A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE.

Being the Memoirs of Gaston de Bonne, Sieur de Marsac.

A ROMANCE.

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CHAPTER XXXV.—CONCLUDED.

Vaguely I heard others crying this or that, as surprise and consternation moved them; some in anger and some incredulously. But I did not answer them, for Henry, remaining silent, held me spellbound, as it were, and awed by the marvellous change which I saw fall on his face. His eyes, which had become on a sudden suffused with blood, seemed to retreat under his sunken brows. His cheeks turned of a brick-red color. His half-open lips showed his teeth gleaming through his beard, while his great nose, which seemed to curve and curve until it well nigh met his chin, gave to his mobile countenance an aspect as strange as it was terrifying. Withal he uttered no word, though I saw his hand grip the riding whip he held in a convulsive grasp, as who should say, "'Tis mine! Mine! Wrest it away who dares!"

"Bethink you, sir," he said at last, fixing his piercing eyes on me, and speaking in a harsh, low tone, like the growling of a great dog, "this is no jesting time. Nor will you save your skin by a ruse. Tell me, on your peril, is this a trick?"

"Heaven forbid, sire!" I answered with passion. "I was in the chamber, and saw it with my own eyes. I mounted on the instant, and rode hither by the shortest route to warn your Highness. Monks are many, and the Holy Union is not apt to stop half way."

I saw he believed me, for his face relaxed. His breath seemed to come and go again, and for the tenth part of a second his eyes sought M. de Rosny's. Then he looked at me again. "I thank you, sir," he said gravely and courteously, "for your care for me: not for your tidings, which are of the sorriest. God grant my good cousin and King may be hurt only. Now tell us exactly, for these gentlemen are equally interested with myself, had a surgeon seen him?"

I replied in the negative, but added that the wound was in the breast and bled much.

"You said a few minutes ago 'dying or already dead!'" the King of Navarre rejoined with severity. "Why?"

"His Majesty's face was sunken," I said.

He nodded. "You may be mistaken," he said. "I pray that you are. But here comes Mornay. He may know more."

In a moment I was abandoned, even by M. de Turenne, so great was the anxiety which possessed all to learn the truth. Maighan alone, under pretence of adjusting a stirrup, remained beside me and entreated me in a low voice to be gone. "Take this horse, M. de Marsac, if you will," he urged, "and ride back the way you came. You have done what you came to do. Go back and be thankful."

"Chut!" I said. "there is no danger."

"You will see," he replied darkly, "if you stay here. Come, take my advice and the horse, he persisted, "and begone! Believe me, it will be for the best."

I laughed outright at his earnestness and his face of perplexity. "I see you have M. de Rosny's orders to get rid of me," I said with a sudden perception of the truth. "But I am not going, my friend. He must find some other way out of his embarrassment, for here I stay."

"Well, your blood be on your own head," Maighan retorted, swinging himself into the saddle with a gloomy face. "I have done my best to save you!"

"And your master?" I answered, laughing. "For flight was the last thing I had in my mind. I had ridden this ride with a very clear perception that the one thing vital which I needed was a footing at court. By the special kindness of Providence I had now gained this, and I was not the man to resign it because, forsooth, it proved to be scanty and perilous. It was something considerable that I had spoken to the great Vicomte and not been consumed, that I had given him look for look and still survived, that I had put in practice Crillon's lessons and come to no harm!

Nor was this all. I had never in the worst times blamed the King of Navarre for his denial of me—I had been foolish, indeed, seeing that it was in the bargain, had I done so; nor had I even doubted his good will or his readiness to reward me should occasion arise. But now, I flattered myself, I had given him that which he needed and had hitherto lacked: an excuse for interference in my behalf.

Whether I was right or wrong in this notion I was soon to learn, for at this moment Henry's cavalcade, which had left me 200 paces behind, came to a stop, and while some of the number waved to me impatiently, one rode back to summon me to the King. I hastened to obey the order as fast as I could, the anxiety in which I was, no less than the manner in which I had been unhorsed, relieving me of the sense of awkwardness and inferiority I might otherwise have experienced. I leaped, I think, that though all was at a standstill till I came up, neither the King of Navarre nor M. de Turenne was thinking principally of me. Every face, from Henry's to that of his least important courtier, wore an air of grave preoccupation, which I had no difficulty in planting to the doubt in every mind, and outweighing every interest, whether the King of France was dead or dying or merely wounded.

