

Wingfield Lewis

**The Maid of Honour: A Tale
of the Dark Days of France.
Volume 3 of 3**



Lewis Wingfield

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CHAPTER XX. DIPLOMACY

It was a matter of imperative necessity to beat down at once the protecting barriers within which the victim had ensconced herself, and here was the first difficulty to be conquered. It was evident that Gabrielle's written ultimatum called for a reply. At the suggestion, Clovis fairly winced. Was he to grovel in the mud, and accept her humiliating terms? Never! And in writing, too! He would rather cut off his hand. What did Providence mean by creating marquises unfurnished with necessary adjuncts? Are not fowls provided with plumes and polar bears with fur? Why for years had the purse yawned for him, and then suddenly shut itself up? Not the purse exactly, for there existed that hateful allowance, which he would never, never soil his fingers with; but the marital authority and position which go with unstinted means! They had both shrivelled away, and the Marquis de Gange smarted as if he had been tarred and feathered. What would people say when the last whimsey of the chatelaine leaked out? She posed as a martyr, but took good care to protect herself against martyrdom. And what was the awful grievance? That the exigencies of his scientific studies (of which she was too ignorant and stupid to know aught) required the professional assistance of a diplomaed disciple of the prophet, and that the adept selected by the prophet chanced to be a woman! Was ever anything so low and paltry as this ridiculous assumption of jealousy? Had he, Clovis, ever made love to Mademoiselle Brunelle? Never. Delighting in like pursuits, they were dear and trusted friends after the manner of male friendship, and none but a base nature could take umbrage at such an alliance.

Judging from her absurd precautions of changed locks and newly-opened doors, the martyr seemed to consider herself in peril-evidently meant the country to suppose so. Her husband was an ogre-a roaring Fee-fo-fum-would by and by serve up her tender limbs on toast, with rich and luscious gravy. The abbé might argue till he was black in the face, but if Mistress Gabrielle could be haughty, so could he. He declined to answer the letter.

"Dear me! a scandal!" objected the abbé in distress, "an inevitable scandal! Might his attached and ever-devoted brother go forth and play the ambassador?"

Pharamond might do what he deemed right, on the clear understanding that the head of the house would not consent to anything that should hold him up to ridicule.

Armed thus with maimed powers, Pharamond went on his mission. He had almost traversed the length of the long saloon, ere Gabrielle, looking up from her embroidery, beheld the intruder. The blood rushed to her face, then slowly ebbed. They would not accept her terms, then, but would force their presence on her?

Bidding the girl and boy who were romping on the floor, to retire to their school-room, she laid her work upon the table, and with crossed hands waited.

"Madame must try and pardon this intrusion," began the abbé, meekly, "because it could not be avoided. I am here to speak, for my brother would not write, and it is rude not to answer a letter. Will madame be so courteous as to hear me out?"

Gabrielle, after a moment's reflection, pointed to a seat, but Pharamond shook his head.

"Madame does not accept me as a friend," he observed, drily, "so I have no desire to stay a moment more than I'm obliged."

"A friend? Who has never done me anything but harm!"

"Are we to discuss all that again?" he replied. "You have yourself admitted, more than once, that you owed much to me, and yet you compelled me by your own conduct reluctantly to withdraw what I had given."

"You do well to remind me!" returned Gabrielle, swelling with contempt. "Your terms of peace were that your brother's wife was to become your mistress! You are right to stand. Say what you have to say, and quickly."

"I have, in the first place, to point out to Madame la Marquise the result of her present course of action. Does a wife, think you, gain in the world's esteem by constantly insulting her husband?"

"I have never insulted my husband."

"Not by making a fool of him before all his class-by treating him like an ill-bred child, that may not be trusted? By driving him from beneath the roof which should be his?"

"What?" ejaculated Gabrielle, amazed.

"That is what you have done, and, believe me, the world will be against you, however plausible a tale you may invent."

"Is he going away?" faltered the marquise, beginning to see the position in another light.

"Is it probable that so proud a man would stay to be made the laughing-stock of all Touraine? Of course not. Beggary were better than such deep disgrace as that. His name is yours, and yet to your own shame you wilfully drag it in the mire. We are all going away, so you will have your chateau to yourself, and when we arrive in Paris it is you who will be the laughing-stock."

"Going away! How will you all live?" asked the marquise, pondering.

"Expelled from the home that should have been our brother's, the chevalier and I will return to Montpellier. The marquis will retreat to Spa, and take service with the mesmerists. He will be happy there in congenial society, for though very poor, he will be freed from dread of insult."

Gabrielle was bewildered. She was being held up to herself in the most natural manner possible, as a tyrant, an insulter of the poor, in whom dwelt neither justice nor compassion. It was not true, she knew that right well; but perhaps without intent, she had been harsh. Yet no-with a remembrance of the crowning outrage of that woman's return, came renewed courage.

The abbé concluded he had gained a point and followed it swiftly with another thrust.

"Madame will excuse me, if I remark that she is given to hallucinations, such as are common in hysterical subjects. She suffers from delusions, invents charges against her sorely-stricken husband, which at expense of his private feelings must be rebutted. His position having been rendered untenable by his wealthy wife, he is compelled to leave her house, and in doing so refrains from the one punishment which lies within easy reach. If he chose, he could remove his children, but he will not, for he has learned with pain that one of madame's chief delusions is that she has herself been divided from her offspring. That he may not be placed in the wrong, by any more such idle fancies, he consents to sacrifice himself, and will leave them with madame *for the present*. I think I have followed all my instructions, and with madame's permission will retire."

The abbé who had spoken with dispassionate calm, made a low reverence, and without looking at the lady moved slowly down the saloon. Would she call him back? No. Better to leave her to chew the cud of bitter and perplexing thought. The arrow was planted, and now would fester. Toinon would surely appear with another letter in the evening. His fingers were on the door handle when a low, sad voice called, "Abbé!"

