

CHAPTER VIII

AT LAMARQUE'S

UNTIL then it seemed as if the sun had gotten into my brain and set it on fire. Her words had the strange effect of clearing my head, though I was still in as sad a predicament as ever I found myself. There was the thing in my pocket, still wrapped in Polly Ann's handkerchief. I glanced at the Vicomtesse shyly, and turned away again. Her face was all repressed laughter, the expression I knew so well.

"I think we should feel better in the shade, Mr. Ritchie," she said in English, and, leaping lightly down from the bank, crossed the road again. I followed her, perforce.

"I will show you the way to Lamarque's," she said.

"Madame la Vicomtesse!" I cried.

Had she no curiosity? Was she going to let pass what Auguste had hinted? Lifting up her skirts, she swung round and faced me. In her eyes was a calmness more baffling than the light I had seen there but a moment since. How to begin I knew not, and yet I was launched.

"Madame la Vicomtesse, there was once a certain miniature painted of you."

"By Boze, Monsieur," she answered, readily enough. The embarrassment was all on my side. "We spoke of it last evening. I remember well when it was taken. It was the costume I wore at Chantilly, and Monsieur le Prince complimented me, and the next day the painter himself came to our hotel in the Rue de Bretagne and asked the honor of painting me." She sighed. "Ah, those were happy days! Her Majesty was very angry with me."

"And why?" I asked, forgetful of my predicament.

AT LAMARQUE'S

511

"For sending it to Louisiana, to Antoinette."

"And why did you send it?"

"A whim," said the Vicomtesse. "I had always written twice a year either to Monsieur de St. Gré or Antoinette, and although I had never seen them, I loved them. Perhaps it was because they had the patience to read my letters and the manners to say they liked them."

"Surely not, Madame," I said. "Monsieur de St. Gré spoke often to me of the wonderful pictures you drew of the personages at court."

Madame la Vicomtesse had an answer on the tip of her tongue. I know now that she spared me.

"And what of this miniature, Monsieur?" she asked. "What became of it after you restored it to its rightful owner?"

I flushed furiously and fumbled in my pocket.

"I obtained it again, Madame," I said.

"You obtained it!" she cried, I am not sure to this day whether in consternation or jest. In passing, it was not just what I wanted to say.

"I meant to give it you last night," I said.

"And why did you not?" she demanded severely.

I felt her eyes on me, and it seemed to me as if she were looking into my very soul. Even had it been otherwise, I could not have told her how I had lived with this picture night and day, how I had dreamed of it, how it had been my inspiration and counsel. I drew it from my pocket, wrapped as it was in the handkerchief, and uncovered it with a reverence which she must have marked, for she turned away to pick a yellow flower by the roadside. I thank Heaven that she did not laugh. Indeed, she seemed to be far from laughter.

"You have taken good care of it, Monsieur," she said.

"I thank you."

"It was not mine, Madame," I answered.

"And if it had been?" she asked.

It was a strange prompting.

"If it had been, I could have taken no better care of it," I answered, and I held it towards her.

She took it simply.

"And the handkerchief?" she said.

"The handkerchief was Polly Ann's," I answered.

She stopped to pick a second flower that had grown by the first.

"Who is Polly Ann?" she said.

"When I was eleven years of age and ran away from Temple Bow after my father died, Polly Ann found me in the hills. When she married Tom McChesney they took me across the mountains into Kentucky with them. Polly Ann has been more than a mother to me."

"Oh!" said Madame la Vicomtesse. Then she looked at me with a stranger expression than I had yet seen in her face. She thrust the miniature in her gown, turned, and walked in silence awhile. Then she said:—

"So Auguste sold it again?"

"Yes," I said.

"He seems to have found a ready market only in you," said the Vicomtesse, without turning her head. "Here we are at Lamarque's."

What I saw was a low, weather-beaten cabin on the edge of a clearing, and behind it stretched away in prim rows the vegetables which the old Frenchman had planted. There was a little flower garden, too, and an orchard. A path of beaten earth led to the door, which was open. There we paused. Seated at a rude table was Lamarque himself, his hoary head bent over the cards he held in his hand. Opposite him was Mr. Nicholas Temple, in the act of playing the ace of spades. I think that it was the laughter of Madame la Vicomtesse that first disturbed them, and even then she had time to turn to me.

"I like your cousin," she whispered.

"Is that you, St. Gré?" said Nick. "I wish to the devil you would learn not to sneak. You frighten me. Where the deuce did you go to?"

