

CHAPTER IX

MONSIEUR LE BARON

THE sun beat down mercilessly on thatch and terrace, the yellow walls flung back the quivering heat, as Madame la Vicomtesse and I walked through the empty streets towards the Governor's house. We were followed by André and Madame's maid. The sleepy orderly started up from under the archway at our approach, bowed profoundly to Madame, looked askance at me, and declared, with a thousand regrets, that Monsieur le Baron was having his siesta.

"Then you will wake him," said Madame la Vicomtesse.

Wake Monsieur le Baron! *Bueno Dios*, did Madame understand what it meant to wake his Excellency? His Excellency would at first be angry, no doubt. Angry? As an Andalusian bull, Madame. Once, when his Excellency had first come to the province, he, the orderly, had presumed to awake him.

"*Assez!*" said Madame, so suddenly that the man straightened and looked at her again. "You will wake Monsieur le Baron, and tell him that Madame la Vicomtesse d'Ivry-le-Tour has something of importance to say to him."

Madame had the air, and a title carried with a Spanish soldier in New Orleans in those days. The orderly fairly swept the ground and led us through a court where the sun drew bewildering hot odors from the fruits and flowers, into a darkened room which was the Baron's cabinet. I remember it vaguely, for my head was hot and throbbing from my exertions in such a climate. It was a new room, — the hotel being newly built, — with white walls, a

picture of his Catholic Majesty and the royal arms of Spain, a map of Louisiana, another of New Orleans fortified, some walnut chairs, a desk with ink and sand and a seal, and a window, the closed lattice shutters of which showed streaks of light green light. These doubtless opened on the Royal Road and looked across the levee esplanade on the waters of the Mississippi. Madame la Vicomtesse seated herself, and with a gesture which was an order bade me do likewise.

"He will be angry, the dear Baron," she said. "He is harassed to death with republics. No offence, Mr. Ritchie. He is up at dawn looking to the forts and palisades to guard against such foolish enterprises as this of Mr. Temple's. And to be waked out of a well-earned siesta — to save a gentleman who has come here to make things unpleasant for him — is carrying a joke a little far. *Mais — que voulez-vous?*"

She gave a little shrug to her slim shoulders as she smiled at me, and she seemed not a whit disturbed concerning the conversation with his Excellency. I wondered whether this were birth, or training, or both, or a natural ability to cope with affairs. The women of her order had long been used to intercede with sovereigns, to play a part in matters of state. Suddenly I became aware that she was looking at me.

"What are you thinking of?" she demanded, and continued without waiting for a reply, "you strange man."

"I was thinking how odd it was," I replied, "that I should have known you all these years by a portrait, that we should finally be thrown together, and that you should be so exactly like the person I had supposed you to be."

She lowered her eyes, but she did not seem to take offence. I meant none.

"And you," she answered, "are continually reminding me of an Englishman I knew when I was a girl. He was a very queer person to be attached to the Embassy, — not a courtier, but a serious, literal person like you, Mr. Ritchie, and he resembled you very much. I was very fond of him."

"And — what became of him?" I asked. Other questions rose to my lips, but I put them down.

"I will tell you," she answered, bending forward a little. "He did something which I believe you might have done. A certain Marquis spoke lightly of a lady, an Englishwoman at our court, and my Englishman ran him through one morning at Versailles."

She paused, and I saw that her breath was coming more quickly at the remembrance.

"And then?"

"He fled to England. He was a younger son, and poor. But his King heard of the affair, had it investigated, and restored him to the service. I have never seen him since," she said, "but I have often thought of him. There," she added, after a silence, with a lightness which seemed assumed, "I have given you a romance. How long the Baron takes to dress!"

At that moment there were footsteps in the court-yard, and the orderly appeared at the door, saluting, and speaking in Spanish.

"His Excellency the Governor!"