Did he hear aright? He turned with manifest reluctance. "Madame deigned to speak?"

"Yes. Come back, I pray you."

With a slight but eloquent shoulder shrug of deprecation, the cunning churchman moved up the saloon again, very slowly, as if under protest.

"Madame would wish to know," he asked, "how soon she will be quit of us? Alas! we must crave indulgence, for my brother's scientific instruments will take long to pack. They are brittle and expensive articles which, under the new conditions, he could never afford to replace."

The marquise was visibly troubled, and the abbé had some ado to keep his countenance. The man was a human chameleon, and poor Gabrielle had not the weapons wherewith to smite such animals. His manner was so staid and stern, yet meek withal, that she could scarce believe that it was over this same passionless face that she had seen pass and fade dissolving views of such deep-dyed iniquity. Was this the satyr who had inflicted scorching kisses; who had by turns cajoled and brutally threatened her-the man of whom she had grown to be mortally afraid? He had just held up for contemplation a portrait of herself, which, though hideously distorted, was like. But was it? It was, and yet it was not. He had made her out a monster.

So they were going away and would leave her in peace with the children? How unexpected a *dénouement*. It never entered the simple head of Gabrielle to suspect that the man was lying. Proud as she was herself, she could understand and appreciate, and even applaud the feeling which preferred independent poverty to gilded bondage. And she had meant so well in what she had done! But put as it had just been, it did seem wrong to make a husband-even a bad one-so dependent. A man dependent on a woman is always a subject for ridicule. Woman governed by her feelings is so easily misled!

Ah me! Permit me to moralize for just a minute. Why is it that the more angelic we are-the more ready to moult our earthy plumage-we should be the less fit to combat those of earth? The more guileless and innocent a woman is-quite fit to soar aloft with newly-sprouted wings-the more abjectly pitiable a victim. Perhaps it means that earth should be left to the earthy, and that angels have no business here at all.

The marquise, while arranging bolts and barriers was quite under the impression that she was a martyr, that a menacing sword was dangling overhead which would fall and pierce her skull, and now she was told-and there seemed some truth in it-that she had been carried away by imagination. According to the abbé she stood convicted of hysteria! If their method of showing displeasure took the form of retreat with bag and baggage, leaving her the solitary mistress of the field, how could she be in danger? They would leave presently, declaring that the heiress had flung her money in their faces in so vulgar a fashion that self-respect compelled departure. Draped in the picturesque dignity of rags, they, not she, would wear the auriole of martyrdom-a consideration as new as disconcerting. It was satisfactory to find that Clovis, bad as she knew him to be, could be so proud. There must be much latent good in a selfish man who, to shield his manhood from smirching, will cheerfully abandon flesh-pots. His wife had calculated (and justly, too) that though he might whine and grumble, he would accept any conditions which did not withdraw the comforts which made life worth living. His wife fully intended that he should have ample means to play ducks and drakes with, but, surrounded as he was by a bad *entourage*, he must not be permitted to be master. And, lo and behold, he snapped his fingers at the money, and elected to wear the rags!

Rapidly reviewing the situation, Gabrielle's heart warmed in a tepid manner to the man whom she had wrongly read. She approved the attitude he had assumed, but could not allow him to retain it.

The abbé had rightly appraised the exceeding generosity of her nature and had played on it. When she called him back he was pleased to mark how clouded was her brow, how shaken was her fixed resolve.

"Clovis has judged me harshly," she observed. "I never wished to drive him from his home."

Things were going well. The outraged one was apologizing for her conduct.

"Que voulez-vous!" replied the abbé with a shrug. "He has my full approval. It is not well to place an honourable man in a false position."

"Nor an honourable woman either," aptly retorted the marquise.

"That brings us to the burning question," said the abbé, drawing a step nearer, in his earnestness. "The fault, if fault it was, was mine, not Clovis's, and I am prepared to bear the blame of my own actions. A little more blame or less," he added, lightly, "cannot make much difference, since I know you consider me a demon. That is all dead and buried-blown away and done with." By a graceful gesture the churchman blew away the past. "It was I who brought back Mademoiselle Brunelle for

prudential reasons, which I admit humbly now were unjustifiable. I thought your objection to the lady was founded on her interference in the nursery and nothing more, and, as you know, she quite understands that in future she has no place there. If your memory serves you, you will remember my pointing out once that a man like Clovis requires to be led by a woman. You could not or would not lead him—that is your affair; and I felt convinced that we were fortunate in his having a leader whose relations with him were platonic. What if, deprived of her, he had pitched on an affinity of exactly the opposite stamp?"

This was true also. Gabrielle felt that it was.

"As it is by your line of action you lead the world to suppose that you deem them guilty, and you know as well as I do that although she once talked nonsense in bravado, they are innocent. You drive us from the house and we go. Need I remark that mademoiselle goes with us? Thus you accentuate the suggestion of impropriety which you are aware does not exist, instead of showing by your behaviour that you are satisfied of the innocence of both."

"Do you think to persuade me," asked the marquise, with sad wonder, in which was a tinge of bitterness, "to accept the woman's presence? The son of the Church calls for too lavish a display of Christian charity."

"I call on you for nothing," returned the abbé, meekly, "since in a week we shall be gone. The scandal of disruption will lie with you; we are not responsible."

So the man persisted in proving her to be in the wrong!

"I do not desire that you should go away, and I will admit that I have been precipitate. What does Clovis want? I am ready to do all I can to meet his views, but he must not suppose that I will accept that woman."