But Lamarque had seen the lady, stared at her wildly for a moment, and rose, dropping his cards on the floor. He bowed humbly, not without trepidation.

"Madame la Vicomtesse!" he said.

By this time Nick had risen, and he, too, was staring at her. How he managed to appear so well dressed was a puzzle to me.

"Madame," he said, bowing, "I beg your pardon. I thought you were that—I beg your pardon."

"I understand your feelings, sir," answered the Vicomtesse as she courtesied.

"Egad," said Nick, and looked at her again. "Egad, I'll be hanged if it's not—"

It was the first time I had seen the Vicomtesse in confusion. And indeed if it were confusion she recovered instantly.

"You will probably be hanged, sir, if you do not mend your company," she said. "Do you not think so, Mr. Ritchie?"

"Davy!" he cried. And catching sight of me in the doorway, over her shoulder, "Has he followed me here too?" Running past the Vicomtesse, he seized me in his impulsive way and searched my face. "So you have followed me here, old faithful! Madame," he added, turning to the Vicomtesse, "there is some excuse for my getting into trouble."

"What excuse, Monsieur?" she asked. She was smiling, yet looking at us with shining eyes.

"The pleasure of having Mr. Ritchie get me out," he answered. "He has never failed me."

"You are far from being out of this," I said. "If the Baron de Carondelet does not hang you or put you in the Morro, you will not have me to thank. It will be Madame la Vicomtesse d'Ivry-le-Tour."

"Madame la Vicomtesse!" exclaimed Nick, puzzled.

"May I present to you, Madame, Mr. Nicholas Temple?" I asked.

Nick bowed, and she courtesied again.

"So Monsieur le Baron is really after us," said Nick. He opened his eyes, slapped his knee, and laughed. "That may account for the Citizen Captain de St. Gré's absence," he said. "By the way, Davy, you haven't happened by any chance to meet him?"

The Vicomtesse and I exchanged a look of understanding. Relief was plain on her face. It was she who answered.

"We have met him—by chance, Monsieur. He has just left for *Terre aux Bœufs*."

"*Terre aux Bœufs*! What the dev—I beg your pardon, Madame la Vicomtesse, but you give me something of a surprise. Is there another conspiracy at *Terre aux Bœufs*, or—does somebody live there who has never before lent Auguste money?"

Madame la Vicomtesse laughed. Then she grew serious again.

"You did not know where he had gone?" she said.

"I did not even know he had gone," said Nick. "Citizen Lamarque and I were having a little game of piquet—for vegetables. Eh, citizen?"

Madame la Vicomtesse laughed again, and once more the shade of sadness came into her eyes.

"They are the same the world over," she said,—not to me, nor yet to any one there. And I knew that she was thinking of her own kind in France, who faced the guillotine without sense of danger. She turned to Nick. "You may be interested to know, Mr. Temple," she added, "that Auguste is on his way to the English Turn to take ship for France."

Nick regarded her for a moment, and then his face lighted up with that smile which won every one he met, which inevitably made them smile back at him.

"The news is certainly unexpected, Madame," he said. "But then, after one has travelled much with Auguste it is difficult to take a great deal of interest in him. Am I to be sent to France, too?" he asked.

"Not if it can be helped," replied the Vicomtesse, seriously. "Mr. Ritchie will tell you, however, that you are in no small danger. Doubtless you know it. Monsieur le Baron de Carondelet considers that the intrigues of the French Revolutionists in Louisiana have already robbed him of several years of his life. He is not disposed to be lenient towards persons connected with that cause."

"What have you been doing since you arrived here on this ridiculous mission?" I demanded impatiently.

"My cousin is a narrow man, Madame la Vicomtesse," said Nick. "We enjoy ourselves in different ways. I thought there might be some excitement in this matter, and I was sadly mistaken."

"It is not over yet," said the Vicomtesse.

"And Davy," continued Nick, bowing to me, "gets his pleasures and excitement by extracting me from my various entanglements. Well, there is not much to tell. St. Gré and I were joined above Natchez by that little pig, Citizen Gignoux, and we shot past De Lemos in the night. Since then we have been permitted to sleep—no more—at various plantations. We have been waked up at barbarous hours in the morning and handed on, as it were. They were all fond of us, but likewise they were all afraid of the Baron. What day is to-day? Monday? Then it was on Saturday that we lost Gignoux."

"I have reason to think that he has already sold out to the Baron," I put in.

"Eh?"

"I saw him in communication with the police at the Governor's hotel last night," I answered.

Nick was silent for a moment.