We rose, and Madame was courtesying and I was bowing to the little man. He was in uniform, his face perspiring in the creases, his plump calves stretching his white stockings to the full. Madame extended her hand and he kissed it, albeit he did not bend easily. He spoke in French, and his voice betrayed the fact that his temper was near slipping its leash. The Baron was a native of Flanders.

"To what happy circumstance do I owe the honor of this visit, Madame la Vicomtesse?" he asked.

"To a woman's whim, Monsieur le Baron," she answered, "for a man would not have dared to disturb you. May I present to your Excellency, Mr. David Ritchie of Kentucky?"

His Excellency bowed stiffly, looked at me with no pretence of pleasure, and I had had sufficient dealings with men to divine that, in the coming conversation, the overflow of his temper would be poured upon me. His first sensation was surprise.

"An American!" he said, in a tone that implied reproach to Madame la Vicomtesse for having fallen into such company. "Ah," he cried, breathing hard in the manner of stout people, "I remember you came down with Monsieur Vigo, Monsieur, did you not?"

It was my turn to be surprised. If the Baron took a like cognizance of all my countrymen who came to New Orleans, he was a busy man indeed.

"Yes, your Excellency," I answered.

"And you are a Federalist?" he said, though petulantly.

"I am, your Excellency."

"Is your nation to overrun the earth?" said the Baron. "Every morning when I ride through the streets it seems to me that more Americans have come. *Pardieu*, I declare every day that, if it were not for the Americans, I should have ten years more of life ahead of me." I could not resist the temptation to glance at Madame la Vicomtesse. Her eyes, half closed, betrayed an amusement that was scarce repressed.

"Come, Monsieur le Baron," she said, "you and I have like beliefs upon most matters. We have both suffered at the hands of people who have mistaken a fiend for a Lady."

"You would have me believe, Madame," the Baron put in, with a wit I had not thought in him, "that Mr. Ritchie knows a lady when he sees one. I can readily believe it."

Madame laughed.

"He at least has a negative knowledge," she replied. "And he has brought into New Orleans no coins, boxes, or clocks against your Excellency's orders with the image and superscription of the Goddess in whose name all things are done. He has not sung 'Ça Ira' at the theatres, and he detests the tricolored cockades as much as you do."

The Baron laughed in spite of himself, and began to thaw. There was a little more friendliness in his next glance at me.

"What images have you brought in, Mr. Ritchie?" he asked. "We all worship the sex in some form, however misplaced our notions of it."

There is not the least doubt that, for the sake of the Vicomtesse, he was trying to be genial, and that his remark was a purely random one. But the roots of my hair seemed to have taken fire. I saw the Baron as in a glass, darkly. But I kept my head, principally because the situation had elements of danger.

"The image of Madame la Vicomtesse, Monsieur," I said.

"*Dame!*" exclaimed his Excellency, eying me with a new interest, "I did not suspect you of being a courtier."

"No more he is, Monsieur le Baron," said the Vicomtesse, "for he speaks the truth."

His Excellency looked blank. As for me, I held my breath, wondering what *coup* Madame was meditating.

"Mr. Ritchie brought down from Kentucky a miniature of me by Boze, that was painted in a costume I once wore at Chantilly."

"*Comment! diable,*" exclaimed the Baron. "And how did such a thing get into Kentucky, Madame?"

"You have brought me to the point," she replied, "which is no small triumph for your Excellency. Mr. Ritchie bought the miniature from that most estimable of my relations, Monsieur Auguste de St. Gré."

The Baron sat down and began to fan himself. He even grew a little purple. He looked at Madame, sputtered, and I began to think that, if he didn't relieve himself, his head might blow off. As for the Vicomtesse, she wore an ingenuous air of detachment, and seemed supremely unconscious of the volcano by her side.

"So, Madame," cried the Governor at length, after I know not what repressions, "you have come here in behalf of that — of Auguste de St. Gré!"

"So far as I am concerned, Monsieur," answered the Vicomtesse, calmly, "you may hang Auguste, put him in prison, drown him, or do anything you like with him."