The marquise's barriers were tottering. Even the abbé had not expected that she would show such feebleness of purpose. His point of refraining to strike at her through her offspring, by removing them, was cleverly imagined, and had told. Would it be prudent to administer another stroke now, to attempt by a vigorous charge to carry the citadel at once, or would it be wiser to wait? It would not do to present the appearance of taking too much upon himself. Clovis must be forced to come forward and play his part. The ground was well prepared. The wife felt compunctious visitings, and so the husband might say his say without loss of dignity. The abbé resolved, therefore, that it was time for him to retire into shadow. So he echoed quietly, "What does he want? Nothing, since as you yourself wrote, 'all is over.' When you first propounded the notion to me, I knew he would not forgive that testament."

So that was at the bottom of it all. Who could have guessed that a dreamy man, wrapped in scientific mists, should so hotly resent an infringement of marital authority? She appeared to have wandered unwittingly so far into the thicket of error, that it seemed vain to grope after the right; and yet, as she repeated to herself again and again, she had meant so extremely well!

The presentiment was proved to be idle wind, since they were all ready to go without a struggle. Had not M. Galland declared it to be due to morbid fancy? The scandal of an open separation must be avoided for the children's sake. What answer could she make to Victor when, grown to manhood, he asked why his father was a beggar? The proposed exodus must be stopped at all hazards. What if the white-robed marquise were to dabble the hem of her skirt in the mire of deception for a little, or, to put it more nicely, make use of diplomatic arts? Supposing that she were to allow herself to be persuaded into cancelling the will, had she not arranged for the contingency? The unlucky will had somehow produced the worst of effects upon the marquis, and there could be no possibility of peace till that question was set at rest. The idea of so deceiving her husband, brought a guilty tingle to her cheek, but there seemed no other way to cut the knot. Infatuated as he was with the woman who had behaved so abominably, and had made her life so wretched, she would never really consent to leave the future of the darlings in his hands; but might she not pretend to do so? A signature with a cross appended would speak for itself. For the sake of future harmony, it might be judicious to appear to

give way. Though it is naughty to do wrong, we all know that the naughtiness becomes a virtue when it is clear that it will result in good. Raising her deep blue eyes to meet the abbé's, she remarked that she would consider all that he had said, and let him know her decision later.

Pharamond bowed. "Decision-on what point?" he inquired.

"Oblige me," replied the marquise, "by requesting M. le Marquis to leave things as they are until he hears again from me."

The interview had been most satisfactory, and Pharamond's face beamed as he went down the staircase. What an admirable inspiration that had been about their enforced departure, with bag and baggage-and with Aglaé! And how easily the poor soul had tumbled into the specious snare. And then he laughed aloud at the fancied picture of Clovis in his poverty. That he of all men should sacrifice his comforts! Before his marriage with the heiress, he had been used to a measure of it, but since he had lain on roses, their perfume had become a necessity. Moreover, his own heavily-cumbered estates were in one of the most turbulent provinces, where landlords might whistle for their rents. Were he in sober earnest to resign his position of prince consort, black bread and a garret would be his fate. To think that Gabrielle should be so hoodwinked! What was she going to consider? and how long would she be about it?

As Clovis listened to his brother's report, he rubbed his nose in perplexity, glancing askance at Algaé, who nodded her head in approval.

"She will come to her senses, and all will be well," declared that lady. "She will know that the vulgar *intriguante* is a poor, harmless, humble friend of milord's, who only asks for the opportunity to forgive. Va! I bear no malice to jealous mad women. She hunted me away with ignominy, yet did I not clasp her to me afterwards? It was for monsieur's sake, for whom he knows I would spill my blood, I forced myself to do so. What is she to me? Except for your sake, nothing!"

Clovis bit his nails to the quick as he walked about the room. That she had changed her mind was well, but would she not insist upon some conditions which he could not, as a man, accept? He was not going to kneel in the dust. They must all make up their minds to that. He was ready to meet her half-way if she would promise to behave better in the future, but as to any more school-boy treatment, he would submit to nothing of the kind.

It was pitiable to see the weak, unstable man fluttering in borrowed plumes, blown out with a proud conviction in his heroic strength of character.

"Monsieur!" cried Algaé, in her rolling tones of thunder, "oblige me by sitting down. Since I was so disgraced here, my nerves are not what they were. Clovis, I was going to say-" she added, with a great roar, clapping her large hands together in guileless glee-"Monsieur le Marquis and I," she went on needlessly to explain to the abbé, "are such *bons camarades* that if I was not conscious of lowly descent, and in terror of the jealous mad woman, I should almost think I was his sister! But, oh! mon Dieu, what rashness! If the servants were to hear me call him Clovis, and report the awful delinquency to the pale nun upstairs, what shrieks and screams! When saints condescend to human frailties, they are very much like other mortals."

"Always call me Clovis. I insist on it," observed, with benign authority, the bird in borrowed plumes.

Algaé, with one of those impulsive movements, which in so massive a woman were charming, because unexpected, jumped up and kissed the marquis's hand, and pressed it to her bosom. "Clovis. To me always Clovis-when we are alone with the abbé," she murmured, gratefully, "but not in public-for your sake. Since you are so kind-so kind-cannot I put up with annoyance from the nun? So far as I am concerned, accept all, and any of her conditions. If she drives me forth again, I can take up my residence at Blois, which is not so very far, and you will sometimes come and see me."

Algaé was vastly improved. With delighted admiration Clovis had, since her return, become assured of it. Her spirits were more airy, her humour more refined; and she fairly bubbled over with good nature, and she never made remarks now that were unpleasantly pithy. What an advantage large

women have over small ones! It is given to the small to be querulous and vixenish. The large and stout ones are conspicuous for indulgent charity, You rarely find them speaking ill of their neighbours. Clovis was quite convinced that Algaé was a dusky pearl, and blamed himself severely for mistrusting her at the time of the attempted suicide.