"Well," he said, "that may make some excitement." Then he laughed. "I wonder why Auguste didn't think of doing that," he said. "And now, what?"

"How did you get to this house?" I said.

"We came down on Saturday night, after we had lost Gignoux above the city."

"Do you know where you are?" I asked.

"Not I," said Nick. "I have been playing piquet with Lamarque most of the time since I arrived. He is one of the pleasantest men I have met in Louisiana, although a little taciturn, as you perceive, and more than a little deaf. I think he does not like Auguste. He seems to have known him in his youth."

Madame la Vicomtesse looked at him with interest.

"You are at Les Îles, Nick," I said; "you are on Mon-

sieur de St. Gré's plantation, and within a quarter of a mile of his house."

His face became grave all at once. He seized me by both shoulders, and looked into my face.

"You say that we are at Les Îles?" he repeated slowly.

I nodded, seeing the deception which Auguste had evidently practised in order to get him here. Then Nick dropped his arms, went to the door, and stood for a long time with his back turned to us, looking out over the fields. When finally he spoke it was in the tone he used in anger.

"If I had him now, I think I would kill him," he said.

Auguste had deluded him in other things, had run away and deserted him in a strange land. But this matter of bringing him to Les Îles was past pardon. It was another face he turned to the Vicomtesse, a stronger face, a face ennobled by a just anger.

"Madame la Vicomtesse," he said, "I have a vague notion that you are related to Monsieur de St. Gré. I give you my word of honor as a gentleman that I had no thought of trespassing upon him in any way."

"Mr. Temple, we were so sure of that—Mr. Ritchie and I—that we should not have sought for you here otherwise," she replied quickly. Then she glanced at me as though seeking my approval for her next move. It was characteristic of her that she did not now shirk a task imposed by her sense of duty. "We have little time, Mr. Temple, and much to say. Perhaps you will excuse us, Lamarque," she added graciously, in French.

"Madame la Vicomtesse!" said the old man. And, with the tact of his race, he bowed and retired. The Vicomtesse seated herself on one of the rude chairs, and looked at Nick curiously. There was no such thing as embarrassment in her manner, no trace of misgiving that she would not move properly in the affair. Knowing Nick as I did, the difficulty of the task appalled me, for no man was likelier than he to fly off at a misplaced word.

Her beginning was so bold that I held my breath, knowing full well as I did that she had chosen the very note.

"Sit down, Mr. Temple," she said. "I wish to speak to you about your mother."

He stopped like a man who had been struck, straightened, and stared at her as though he had not taken her meaning. Then he swung on me.

"Your mother is in New Orleans," I said. "I would have told you in Louisville had you given me the chance."

"It is an interesting piece of news, David," he answered, "which you might have spared me. Mrs. Temple did not think herself necessary to my welfare when I was young, and now I have learned to live without her."

"Is there no such thing as expiation, Monsieur?" said the Vicomtesse.

"Madame," he said, "she made me what I am, and when I might have redeemed myself she came between me and happiness."

"Monsieur," said the Vicomtesse, "have you ever considered her sufferings?"

He looked at the Vicomtesse with a new interest. She was not so far beyond his experience as mine.

"Her sufferings?" he repeated, and smiled.

"Madame la Vicomtesse should know them," I interrupted; and without heeding her glance of protest I continued, "It is she who has cared for Mrs. Temple."

"You, Madame!" he exclaimed.

"Do not deny your own share in it, Mr. Ritchie," she answered. "As for me, Monsieur," she went on, turning to Nick, "I have done nothing that was not selfish. I have been in the world, I have lived my life, misfortunes have come upon me too. My visits to your mother have been to me a comfort, a pleasure,—for she is a rare person."

"I have never found her so, Madame," he said briefly.

"I am sure it is your misfortune rather than your fault, Mr. Temple. It is because you do not know her now."

Again he looked at me, puzzled, uneasy, like a man who would run if he could. But by a kind of fascination his eyes went back to this woman who dared a subject sore

to the touch—who pressed it gently, but with determination, never doubting her powers, yet with a kindness and sympathy of tone which few women of the world possess. The Vicomtesse began to speak again, evenly, gently.

"Mr. Temple," said she, "I am merely going to tell you some things which I am sure you do not know, and when I have finished I shall not appeal to you. It would be useless for me to try to influence you, and from what Mr. Ritchie and others have told me of your character I am sure that no influence will be necessary. And," she added, with a smile, "it would be much more comfortable for us both if you sat down."

He obeyed her without a word. No wonder Madame la Vicomtesse had had an influence at court.