"God help me," said the poor man, searching for his handkerchief, and utterly confounded, "why is it you have come to me, then? Why did you wake me up?" he added, so far forgetting himself.

"I came in behalf of the gentleman who had the indis-

cretion to accompany Auguste to Louisiana," she continued, "in behalf of Mr. Nicholas Temple, who is a cousin of Mr. Ritchie."

The Baron started abruptly from his chair.

"I have heard of him," he cried; "Madame knows where he is?"

"I know where he is. It is that which I came to tell your Excellency."

"*Hein!*" said his Excellency, again nonplussed. "You came to tell me where he is? And where the — the other one is?"

"*Parfaitement,*" said Madame. "But before I tell you where they are, I wish to tell you something about Mr. Temple."

"Madame, I know something of him already," said the Baron, impatiently.

"Ah," said she, "from Gignoux. And what do you hear from Gignoux?"

This was another shock, under which the Baron fairly staggered.

"*Diable!* is Madame la Vicomtesse in the plot?" he cried. "What does Madame know of Gignoux?"

Madame's manner suddenly froze.

"I am likely to be in the plot, Monsieur," she said. "I am likely to be in a plot which has for its furtherance that abominable anarchy which deprived me of my home and estates, of my relatives and friends and my sovereign."

"A thousand pardons, Madame la Vicomtesse," said the Baron, more at sea than ever. "I have had much to do these last years, and the heat and the Republicans have got on my temper. Will Madame la Vicomtesse pray explain?"

"I was about to do so when your Excellency interrupted," said Madame. "You see before you Mr. Ritchie, barrister, of Louisville, Kentucky, whose character of sobriety, dependance, and ability" (there was a little gleam in her eye as she gave me this array of virtues) "can be perfectly established. When he came to New Orleans some years ago he brought letters to Monsieur de

St. Gré from Monsieur Gratiot and Colonel Chouteau of St. Louis, and he is known to Mr. Clark and to Monsieur Vigo. He is a Federalist, as you know, and has no sympathy with the Jacobins."

"*Eh bien*, Mr. Ritchie," said the Baron, getting his breath, "you are fortunate in your advocate. Madame la Vicomtesse neglected to say that she was your friend, the greatest of all recommendations in my eyes."

"You are delightful, Monsieur le Baron," said the Vicomtesse.

"Perhaps Mr. Ritchie can tell me something of this expedition," said the Baron, his eyes growing smaller as he looked at me.

"Willingly," I answered. "Although I know that your Excellency is well informed, and that Monsieur Vigo has doubtless given you many of the details that I know."

He interrupted me with a grunt.

"You Americans are clever people, Monsieur," he said; "you contrive to combine shrewdness with frankness."

"If I had anything to hide from your Excellency, I should not be here," I answered. "The expedition, as you know, has been as much of a farce as Citizen Genêt's commissions. But it has been a sad farce to me, inasmuch as it involves the honor of my old friend and Colonel, General Clark, and the safety of my cousin, Mr. Temple."

"So you were with Clark in Illinois?" said the Baron, craftily. "Pardon me, Mr. Ritchie, but I should have said that you are too young."

"Monsieur Vigo will tell you that I was the drummer boy of the regiment, and a sort of ward of the Colonel's. I used to clean his guns and cook his food."

"And you did not see fit to follow your Colonel to Louisiana?" said his Excellency, for he had been trained in a service of suspicion.

"General Clark is not what he was," I replied, chafing a little at his manner; "your Excellency knows that, and I put loyalty to my government before friendship. And I might remind your Excellency that I am neither an adventurer nor a fool."

The little Baron surprised me by laughing. His irritability and his good nature ran in streaks.

"There is no occasion to, Mr. Ritchie," he answered. "I have seen something of men in my time. In which category do you place your cousin, Mr. Temple?"