Gabrielle was not long in coming to a decision. Having been admittedly precipitate, and having looked at things from their worst point of view, it was her place to show generosity. What could she lose by falling in with the wishes of the men, and making a new will to please them, which, in the event of her death, would be no better than waste-paper? Since Clovis could show a proper pride, such as became his rank, it would not be well to torment him. It had been a noble trait that in the same breath, he should have proposed to retire from the scene, and yet not distress her about the children. Supposing he had gone, along with Algaé, and had taken the dear ones with him? Legally, she would have had no remedy. It never should be said that he could be more generous than she. The baleful woman whose evil spells had wrecked her content must go, of course; but she should be allowed to take her time, and not be expelled violently, as before. Ostensibly, she had come on a visit. Let her remain for a week or two longer, and quietly withdraw. No harm would be done. No scandal would arise. The acute incident would be closed, giving way to a prospect of tranquillity.

His wife sent a short note to the marquis, begging his attendance in the boudoir. He made a wry face, for it was terribly like a schoolboy's summons to receive a flogging.

But Algaé, the large-hearted, placed her brown hands upon his shoulders and shook him amicably. "You are indeed a child, my Clovis, and deserve the flogging!" she said, cheerily. "Fi donc! A gentleman obeys a lady's bidding. Would you have her come down here and sing peccavi before me, whom she detests? Infant! go to her and make it up, and if she proposes stipulations about me, be sure to accede to them all."

Clovis obeyed with a bad grace, and entered his wife's boudoir with the sorry air of a malefactor who pleads guilty-a condition that was not improved by the dignified courtesy of his reception. With a serene smile, Gabrielle bade him sit by her side.

"We seem doomed to have misunderstandings," she sighed; "and I am fain to confess that the blame is equally divided. I unwittingly offended you on a money question. I often wish that there was no such thing as money."

The exordium was promising, and Clovis plucked up his spirits. With a polite bow he remained silent.

"What would you have me do?" she asked.

"Release me from the possible prospect of being held up to ridicule by my children."

"It shall be done-upon conditions."

Ah! There were to be conditions then? The anger of the marquis rose. His face assumed so sullen an expression that Gabrielle felt less compunction as to her pious fraud. Such men as her husband and his brother were not fit to have the custody of children; as to that she had no doubt. When she proceeded to explain that he might send for a notary, and she would sign another will on condition that a certain person undertook to withdraw from the circle, Clovis could scarce contain his passion.

When the maréchal's solicitors had forced him to obedience it was bad enough-but now-to receive peremptory orders from his wife! He was not such a ninny as to be taken in by the little sop. That Algaé was to be allowed to stay on for a week or two just to keep up appearances made no difference. He had chosen to engage a female secretary and helper concerning whose relations with himself there could be no suspicion in any healthy mind, and he was to be deprived of her assistance in his work through a morbid and unworthy suspicion.

"What if I refuse?" he said, sulkily. "You will play the martyr, I suppose?"

"I will place the matter before the Seigneurie and magistrates of Blois," Gabrielle quietly replied. "The line they counsel I will take."

The wrath of the marquis boiled over. His hands shook, and his fingers twitched as though he would like to strike her.

"You will do that?" he muttered, harshly. "You will wash our linen in public to make me a fool before the province? You will deliberately create a public *esclandre* at so dangerous a moment?"

"Alas!" returned his wife, mournfully, "the scandal is made by you. All I ask is to be treated with respect. Rid me for ever of her who has been the shadow across our path, and I will carry out your wishes. Refuse, and I will seek the protection of the Seigneurie, who shall arbitrate between us."

"I will return you a written answer," Clovis said, abruptly rising and making for the door. He could not and would not be ordered thus to part with Algaé; and yet he was sorely anxious for the cancelling of the hateful document. He was not capable of steering his bark alone among rocks and shallows, but must seek counsel from the others. They were awaiting him, and in a white heat of vexation he poured out to them his woes.

Mademoiselle Brunelle laughed merrily, directing sly looks of intelligence at the abbé, who frowned over his brother's shoulder, and pursed his lips.

Appeal to the Seigneurie, indeed! It was well to know of such a project in order to circumvent it. Clovis had been awkward and unskilful; and he, the abbé, must assume henceforth more openly the command of operations. Inopportune stiff necks are productive of no end of worry. Why could not the silly zany have done as he was bid, have accepted every suggestion, leaving further action to the others? The all-important object was to secure a proper will, and that point gained, both Pharamond and Algaé were well aware of what the next step would have to be. Clovis, the shilly-shally, must henceforth be excluded from a hand in the management of affairs. The lucky fellow should reap his share of profit by and by without the sweat of labour. His abortive interview with his wife had produced one good result. He was more than ever exasperated against her, and swore, with needless oaths, that he would never look on her or speak to her again.

"In that he must please himself," Pharamond remarked with indifference; "but he must take up his pen and write. If he would cease fretting and fidgeting, and sit down, his obliging brother would dictate, and the epistle should be of the shortest. Would mademoiselle kindly listen and suggest, since for her there were no secrets?"

The letter placed an hour later in the hand of Gabrielle ran thus: -

"Madame, – Your instructions shall be obeyed. I have sent to Blois for a notary.

"Your affectionate husband,

"Clovis."

CHAPTER XXI. THE SPIDERS SPIN

How provoking and how unfair to be called upon to drag out the years of our earthly pilgrimage during so stormy a period as this one! With unexpected bombshells exploding at one's feet, what was the use of sketching elaborate schemes which accident would most likely shiver? The abbé had already been obliged to change his tactics several times in consequence of untoward circumstances, and now from a clearing heaven there rained down missiles whose unexpected proximity sharpened his ire. "Why was I born so late?" he asked himself with muttered curses. "Under Louis XV., *le Bien-Aimé*, everybody did what they liked, provided that his majesty smiled. And if his own fancy was not thwarted, that monarch must have been much addicted to smiling, for he found the world a pleasant place. And now, just a few years later, there seemed to be not such a thing as a smile left anywhere. They had been so lavishly showered by the *bien-aimé* and his lotus-eating coterie that the stock was completely exhausted, and humanity had to put up with execrations as a substitute."