"Quick, sir!" Henry said with impatience as soon as I came within hearing. "Do not detain me with your compliments, which, longer than is necessary, M. de Turenne presses me to carry into effect the order I gave yesterday. As, however, you have placed yourself in jeopardy on my account, I feel that something is due to you. You will be good enough, therefore, to present yourself at once at M. la Varenne's lodging, and give me your parole to remain there without stirring abroad until your affair is concluded."

Aware that I owed this respite, which, besides securing my present safety, promised well for the future, to the great event which even in M. de Turenne's mind had overshadowed all others, I bowed in silence. Henry, however, was not content. "Come, sir," he said sharply and with all the appearance of anger, "real or feigned. "Do you agree to that?"

I replied humbly that I thanked him for his clemency.

"There is no need of thanks," he replied coldly. "What I have done is without prejudice to M. de Turenne's complaint. He must have justice."

I bowed again, and in a moment the troop were gone at a gallop toward Meudon; whence, as I afterward learned, the King of Navarre, attended by a select body of five and twenty horsemen, wearing private arms, rode on at full speed to St. Cloud to present himself at his Majesty's bedside. A groom who had caught the Old, which had escaped in the town with no more injury than a slight wound in the shoulder, by and by met me with the horse, having received, I fancy, a hint from Maighan; and in this way I was enabled to render myself with some decency at Varenne's lodging, a small house at the foot of the hill and not far from the castle gate.

Here I found myself under no greater constraint than that which my own parole laid upon me; and my room having the convenience of a window looking upon the public street, I was enabled from hour to hour to comprehend some of the various rumors, fears and surprises which made that day remarkable. The manifold reports, however, which flew from mouth to mouth on the occasion, as well as the overmastering excitement which seized all, are so well remembered by many that I refrain to dwell upon them, though they served to distract my mind not disagreeably from my own position. Suffice it to say that at one moment we heard that his Majesty was dead, at another that the wound was skin deep, and again that we might expect him at Meudon before sunset. The rumor that the Duchess de Montpensier had taken refuge there was no sooner believed than we were asked to listen to the guns of Paris firing *feux de joie* in honor of the King's death.

The streets were so closely packed with persons telling and hearing these tales that, seemed from my window to be looking on a fair. Nor was all my amusement without doors, for a number of the gentlemen of the court, hearing that I had been at St. Cloud in the morning, and in the very chamber, a thing which made me for the moment the most desirable companion in the world, remembered on a sudden that they had heretofore lacked: acquaintance with me, and honored me by calling upon me and sitting a great part of the day with me. From which circumstance I confess I derived as much hope as their diversion, well knowing that courtiers are the best weather prophets in the world, since they hate nothing so much as to be discovered in the company of those on whom the sun does not shine.

The return of the King of Navarre, which happened about the middle of the afternoon, while it dissipated the fears of some and dashed the hopes of others, put an end to this state of uncertainty by confirming, to the surprise of many, that his Majesty was in no danger. We learned with varying emotions that the first appearance which had deceived, not myself only, but experienced leeches had been themselves belied by subsequent conditions, and that in a word Paris had as much to fear and loyal men as much to hope as before this wicked and audacious attempt.

I had no more stomached this surprising information, which was less welcome to me, I confess, than it should have been, when the arrival of M. François, who greeted me with the affection which he never failed to show me, distracted my thoughts for a time. Immediately upon learning where I was and the strange adventures which had befallen me he had ridden off, stopping only once, when he had nearly reached me, for the purpose of waiting on Mme. de Bruhl. I asked him how she had received him.

"Like herself," he replied with a blush. "More kindly than I had a right to expect, if not as warmly as I had the courage to hope."

"That will come with time," I said laughing. "And Mlle. de la Vire?"

"I did not see her," he answered, "but I heard she was well. And a hundred fathoms deeper in love," he added, eyeing me roguishly, "than when I saw her last."

It was my turn to color now, and I did so, feeling all the pleasure and delight such a statement was calculated to afford me. Picturing mademoiselle as I had seen her last, leaning from her horse with love written so plainly on her weeping face that all who ran might read it, I sank into so delicious a reverie that M. la Varenne, entering suddenly, surprised us both before another word was spoken on either side.