"If a love of travel and excitement and danger constitutes an adventurer, Mr. Temple is such," I said. "Fortunately the main spur of the adventurer's character is lacking in his case. I refer to the desire for money. Mr. Temple has an annuity from his father's estate in Charleston which puts him beyond the pale of the fortune-seeker, and I firmly believe that if your Excellency sees fit to allow him to leave the province, and if certain disquieting elements can be removed from his life" (I glanced at the Vicomtesse), "he will settle down and become a useful citizen of the United States. As much as I dislike to submit to a stranger private details in the life of a member of my family, I feel that I must tell your Excellency something of Mr. Temple's career, in order that you may know that restlessness and the thirst for adventure were the only motives that led him into this foolish undertaking."

"Pray proceed, Mr. Ritchie," said the Baron.

I was surprised not to find him more restless, and in addition the glance of approbation which the Vicomtesse gave me spurred me on. However distasteful, I had the sense to see that I must hold nothing back of which his Excellency might at any time become cognizant, and therefore I told him as briefly as possible Nick's story, leaving out only the episode with Antoinette. When I came to the relation of the affairs which occurred at Les Îles five years before and told his Excellency that Mrs. Temple had since been living in the Rue Bourbon as Mrs. Clive, unknown to her son, the Baron broke in upon me.

"So the mystery of that woman is cleared at last," he said, and turned to the Vicomtesse. "I have learned that you have been a frequent visitor, Madame."

"Not a sparrow falls to the ground in Louisiana that your Excellency does not hear of it," she answered.

"And Gignoux?" he said, speaking to me again.

"As I told you, Monsieur le Baron," I answered, "I have come to New Orleans at a personal sacrifice to induce my cousin to abandon this matter, and I went out last evening to try to get word of him." This was not strictly true. "I saw Monsieur Gignoux in conference with some of your officers who came out of this hotel."

"You have sharp eyes, Monsieur," he remarked.

"I suspected the man when I met him in Kentucky," I continued, not heeding this. "Monsieur Vigo himself distrusted him. To say that Gignoux were deep in the councils of the expedition, that he held a commission from Citizen Genêt, I realize will have no weight with your Excellency, — provided the man is in the secret service of his Majesty the King of Spain."

"Mr. Ritchie," said the Baron, "you are a young man and I an old one. If I tell you that I have a great respect for your astuteness and ability, do not put it down to flattery. I wish that your countrymen, who are coming down the river like driftwood, more resembled you. As for Citizen Gignoux," he went on, smiling, and wiping his face, "let not your heart be troubled. His Majesty's minister at Philadelphia has written me letters on the subject. I am contemplating for Monsieur Gignoux a sea voyage to Havana, and he is at present partaking of my hospitality in the *calabozo*."

"In the *calabozo*!" I cried, overwhelmed at this example of Spanish justice and omniscience.

"Precisely," said the Baron, drumming with his fingers on his fat knee. "And now," he added, "perhaps Madame la Vicomtesse is ready to tell me of the whereabouts of Mr. Temple and her estimable cousin, Auguste. It may interest her to know why I have allowed them their liberty so long."

"A point on which I have been consumed with curiosity — since I have begun to tremble at the amazing thoroughness of your Excellency's system," said the Vicomtesse.

His Excellency scarcely looked the tyrant as he sat before us, with his calves crossed and his hands folded on his waistcoat and his little black eyes twinkling.

"It is because," he said, "there are many French planters in the province bitten with the three horrors" (he meant Liberty, Equality, and Fraternity), "I sent six to Havana; and if Monsieur Étienne de Boré had not, in the nick of time for him, discovered how to make sugar he would have gone, too. I had an idea that the Sieur de St. Gré and Mr. Temple might act as a bait to reveal the disease in some others. Ha, I am cleverer than you thought, Mr. Ritchie. You are surprised?"

I was surprised, and showed it.

"Come," he said, "you are astute. Why did you think I left them at liberty?"

"I thought your Excellency believed them to be harmless, as they are," I replied.