Each time that a courier arrived with intelligence of what was passing in the capital, the male occupants of Lorge shuddered, guessing that the news was bad. Bad, forsooth! The ball set a rolling was tearing down the hillside with such velocity that the sight thereof took away the breath.

Old de Vaux, grateful ever to the marquis and his affinity for their treatment of his sciatic nerve, came riding over with crumpled gazettes in his pocket, his eyes goggling in his head. If the whitened locks upon his pate had not been artificial, they would have stood up on end. "What are we all coming to?" was the burthen of his wail. If the world was coming to an abrupt conclusion, why did it not perform a dignified smash and vanish into vacuum in smoke, instead of first permitting that over-rated creation, man, to show what a base thing he was?

Smash! Paris, beautiful Paris, had come to smash. From a paradise it was become a pandemonium where all that was best and noblest was torn by devils' pincers.

Sciatica? Oh, yes. It was charming well, thanks to the delightful and indefatigable pupil of Mesmer and the enlightened marquis. A pair so good as they would certainly be canonized-so would the prophet. Madame and Angelique were as disgusted as the baron, but sent kindest messages to all. Would they allow their patient to unfold the latest budget?

Then the old gentleman would drone out before a long-suffering but apparently appreciative audience the result of his private lucubrations, and pour forth as well those of his lady and of Angelique. The seigneurs, he declared, must select the strongest fortress in the province, arm and victual it, and thus secure from the scum, look out for better times.

Of course, the crescendo of Parisian sinfulness found its echo, of fluctuating intensity, in the provinces. The timorous old baroness and her daughter preferred their garden to possible insult on the roads. Moreover, there was little to be gained by visiting at Lorge now. The marquise since her return from the capital, had been vastly frigid and stand-off-a stuck-up piece of goods. It was certain, now that she had her fabulous possessions in her hands, that a mere country noble's family were too contemptible to touch. It was equally clear that the oaf who was called chevalier had no honourable intentions, and that it would be more than imprudent to place so chaste a specimen as Angelique within reach of his brandy-laden breath. And so it came about that the only neighbours of the fair sex in the vicinity visited less and less at Lorge, and that the old baron when he trotted over on his prad, looked as a matter of course for the society of the mesmerists to whom he owed so much, and ceased to ask to see the chatelaine.

Not understanding her, the baron had always been frightened of Gabrielle-one shade less than of the abbé. Strange! When that gentleman first came among them, the baron and all the booby squires voted him the most charming of acquisitions. Now, somehow, he was to be avoided as much

as might be, for his tongue was sharp and his wit scathing, and he was no respecter of persons. The abbé would sometimes take up the old gentleman in his claws, as it were, toy with him as cat does with a mouse, till he was bewildered and breathless; then turn him inside out with a gesture of contempt, and fling him aside. This was terribly disrespectful to a Vaux of Vaux, but it certainly was a fact, whose enormity was only revealed by slow degrees, that the abbé was not averse to treating a Vaux de Vaux (with a thousand quarterings) as if he were no more than a puppet. Having arrived at and digested this stupendous fact, it stood to reason that the baron disliked the abbé as much as he dared; but, at the same time, the counsel of that ghostly man was so worldly-wise; he was so respected by the mesmerists, appealed to by them on every occasion as an oracle, that in moments of startling difficulty such as were now of frequent occurrence, it was only natural that the baron should amble over from Montbazou to crave the oracle's advice.

A budget, indeed! Almost every day was stamped by some inconceivable event. History was making up for casual napping by a spell of feverish haste. A catalogue of years was crowded into weeks. The poor old globe was spinning round so rapidly that it would certainly be shot out of its orbit, to the annihilation of the insects on its surface.

When, six weeks after their arrival in the country, the incidents of the tenth of August reached far Touraine, the cunning abbé had the gazette wherein they were chronicled laid on the table of the marquise, whom he justly calculated would be frozen with horror. That her innocent benefactress should be summoned by destiny in fulfilment of prophecy, to drain so full a cup of bitterness was appalling, and naturally set her friend reflecting upon the darkness of her own horoscope.

The sensitive and haughty queen was indeed humbled; her defenders massacred, her home converted into a shambles.

After the storming of the Tuileries, the populace, blood-drunk, wreaked their insensate fury upon all alike, irrespective of age or sex. The gentlemen-ushers, pages, doorkeepers, even the lowly scullions of the kitchen were, without distinction, butchered. It was impossible to move a yard over the polished floors without treading on a corpse, stripped and horribly mutilated. Every corner of the palace was plundered, its furniture flung out of the window. When there were no more Royalists to kill, the rioters turned upon each other, making the fatal day the fête of carnage and devastation. The mangled bodies of the seven hundred murdered Swiss were covered with those of *sans-culottes*. It was a carnival of slaughter. On the Place Louis XV., groups of men and women amused themselves by severing the heads of the slain and tearing their flesh like tigers. It was a relief to know that the royal family were safe within the Temple; and yet, for what further suffering had they been rescued? The situation was so alarming that foreign ambassadors left Paris in a body, the last to go milady Sutherland, who stood by Marie Antoinette in her travail till the prison gates were closed on her.

Then came the incident, so often repeated in history, of a hopeless combat with a spirit which, easily raised, it is found impossible to lay. General Lafayette, perceiving, with distress, the results of his own teaching, implored his army to rise in defence of king and constitution, and being met with laughter, fled.