His look and tone was as abrupt as it was in his nature, which was soft and compliant, to make them. "M. de Marsac," he said, "I am sorry to put any constraint upon you, but I am directed to forbid you to your friends, and I must request this gentleman to withdraw."

"But all day my friends have come in and out," I said. "Is this a new order?"

"A written order which reached me no further back than two minutes ago," he answered plainly. "I am also directed to remove you to a room at the back of the house that you may not overlook the street."

"But my parole was taken," I cried, giving way to a natural feeling of indignation.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am sorry to say that I have nothing to do with that, M. de Marsac," he continued. "I can only obey orders. I must ask this gentleman, therefore, to withdraw."

M. François had no option but to leave me, which he did, I could see, notwithstanding his easy and confident expressions, with a good deal of mistrust and apprehension. When he was gone M. la Varenne lost no time in carrying out the remainder of his orders. As a consequence, I found myself confined to a small and gloomy apartment, which looked, at a distance of three paces, upon the smooth face of the rock on which the castle stood. This change from a window which commanded all the life of the town and intercepted every result of popular fancy to a closet, whither no sounds penetrated and where the very transition from noon to evening scarcely made itself known, could not fail to depress my spirits sensibly; the more as I took it to be significant of a change in my fortunes, of which I had been flattering that I must now appear to the King of Navarre in the light of a bearer of false tidings. I associated the order to confine me more closely with his return from St. Cloud, and comprehending that M. de Turenne was once more at liberty to attend to my affairs, I began to look upon them with forebodings which were none the less painful because the parole I had given debarred me from any attempt to escape.

Sleep and habit enabled me nevertheless to pass the night in tolerable comfort. Very early in the morning a great firing of guns, which made itself heard even in my quarters, led me to suppose that Paris had surrendered, but the servant who brought me my breakfast declined in a stolid manner to give me any information. I spent the day in complete solitude, my thoughts divided between my mistress and my own prospects, which seemed to grow more and more gloomy as the hours succeeded one another. No one came near me, and I was left without a single attendant had I forgotten even that I needed food. This omission, it is true, was made good about sunset, but M. la Varenne did not appear, the servant was dumb, and I heard no sounds in the house.

I had finished my meal an hour or more, and the room was growing dark, when the silence was broken by quick steps passing through the house. They paused and seemed to hesitate at the foot of the stairs, but the next moment came on again, stopping only at my door. I rose from my seat on hearing the key turned in the lock, and my astonishment may be conceived when I saw M. de Turenne enter alone and close the door behind him.

He saluted me in a haughty and perfunctory manner as he advanced to the table, raising his cap for an instant and then replacing it. This done he stood looking at me and I at him, in silence which on my side was the issue of pure astonishment; on his, apparently of contempt and a kind of wonder. The evening light, which was pretty far gone, lent a sombre whiteness to his handsome face, causing it to stand out from the shadows behind him in a way which was not without its influence on me.

"Umph! I came to look at you!" he said at last, speaking with unimaginable insolence.

I felt my gorge rise, and gave him back look for look. "At your will," I said.

"And to say this," he continued, in the same tone. "To learn whether the man who was mad enough to insult and defy me, was the old penniless dullard some call him, or the daredevil others paint him."

"You are satisfied now?" I said.

He made no answer, but went closely; then with a sudden heat he cried, "Curse me, if I am! Nor whether I have to do with a man very deep or very shallow, a fool or a knave!"

"You may say what you please to a prisoner," I retorted coldly.

"Tarenne cares for no one does, to whom he pleases," he answered proudly. The next moment he made me start by saying, as he drew out a comfit box and opened it, "I am just from the little fool you bewitched. If she were in my power I would have her whipped out of the place. I'faith, I would! I'm sick of her scenes. As she is not, I must take another way. Have you any idea, may I ask," he continued in his most cynical tone, "what is going to become of you, M. de Marsac?"

I replied, my heart inexpressibly lightened by what I had just heard, that I had believed that I placed my fullest confidence in the justice of the King of Navarre.

He repeated the name in a tone I did not understand.

"Yes, sir, the King of Navarre," I answered.

"Well, I dare say you have good reason to do so," he replied. "Unless I am mistaken that good gentleman knew a little more of this affair than he acknowledged."