"There!" she said. "If any reference I am about to make gives you pain, I am sorry." She paused briefly. "After Mr. Ritchie took your mother from here to New Orleans, some five years ago, she rented a little house in the Rue Bourbon with a screen of yellow and red tiles at the edge of the roof. It is on the south side, next to the corner of the Rue St. Philippe. There she lives absolutely alone, except for a servant. Mr. Clark, who has charge of her affairs, was the only person she allowed to visit her. For her pride, however misplaced, and for her spirit we must all admire her. The friend who discovered where she was, who went to her and implored Mrs. Temple to let her stay, she refused."

"The friend?" he repeated in a low tone. I scarcely dared to glance at the Vicomtesse.

"Yes, it was Antoinette," she answered. He did not reply, but his eyes fell. "Antoinette went to her, would have comforted her, would have cared for her, but your mother sent her away. For five years she has lived there, Mr. Temple, alone with her past, alone with her sorrow and remorse. You must draw the picture for yourself. If the world has a more terrible punishment, I have not heard of it. And when, some months ago, I came, and Antoinette sent me to her—"

"Sent you to her!" he said, raising his head quickly.

"Under another name than my own," Hélène continued, apparently taking no notice of his interruption. She leaned toward him and her voice faltered. "I found your mother dying."

He said nothing, but got to his feet and walked slowly to the door, where he stood looking out again. I felt for him, I would have gone to him then had it not been for the sense in me that Hélène did not wish it. As for Hélène, she sat waiting for him to turn back to her, and at length he did.

"Yes?" he said.

"It is her heart, Mr. Temple, that we fear the most. Last night I thought the end had come. It cannot be very far away now. Sorrow and remorse have killed her, Monsieur. The one thing that she has prayed for through the long nights is that she might see you once again and obtain your forgiveness. God Himself does not withhold forgiveness, Mr. Temple," said the Vicomtesse, gently. "Shall any of us presume to?"

A spasm of pain crossed his face, and then his expression hardened.

"I might have been a useful man," he said; "she ruined my life—"

"And you will allow her to ruin the rest of it?" asked the Vicomtesse.

He stared at her.

"If you do not go to her and forgive her, you will remember it until you die," she said.

He sank down on the chair opposite to her, his head bowed into his hands, his elbows on the table among the cards. At length I went and laid my hands upon his shoulder, and at my touch he started. Then he did a singular thing, an impulsive thing, characteristic of the old Nick I had known. He reached across the table and seized the hand of Madame la Vicomtesse. She did not resist, and her smile I shall always remember. It was the smile of a woman who has suffered, and understands.

"I will go to her, Madame!" he said, springing to his feet. "I will go to her. I—I was wrong."

She rose, too, he still clinging to her hand, she still unresisting. His eye fell upon me.

"Where is my hat, Davy?" he asked.

The Vicomtesse withdrew her hand and looked at me.

"Alas, it is not quite so simple as that, Mr. Temple," she said; "Monsieur de Carondelet has first to be reckoned with."

"She is dying, you say? then I will go to her. After that Monsieur de Carondelet may throw me into prison, may hang me, may do anything he chooses. But I will go to her."

I glanced anxiously at the Vicomtesse, well knowing how wilful he was when aroused. Admiration was in her eyes, seeing that he was heedless of his own danger.

"You would not get through the gates of the city. Monsieur le Baron requires passports now," she said.

At that he began to pace the little room, his hands clenched.

"I could use your passport, Davy," he cried. "Let me have it."

"Pardon me, Mr. Temple, I do not think you could," said the Vicomtesse. I flushed. I suppose the remark was not to be resisted.

"Then I will go to-night," he said, with determination. "It will be no trouble to steal into the city. You say the house has yellow and red tiles, and is near the Rue St. Philippe?"

Hélène laid her fingers on his arm.

"Listen, Monsieur, there is a better way," she said. "Monsieur le Baron is doubtless very angry with you, and I am sure that this is chiefly because he does not know you. For instance, if some one were to tell him that you are a straightforward, courageous young man, a gentleman with an unquenchable taste for danger, that you are not a low-born adventurer and intriguer, that you have nothing in particular against his government, he might not be quite so angry. Pardon me if I say that he is not disposed to take your expedition any more seriously than is your own Federal government. The little Baron

is irascible, choleric, stern, or else good-natured, good-hearted, and charitable, just as one happens to take him. As we say in France, it is not well to strike flint and steel in his presence. He might blow up and destroy one. Suppose some one were to go to Monsieur de Carondelet and tell him what a really estimable person you are, and assure him that you will go quietly out of his province at the first opportunity, and be good, so far as he is concerned, forever after? Mark me, I merely say *suppose*. I do not know how far things have gone, or what he may have heard. But suppose a person whom I have reason to believe he likes and trusts and respects, a person who understands his vagaries, should go to him on such an errand."