On the second of September—a Sunday, whereon time hung heavy on the hands—the brilliant idea occurred to certain zealous citizens, headed by one Maillard, that it would be fine fun to make hay in the prisons. Were there not the Abbaye, the Carmelites, the Chatelet, La Force, Salpêtrière, Bicêtre, all crammed with wicked people who did not approve of *sans-culottes*? What a delicious amusement would it be for the dull Sunday to teach them how bad they were. With yells, a throng, increasing in volume at each street corner, swept towards the Abbaye—men naked to the waist, with foaming lips and rolling eyes, and arms clotted with gore. Knives and sharp pikes made short but merry work. Recalcitrant maidens who refused to shout "Vive la Nation!" were compelled to drink the blood of their relations. The massacre continued all day and through the night. But why go into the full details of the hideous story? France was become a dangerous lunatic who had beaten and trampled on her keepers.

It was a desperate shock to Gabrielle when she read of the fate of her friend, Louise, Princesse de Lamballe. That ill-starred lady had, as she knew, been imprisoned in La Force; and it was with a thrill that chilled her blood that she perused the details of her murder. Sure so horrible and ferocious a deed had never been done before! The marquise read, in the gazettes cunningly placed by the abbé, with blanched cheek, of how the beautiful favourite of the stricken queen had been dragged to the prison threshold, there to be slain by inches; of how her body was stripped and mutilated and flung in derision on a dung-heap, while her head was borne on a pike with auburn tresses flying, and flourished at the Temple under the window of the royal prisoners. Unhappy Louise! Unfortunate Marie Antoinette! Concerning one the sinister prophecy was accomplished; concerning the other it would be soon. What of the third, which concerned the Marquise de Gange? Morbid fancy, forsooth! No, indeed. Her fate was sealed, like theirs. What must be, must. She had lulled herself in false security.

Since Fate had decreed that the present occupants of Lorge were to live in so unsavoury an era, it behoved the ruling spirit of the group, Monsieur l'Abbé, to extract what advantage he could out of the disadvantages. In the first place, outside events were so terribly engrossing that local gossip and tittle-tattle for the time had lost their charm. The general feeling of insecurity, too, was such that the marquise could be taught without difficulty that this was not the moment for aristocrats to appeal to the Seigneurie. What was a petty bit of jealousy, or even a family misunderstanding, by the side of a massacre of thousands? A protest at such a crisis on so paltry a subject would be justly met with contempt.

Then as History kept plying her shuttle with lightning speed, the abbé shook his head and marvelled, congratulating himself that the great obstacle to his plan had been removed, since time was becoming precious.

For the new will was now an accomplished fact, and lay safe in yonder desk which bore the cypher of the marquis.

Mademoiselle Brunelle had intimated to the chatelaine, with a heavenly resignation worthy of all praise, that for appearance' sake she would accept the permission to linger on a week or two and then disappear for ever. Her note, penned in a small and irreproachable caligraphy, both relieved and troubled the marquise. That she had consented to depart without a struggle was a relief, but her mild and simple expressions of gratitude for past favours caused Gabrielle a twinge of conscience. Of course it was inevitable that the woman should be made to go, but the marquise would have felt more satisfied with herself if the creature had been vulgar and played the termagant instead of assuming the seraph. It was a million pities that she could not have gone on behaving as at first, when her mistress, finding her useful, had welcomed and tried to make a friend of her. The social earthquake had so far shaken the city of Blois that professors began to find it dangerous to cultivate aristocratic blossoms, preferring, with an eye to a whole skin, the discharging of declamatory fireworks at clubs and political assemblies. Of course there could be no question ever again of bringing mademoiselle and her late charges together; and yet it was a pity that it must be so, since the minds of the dear ones were lying fallow.

News arrived of changes, legislative and warlike, such as would transform the map of France. The jewels appertaining to the crown were annexed. The National Convention, just sprung into being, decreed the abolition of Royalty; proclaimed a Republic. The republican armies were, contrary to expectation, crowned with victory. They conquered Savoy, occupied Nice; swept from French territory the forces of the Allies. The small remaining scraps of the property of emigrants, long threatened and plucked at now and again, were actually seized *en bloc*. A list of pains and penalties of the severest kind was launched at such bad citizens as were gangrened with royalism.

At the present rate of progress the country would soon be no safer than the towns. Aristocrats would be dragged from their retreats, consigned to local jails, finished off in batches by a *noyade* or a *fusillade*-be drowned or shot in droves. Clearly, there was no time for palaver or parleying, or the

days would pass away when it would be possible to emigrate. What a mercy-the abbé never wearied of repeating the refrain-that the Maréchal de Brèze should have transferred his wealth to Geneva, and that his obstinate and stiff-necked daughter should have been induced to change her will!

Mademoiselle Brunelle was equally convinced with the abbé that there was no time to squander. If she were to remain too long, the marquise would become suspicious and insist on her departure. Of course she need not travel further than Blois, but it is well to be on the spot when something important is to take place, especially when your coadjutor is so double-faced as was the abbé. The susceptibilities of Clovis must be respected. What the schemers had to do must be done speedily, silently, and neatly. When she thought of it all the low laughter of Algaé rumbled. How surprised and mortified would the abbé be when in the end he found himself circumvented! She was to put out her paw for the chestnuts and keep half the booty for her trouble? So Pharamond had picturesquely put it. Not so. Unwittingly it was his own paw that was to be protruded, and in his case the fable would be realized. The excellent lady had graduated in his own school, and it is given to clever pupils oftentimes to outstrip the master.