"Indeed. The King of Navarre?" I said, staring stolidly at him.

"Yes, indeed, the King of Navarre!" he retorted, mimicking my tone yet with a nearer approach to anger than I had yet witnessed in him. "But let him be a moment, sirrah!" he continued harshly, "and do you listen to me. Or first look at that. Seeing is believing."

He produced, as he spoke, a paper, or to speak more correctly, a parchment, which he thrust with a kind of savage scorn into my hands. Repressing for a moment the wonder I felt, I took it to the window, and found it to be a royal patent drawn as far as I could judge in due form, and appointing some person unknown—for the name was left blank—to the post of Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac with a salary of 12,000 livres a year.

"Well, sir?" he said impatiently.

"Well?" I answered mechanically. For my brain reeled; the exhibition of such a paper in such a way raised extraordinary thoughts in my mind.

"Can you read it?" he asked contemptuously.

"Certainly," I answered, telling myself that he would fain play some tricks with me.

"Very well," he replied, "then now listen. I am going to condescend to make you an offer, M. de Marsac. I will procure your freedom, and fill up the blank which you see there with your name—upon one condition."

I stared at him with all the astonishment it was natural for me to feel in the face of such a proposal, and I asked myself wonder this office on me. I muttered incredulously.

"The King having placed it at my disposal," he answered, "I will. But first let me remind you," he continued proudly, "that the affair has another side. On the one hand I offer you a royal patent drawn as far as I could satisfy your highest ambition. On the other I warn you that my power to avenge myself is no less to-day than it was yesterday; and that I condescend to buy you it is because that course commends itself to me for certain reasons, not because it is the only one open."

I bowed. "The condition, M. le Vicomte?" I said huskily, beginning to understand him.

"That you give up all claim and suit to the hand of my kinswoman," he answered. "That is all. It is a simple and easy condition."

I looked at him in renewed astonishment, asking myself a hundred questions. Why did he stoop to bargain why could command? Why did he condescend to treat, who held me at his mercy? Why did he gravely discuss my aspirations, to whom they must seem the rankest presumption? Why—but I could not follow it. I stood looking at him in silence, in perplexity as great as if he had offered me the crown of France, in amazement and doubt and suspicion that knew no bounds.

"Well?" he said at last, misreading the emotion in my face. "You consent, sir?"

"Not yet," I answered.

He started. "I think I cannot have heard you aright," he said, speaking and almost courteously. "I offer you a great place and my patronage, M. de Marsac. Do I understand that you prefer a prison and my enmity?"

"In those conditions," I answered.

"Think, think," he said harshly.

"I have thought," I answered.

"Ay, but have you thought where you are? Have you thought how many obstacles lie between you and this little fool?" he retorted. "How many persons you must win over, how many intrigues you must set afoot? Have you thought what it will be to have me against you in this? or which of us is more likely to win in the end?"

"I have thought," I repeated obstinately.

But my voice shook and my lips were dry. The room had grown dark. The rest outside, intercepting the daylight, gave it already the air of a dungeon. Though I never dreamed of yielding to him, though I even felt that in this interview he had descended to my level, and I had had the better of him, great and powerful noble as he was—despite this I felt my heart sink. For I remembered how men immured in prisons drag out their lives, always petitioning, always forgotten; how wearily the days go, that to free men are bright with hope and ambition. And I saw in a flash what it would be never to cross horse again, or breathe the free air of heaven, never to hear the click of sword against stirrup, or the rich tones of M. François's voice calling for his friend.

I expected M. de Turenne to go when I had made this answer, or else to fall into such a rage as opposition is apt to cause in those who seldom encounter it. To my surprise, however, he restrained himself. "Come," he said, with patience and perseverance which fairly astonished me, and so much the more as chagrin was clearly marked in his voice, "I know where you put your trust. You think the King of Navarre will protect you. I pledge you the honor of Turenne that the King of Navarre will do nothing to save you. Now, what do you say?"

"As I said before," I answered doggedly.

He took up the parchment from the table with a grim laugh. "So much the worse for you, then!" he said, shrugging his shoulders. "So much the worse for you! I took you for a rogue! You are worse. You are a fool!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

VIVE LE ROI!

