board a smuggling vessel.

We will not enter into all the details of this obstinate pursuit, which lasted for several months.

We will confine ourselves to saying that the Count missed the Duke at Naples, as he had missed him at Madrid and Barcelona, and that he traversed the whole of Italy, and entered France, still in chase of his intangible enemy, who seemed to fly before him.

But during the interval, although the Count did not suspect, the parts had been greatly modified, if not completely changed.

In this way.

The Duke had a great interest in knowing what the Count would do. Though it was certain that the war would compel him to leave Spain, still he was too well acquainted with the young man's resolute and determined character to suppose for a moment that he would accept the insult offered him, without trying to take a startling revenge.

In consequence, he had left at Cadiz a confidential man with orders to watch the Count's movements with the greatest care, in the event of his reappearing, and to warn the Duke of what steps he might take.

The man had conscientiously and most skilfully discharged the delicate duty entrusted to him, and while the Count was pursuing the Duke, he pursued the Count, never letting him out of sight, stopping when he stopped, and setting out behind him directly he saw him start.

When at last he felt assured that the Count was really after his master, he got ahead of him, rejoined the Duke, whom he came up with in the neighbourhood of Pignerol, and reported to him all that he had learned.

The Duke, though internally terrified by the hateful persistency of his enemy, pretended to attach but very slight importance to this communication, and smiled contemptuously on listening to his servant's report.

But, for all this, he did not neglect to take his precautions; and, as peace was on the point of being signed, and a Spanish plenipotentiary was in Paris, he sent off the same valet to him at full speed, with a pressing letter.

This letter was a formal denunciation of the Count de Barmont Senectaire.

Cardinal de Richelieu raised no difficulty about granting an order to arrest the Count, and police agents of his Eminence, commanded by François Bouillot, left Paris in pursuit of the unhappy officer.

The latter, completely ignorant of what was going on, had continued his journey, and even gained ground on the Duke, who, persuaded that henceforth he would have nothing to fear from his enemy, as the latter would be arrested before he could come up with him, now travelled by easy stages.

The Duke's calculations were false, however. He had not reflected that the Cardinal's guards, not knowing where to find the man whom they had orders to arrest, and obliged to feel their way, would be compelled to almost double their journey: and this really occurred.

Moreover, as, with the exception of Bouillot, not one of them was personally acquainted with the Count, and he, as we now know, desired nothing so much as the Count's escape, he passed through the midst of them unsuspected, which occasioned them a great loss of time, by compelling them to turn back.

We have already narrated how, after the stormy explanation which took place between father-in-law and son-in-law, the latter was arrested, taken by Bouillot to the Isle St. Marguerite, and delivered over to Major de l'Oursière. And now that we have fully explained the respective positions of each of our characters, we will resume our narrative at the point where we left it.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PRISONER

We have mentioned that after proof of identity, and perusal of the order of arrest, Major de l'Oursière, governor of the fortress of St. Marguerite, had the Count conducted to the room which was to serve as his prison, until the day when it might please the Cardinal to restore him to liberty.

This room, very spacious and lofty, of an octagonal shape, and with whitewashed walls, fifteen feet thick, was only lighted by two narrow loopholes, covered with an under and outer iron trelliswork, which completely prevented any looking out.

A large chimney, with a wide mantelpiece, occupied one corner of the room: facing was a bed, composed of a thin palliasse and a narrow mattress laid on a deal bedstead, formerly painted yellow, though time had completely removed the colour.

A rickety table, a stool, a chair, a night commode, and an iron candlestick, completed the furniture, which was more than modest.

This room was situated on the highest floor of the tower, the platform of which, where a sentry tramped day and night, served as the ceiling.

The soldier drew the bolts that garnished the iron-lined door of this room. The Count entered, with a firm step.

After taking a glance at these cold, sad walls, destined henceforward to serve him as a habitation, he sat down on a chair, crossed his arms on his breast, hung his head, and began to reflect.

The soldier, or rather gaoler, who had gone out, returned an hour later, and found him in the same position.

He brought with him sheets, blankets, and wood to light a fire. Behind him two soldiers carried the portmanteau containing the prisoner's clothes and linen, which they placed in a corner, and retired.

The gaoler at once set to work making the bed. Then he swept the room and lit the fire. When these different duties were accomplished, he approached the prisoner.

"My lord?" he said to him politely.

"What do you want with me, my friend?" the Count answered, raising his head and looking at him gently.

"The governor of the castle desires the honour of an interview with you, as he says he has an important communication to make."

"I am at the governor's orders," the Count said laconically.

The gaoler bowed and went out.

"What can the man want with me?" the Count muttered, so soon as he was alone.

He had not long to wait, for the door opened again and the governor made his appearance.

The prisoner rose to receive him, bowed, and then silently waited for him to speak.

The Major made the gaoler a sign to withdraw, and then, after a fresh bow, he said with cold politeness, —

"My lord Count, gentlemen should respect each other. Although the orders I have received on your account from the Cardinal are very strict, I still desire to shew you any attention that is not incompatible with my duty. I have, therefore, come to you frankly in order to have an understanding on the subject."

The Count guessed to what this speech tended, but did not let it be seen, and answered, —

"Mr. Governor, I am grateful, as I ought to be, for the steps you have been kind enough to take; may I ask you, therefore, to have the goodness to explain to me the nature of your orders, and what the favours are by which you can alleviate their severity. But, in the first place, as I am at home here," he added, with a melancholy smile; "do me the honour of seating yourself."

The Major bowed, but remained standing.

"It is unnecessary, my lord," he remarked, "as what I have to say to you is very short; in the first place, you will observe that I have had the delicacy to send you the trunk containing your effects unexamined as I had the right to do."

"I allow the fact, Major, and feel obliged; to you for it."

The Major bowed.

"As you are an officer, my lord," he said, "you are aware that his Eminence the Cardinal, although he is a great man, is not very liberal to officers whose infirmity or wounds compel them to quit the service."

"That is true."

"The governors of fortresses more especially, although nominated by the King, being obliged to pay a long price to their predecessors for the office, are reduced to a perfect state of want, if they have not saved up some money."

"I was not aware of that circumstance, sir, and fancied that the governorship of a fortress was a reward."

"So it is, my lord, but we have to pay for the command of fortresses like this, which are employed as state prisons."

"Ah! Very good."

"You understand, it is supposed that the governor makes a profit by the prisoners intrusted to his keeping."

Конец ознакомительного фрагмента.

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