Sure, now that they held the necessary document, their task was of the most infantine simplicity. It had been ascertained by cautious probing that Clovis could be counted on not to defend his wife. He would be politely invited to bury his head in the sand until that which must be was accomplished. By skilful manipulation his loathing for his better half was increasing as steadily in volume as a rolling snowball, and was assuming the proportions of a fixed idea. Gabrielle had decreed the banishment of the dear affinity. With many a groan he had acquiesced, being assured by two whisperers as he wrote to their dictation, that it was but a matter of form. "If she conquers, after all," he had said as he flung down the pen, "I will never forgive either of you. You have some project in your minds for the arrangement of the situation. What it may be I cannot guess, but I would have you know that if you fail I shall hate you both quite as much as her."

Algaé and the abbé had exchanged a glance of scorn over his shoulder, in that they were forced to work with such a sorry tool. No matter. If we paddle in thick mud, a little elbow-grease and water will make us clean again. Both began from opposite points of view to understand that the removal of Clovis might perchance have to follow his wife's. After her removal they would journey to Geneva, divide the fortune-hush the remorseful groans which so pusillanimous an object as Clovis was certain to indulge in-possibly drive him to drink, the natural corollary of remorse-and so into his grave. This was the abbé's view. Algaé went further. Arrived at Geneva, she would speedily become the marquise, and certain of dominion over her spouse-so long as his life was allowed to last-would secure to herself the reversion of her predecessors' fortune, and politely dismiss the brothers.

All that, however, was as yet in the clouds, and there was no time to lose. To a certain extent, the marquis must now be admitted to the council, but the cautious finger of the governess must be kept upon his pulse, to ascertain how far he could be trusted not to scream and make an uproar. Such a task was exactly suited to a lady of such tact and discretion as mademoiselle, and she gladly undertook the office.

Toinon, mightily displeased at the way things were going, was racked by apprehension. It seemed to her as if she and her mistress were being gradually enwrapped in the glutinous film of spiders, which uncomely creatures by and by would quietly devour them. Such a *ménage* as that of Lorge, despite its outward calm, was abnormal. Her dear mistress dwelt in strict retirement in her own house. A band of harpies (among which, I regret to say, she reckoned her master) were secretly conspiring, and the result of their machinations could not but be harmful. They whispered in corners, deliberated with closed doors, discussed and argued something earnestly at all times and seasons, and if somebody approached them, they suddenly grew silent. What could they be conspiring? For two pins, popping her insulted vanity into her pocket, she would write to the truant Jean, of whom she vaguely heard sometimes as being quite of importance at Blois. If he had grown out of his love for Toinon, his blindness was to be deplored; but righteously indignant as that damsel felt at his neglect,

she never for a moment doubted his honesty, however deplorable his opinions. Jean respected both the marquise and her foster-sister, and if carried away from his allegiance by politics, she felt none the less certain that, were she to summon him, he would come. But how could she summon him? He would laugh at her fears, and, on the principle of "Wolf, wolf," would not obey a second summons. All she could report was that madame was unhappy and neglected, that the objectionable ex-governess had come and was on the point of going, and that, meanwhile, she and the brothers were given to whispering in corners. It was absurd, and Jean would be justified in laughing at her. He had left his dog behind him in her care, as an unfit companion for a deputy at Blois, and as the faithful beast followed her about, gazing into her eyes with canine sympathy, she would suddenly sometimes sink upon the floor, and clasping his woolly head in her comely arms, whisper to him, "Oh, my dear! I am so sorely troubled. How I wish you could tell me what to do!"

As to her master, he was quite different from what he used to be. In old days, who so spick and span, so punctiliously prim in his attire? His face used then to wear a dreamy expression of philanthropical beatitude, which, if somewhat trying, was free of blame. Now he neglected his dress, his shoulders were rounded. He muttered between his teeth, as he wandered with bent head, and when he raised it, his eyes were bloodshot, his features convulsed by passion-torn by some secret dread. He was always brooding, and on some subject which stirred the lees, erstwhile so undisturbed, of evil thoughts. The marquis was changing a *vue d'œil*, and the change was not for the better.

Toinon, with her dog behind her, was slowly mounting the stair one day, revolving for the thousandth time the pros and cons of her perplexity, when she perceived that the outer door of the abbé's sanctum was open-an unusual circumstance, for had he not taken to himself this tiny chamber by reason of its double doors? The abigail hesitated. Should she descend to prying? If she did it would be for the best motives, and if she heard anything that concerned her not it might as well be consigned to a tomb. She could detect the mellifluous accents of the abbé, apparently in remonstrance, then the voice of mademoiselle, very low and earnest, broken by something smothered from the marquis, who spoke in tones of pain. What could they be discussing so earnestly? Raising her finger to caution the dog to silence, she stole down a-tiptoe, and holding her breath, listened.

Not for long, however, for the marquis of a sudden cried out, "I will never consent to such strong measures-never-never-never. They are too full of risk;" and was evidently moving towards the door when his progress was arrested by the abbé.

"Leave it to us, dear brother; leave it to us," the latter was repeating, soothingly. "If not your poor brother and your devoted friend, who else in the wide world are you to trust? It is as plain as daylight that we must leave France ere long, and your obstinate wife will never consent to go with us. Well, well; she doubtless will be safe here if we are not, and if we get into trouble, she will be rather pleased than otherwise. Do as you are advised. Take yonder document and raise on it at Blois or Tours a little money for present expenses. We are out of cash, as you know, since you so properly stood out against the allowance. You can easily raise money on that paper. Is not everybody scraping together all they can in order to be off while there is time? Go, dear lad, perform your portion of the task, and leave the rest to us."

"What of her, then?" Clovis inquired in doubt.

"Meddle, meddle, meddle-why will you meddle?" retorted Pharamond, laughing. "I daresay she will live on here for many years, or perhaps not-who knows? Suffice it for the moment that we men must fly across the border."

Then came something more from mademoiselle, which the eavesdropper could not catch, and Toinon had but time to flee with all her speed to the upper storey, ere the marquis opened the door. He was sighing and moaning and muttering in most extraordinary fashion.