He turned again to the Vicomtesse. "You have picked up a diplomat, Madame. I must confess that I misjudged him when you introduced him to me. And again, where are Mr. Temple and your estimable cousin? Shall I tell you? They are at old Lamarque's, on the plantation of Philippe de St. Gré."

"They were, your Excellency," said the Vicomtesse.

"Eh?" exclaimed the Baron, jumping.

"Mademoiselle de St. Gré has given her brother eight hundred livres, and he is probably by this time on board a French ship at the English Turn. He is very badly frightened. I will give your Excellency one more surprise."

"Madame la Vicomtesse," said the Baron, "I have heard that, but for your coolness and adroitness, Monsieur le Vicomte, your husband, and several other noblemen and their ladies and some of her Majesty's letters and jewels would never have gotten out of France. I take this opportunity of saying that I have the greatest respect for your intelligence. Now what is the surprise?"

"That your Excellency intended that both Mr. Temple and Auguste de St. Gré were to escape on that ship."

"*Mille tonneres*," exclaimed the Baron, staring at her, and straightway he fell into a fit of laughter that left him coughing and choking and perspiring as only a man in his

condition of flesh can perspire. To say that I was bewildered by this last evidence of the insight of the woman beside me would be to put it mildly. The Vicomtesse sat quietly watching him, the wonted look of repressed laughter on her face, and by degrees his Excellency grew calm again.

"*Mon Dieu*," said he, "I always like to cross swords with you, Madame la Vicomtesse, yet this encounter has been more pleasurable than any I have had since I came to Louisiana. But, *diable*," he cried, "just as I was congratulating myself that I was to have one American the less, you come and tell me that he has refused to flee. Out of consideration for the character and services of Monsieur Philippe de St. Gré I was willing to let them both escape. But now?"

"Mr. Temple is not known in New Orleans except to the St. Gré family," said the Vicomtesse. "He is a man of honor. Suppose Mr. Ritchie were to bring him to your Excellency, and he were to give you his word that he would leave the province at the first opportunity? He now wishes to see his mother before she dies, and it was as much as we could do this morning to persuade him from going to her openly in the face of arrest."

But the Baron was old in a service which did not do things hastily.

"He is well enough where he is for to-day," said his Excellency, resuming his official manner. "To-night after dark I will send down an officer and have him brought before me. He will not then be seen in custody by any one, and provided I am satisfied with him he may go to the Rue Bourbon."

The little Baron rose and bowed to the Vicomtesse to signify that the audience was ended, and he added, as he kissed her hand, "Madame la Vicomtesse, it is a pleasure to be able to serve such a woman as you."

CHAPTER X

THE SCOURGE

As we went through the court I felt as though I had been tied to a string, suspended in the air, and spun. This was undoubtedly due to the heat. And after the astonishing conversation from which we had come, my admiration for the lady beside me was magnified to a veritable awe. We reached the archway. Madame la Vicomtesse held me lightly by the edge of my coat, and I stood looking down at her.

"Wait a minute, Mr. Ritchie," she said, glancing at the few figures hurrying across the Place d'Armes; "those are only Americans, and they are too busy to see us standing here. What do you propose to do now?"

"We must get word to Nick as we promised, that he may know what to expect," I replied. "Suppose we go to Monsieur de St. Gré's house and write him a letter?"

"No," said the Vicomtesse, with decision, "I am going to Mrs. Temple's. I shall write the letter from there and send it by André, and you will go direct to Madame Gravois's."

Her glance rested anxiously upon my face, and there came an expression in her eyes which disturbed me strangely. I had not known it since the days when Polly Ann used to mother me. But I did not mean to give up.

"I am not tired, Madame la Vicomtesse," I answered, "and I will go with you to Mrs. Temple's."

"Give me your hand," she said, and smiled. "André and my maid are used to my vagaries, and your own countrymen will not mind. Give me your hand, Mr. Ritchie."

I gave it willingly enough, with a thrill as she took it