With these words he took his leave. But his departure, which I should have hailed a few minutes before with joy as a relief from present embarrassment and possible humiliation, now found me indifferent. The statement on which he had solemnly pledged himself in regard to the King of Navarre, that I could expect no further help from him, had prostrated me, dashing my hopes and spirits so completely that I remained rooted to the spot long after his step had ceased to sound on the stairs. If what he said was true, in the darkness which filled alike my room and my mind I could descry no glimmer of light. I knew his Majesty's weakness and vacillation too well to repose any confidence in him; if the King of Navarre also abandoned me, I was indeed without hope, as without resource.

I had stood some time with mind painfully employed upon this problem, which my knowledge of M. de Turenne's strictness in points of honor did not allow me to dismiss lightly, when I heard another step, and in a moment M. la Varenne opened the door. I called to him in the dark, and uttered an apology for the remissness of the servants, which I accepted, seeing nothing else for it, in good part.

"We have been at sixes and sevens all day, and you have been forgotten," he continued, "but you will have no reason to complain now. I am ordered to conduct you to his Majesty without delay."

"To St. Cloud?" I exclaimed, astonished.

"No, the King is here," he answered.

"At Meudon?"

"To be sure. Why not?"

I expressed my wonder at his Majesty's rapid recovery.

"Pooh!" he answered roughly. "He is as well as he ever was. I will leave you my light. Be good enough to descend as soon as you are ready, for it is ill keeping kings waiting. Oh! and I had forgotten one thing," he added, returning when he had already reached the door. "My orders, M. de Marsac, are to see that you do not hold converse with any one until you have seen the king. You will kindly remember this if we are kept waiting in the antechamber."

I replied that I was at the King's disposition, and Varenne retired, leaving me to put the best face on the matter I could. Very naturally, however, I augured anything but well of an interview weighted with such a condition; and this contributed still further to depress my spirits, already lowered by the long solitude in which I had passed the day. Fearing nothing, however, so much as suspense, I hastened to do what I could to repair my costume, and then descended to the foot of the stairs, where I found him awaiting me with a couple of servants, of whom one bore a link.

The way out side by side, and having only a hundred yards to go, seemed in a moment to be passing through the gate of the castle. I noticed that the entrance was very strongly guarded, but an instant's reflection served to remind me that this was not surprising after what had happened in the day. I had, however, M. la Varenne as we crossed the courtyard that I supposed Paris had surrendered, but he replied in the negative so curtly and with so little consideration that I forebore to ask any other questions; and the chateau being small, we found ourselves almost at once in the long, narrow corridor, which appeared to serve as the antechamber.

It was brilliantly lighted and crowded from end to end and almost from wall to wall with a mob of courtiers, whose silence, no less than their keen and anxious looks, took me by surprise. Instead of the murmur of voices which seized upon the embrasure of a window, talked together in a low tone; or a couple who thought themselves sufficiently important to pace the narrow passageway between the waiting lines, conversed in whispers as they walked, but never ceased their talk in alarm and continually looked askance, while the general company stood at gaze, starting and looking up eagerly whenever the door swung open or a newcomer was announced. The strange silence which prevailed reminded me of nothing so much as of Paris on the night of the Duke of Mayenne's desertion; but that stillness had brooded over empty chambers; this gave a peculiar air of strangeness to a room thronged in every part.

M. la Varenne, who was received by those about the door with profound politeness, drew me into the recess of a window, where, without a word, he pointed out to me, among other things, that the Huguenots present almost outnumbered the King's immediate following. Still, I noticed M. de Rambouillet, to whom, at another time, I should have hastened to pay my respects, and among the men who were walking to and fro M. d'Aumont. Nor had I more than noted the presence of these before the door of the chamber opened and called to the number Marshal Biron, who came out leaning on the arm of Crillon. The sight of the veteran warrior, who exhibited his wounds in his quarrel with Henri III., was sufficient of itself to apprise me that some serious crisis was at hand, particularly as they progress through the crowd was watched, I observed, by a hundred curious and attentive eyes.

They disappeared at last through the door, and I was left to wonder what had brought them together, and to speculate on the nature of the business which had passed between the King and Rosny, which, if it had been of a royal character, would have been transacted in the council chamber, and not in the ante-chamber. Lost in conjecture, I had remained in the same place, and was now left alone, the attendants who had followed Biron having withdrawn to the other end of the room, where they talked together in a low tone,