Peeping from the landing above she could see that he trembled like a leaf, and did not fail to mark the abbé's sneer of triumph as he looked after his departing brother.

"He has been sent away from Lorge," she murmured, with wrinkles on her brow. "He is to go, and to take madame's testament along with him. Those two demons are victorious, and we are at their mercy. What do they intend to do? Nothing that bodes good to us."

CHAPTER XXII. DOMESTIC COOKERY

That Clovis should have thought proper to leave Lorge without notice, or any hint of his intentions, was not a subject for vexation now to Gabrielle. She saw the carriage disappear round the corner with a valet and a valise in the rumble, and the eyes of the occupant fixed steadily upon the postilion. No smile, or nod, or wave of a hand for her to whom he owed so much. She could contemplate him now without a wince or heartache, as calmly as we examine uncanny specimens of beetledom in a glass case. She prayed Heaven that her son, the dear Victor, should not grow up too like his father. One good point about the marquis's going was that he was separated from that woman. Then she began to wonder a little that he should have prematurely torn himself away before the moment of her flitting. That was good. Perhaps he had acted thus on purpose to keep up the show of appearances which all agreed was to be maintained. Be that as it might, it was not probable that the woman would linger on in a false position-*pour les beaux yeux de l'abbé*-and so the chatelaine, sitting with the dear ones in the moat garden, was prepared at any moment to witness the departure of another carriage. And after that? Would Clovis return when the coast was clear, or remain at a distance in dudgeon, leaving her to the tender mercies of his brothers? What then? She had given way, or seemed to do so, for peace' sake. They could require no more of her, and would doubtless respect her seclusion. It was curious to think though of the whimsicality of the situation. She, Gabrielle de Gange, erstwhile the reigning belle, with all at her feet that the world had to give, was living now with unruffled equanimity under the same roof as sheltered the man whom she had learned to look on as a devil.

It was October, and the leaves were circling over the grass in whispering eddies. The mournful days of late autumn have a charm of their own, as nature still peeps forth half-chilled from under the closing slab of the tomb. The monotony of mundane existence is in tune with the scene, and as all that is pleasant of the year slowly vanishes, we dream and moralize in a regretful way, which is not discontent.

Nature is dying, but will live again anon. Ah! what of us who gaze ahead striving to peer into the unknown? Have we not learned to know too well that the Future is the grave in which all our poor puny ambitions are to lie, never to arise any more, and yet we would fain examine the resting-place where Hope is to play chief mourner! Most of us who have reached middle age have had ambition crushed out of us long since, and we can smile with quiet amusement at the vaulting aspirations of our youth.

Gabrielle, while tranquilly embroidering, was not averse to recalling the past, summoning on the disc of memory the pageants of Versailles, the innocent bucolics of Trianon, the magnificent fêtes at the Tuileries. Where were all the gaily gilded puppets now? The Tuileries was a Golgotha, Trianon a nest for owls. The lovely Lamballe had been hacked to pieces by demons; their majesties were doing gruesome penance for the sins of others; even the saintly and immaculate Elizabeth, one of the purest and noblest women who ever trod the earth, was also enduring long-drawn and excruciating pangs of martyrdom.

Laying down her embroidery as she reviewed these things, Gabrielle would clasp her hands behind her head, and marvel, as others in similarly incongruous situations have done, whether Providence is not a myth. Every fibre of the human soul revolts against the monstrous doctrine that the innocent shall suffer for the guilty, and yet every day we see that it obtains, and always has obtained from the time of Adam downwards. Such gloomy reflections should not perplex young and pretty heads, and yet the marquise was unable to conquer melancholy. Perhaps it was induced by the season, perhaps by the germs of illness. She must have dreamed too long in the moat garden without being

provided with sufficient wraps. Certainly she had caught a chill, for when Toinon brought her as usual her morning chocolate, a few days after the marquis's departure, she found her shivering and feverish, with chattering teeth and laboured breath. Drawing aside the heavy curtains of the ancestral bed, Toinon gazed long and anxiously at her mistress, who said, turning impatiently, "You stare as if I were a ghost!"

"Madame thinks she has caught cold?" Toinon agreed quietly. "Madame was always too fond of sitting in the open air."

"I knew I was going to be unwell," her mistress observed drowsily, "for last night I could scarce touch my supper. When the palate is affected, things taste quite differently. The good Bertrand sent up some of my favourite cakes, as light as if made by fairies, and somehow they seemed quite coppery. Do something, Toinon; give them to your dog, for the dish is scarcely touched, and I would not have Bertrand think I am ungrateful."

"And you were always so partial to those cakes!" drily remarked Toinon, with a peculiar smile. "Yes, I will give them to the dog."

"First make me some tisane," entreated Gabrielle. "I am languid and feverish, and my throat is parched and burning."

Toinon slowly shook her head and went straight into the adjoining boudoir, where the light refectory described as supper was always laid out on a low table. Her movement was so abrupt that had she not been much preoccupied, she could not have failed to perceive the whisk of a black coat-tail, as it disappeared into the long saloon. Had she opened the door four minutes earlier, she would have seen a dapper figure clad in black leaning over the plate that held the confectionery, and have heard a soft voice mutter, "Only half a cake. It must have had a peculiar taste."

As it was, Toinon saw nothing of this, but finding the room empty, moved swiftly to the tray, took up a cake and smelt it. A thin, pale face was watching her through a door-chink with gleaming eyes.

She again shook her head, and murmuring, "Can they be so wicked?" carried the plate away.

Along the corridor she sped, and down the stairs, unconscious of a dark shadow moving noiselessly, till she reached her own apartment. At sound of the well-known footstep, an animal within, hitherto quiescent, began to whine and yelp, and beat itself against the door.

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