"And where is such a person to be found," said Nick, amused in spite of himself.

Madame la Vicomtesse courtesied.

"Monsieur, she is before you," she said.

"Egad," he cried, "do you mean to say, Madame, that you will go to the Baron on my behalf?"

"As soon as I ever get to town," she said. "He will have to be waked from his siesta, and he does not like that."

"But he will forgive you," said Nick, quick as a flash.

"I have reason to believe he will," said Madame la Vicomtesse.

"Faith," cried Nick, "he would not be flesh and blood if he didn't."

At that the Vicomtesse laughed, and her eye rested judiciously on me. I was standing rather glumly, I fear, in the corner.

"Are you going to take him with you?" said Nick.

"I was thinking of it," said the Vicomtesse. "Mr. Ritchie knows you, and he is such a reliable and reputable person."

Nick bowed.

"You should have seen him marching in a Jacobin procession, Madame," he said.

"He follows his friends into strange places," she retorted.

"And now, Mr. Temple," she added, "may we trust you to stay here with Lamarque until you have word from us?"

"You know I cannot stay here," he cried.

"And why not, Monsieur?"

"If I were captured here, I should get Monsieur de St. Gré into trouble; and besides," he said, with a touch of coldness, "I cannot be beholden to Monsieur de St. Gré. I cannot remain on his land."

"As for getting Monsieur de St. Gré into trouble, his own son could not involve him with the Baron," answered Madame la Vicomtesse. "And it seems to me, Monsieur, that you are already so far beholden to Monsieur de St. Gré that you cannot quibble about going a little more into his debt. Come, Mr. Temple, how has Monsieur de St. Gré ever offended you?"

"Madame—" he began.

"Monsieur," she said, with an air not to be denied, "I believe I can discern a point of honor as well as you. I fail to see that you have a case."

He was indeed no match for her. He turned to me appealingly, his brows bent, but I had no mind to meddle. He swung back to her.

"But Madame—!" he cried.

She was arranging the cards neatly on the table.

"Monsieur, you are tiresome," she said. "What is it now?"

He took a step toward her, speaking in a low tone, his voice shaking. But, true to himself, he spoke plainly. As for me, I looked on frightened,—as though watching a contest,—almost agape to see what a clever woman could do.

"There is—Mademoiselle de St. Gré—"

"Yes, there is Mademoiselle de St. Gré," repeated the Vicomtesse, toying with the cards.

His face lighted, though his lips twitched with pain.

"She is still—"

"She is still Mademoiselle de St. Gré, Monsieur, if that is what you mean."

"And what will she think if I stay here?"

"Ah, do you care what she thinks, Mr. Temple?" said the Vicomtesse, raising her head quickly. "From what I have heard, I should not have thought you could."

"God help me," he answered simply, "I do care."

Hélène's eyes softened as she looked at him, and my pride in him was never greater than at that moment.

"Mr. Temple," she said gently, "remain where you are and have faith in us. I begin to see now why you are so fortunate in your friends." Her glance rested for a brief instant on me. "Mr. Ritchie and I will go to New Orleans, talk to the Baron, and send André at once with a message. If it is in our power, you shall see your mother very soon."

She held out her hand to him, and he bent and kissed it reverently, with an ease I envied. He followed us to the door. And when the Vicomtesse had gone a little way down the path she looked at him over her shoulder.

"Do not despair, Mr. Temple," she said.

It was an answer to a yearning in his face. He gripped me by the shoulders.

"God bless you, Davy," he whispered, and added, "God bless you both."

I overtook her where the path ran into the forest's shade, and for a long while I walked after her, not breaking her silence, my eyes upon her, a strange throbbing in my forehead which I did not heed. At last, when the perfumes of the flowers told us we were nearing the garden, she turned to me.

"I like Mr. Temple," she said, again.

"He is an honest gentleman," I answered.

"One meets very few of them," she said, speaking in a low voice. "You and I will go to the Governor. And after that, have you any idea where you will go?"

"No," I replied, troubled by her regard.

"Then I will tell you. I intend to send you to Madame Gravois's, and she will compel you to go to bed and rest. I do not mean to allow you to kill yourself."