

CHAPTER XI

"IN THE MIDST OF LIFE"

THE Alcalde had stopped on the step with an exclamation at something in the darkness outside, and he backed, bowing, into the room again to make way for some one. A lady, slim, gowned and veiled in black and followed by a negress, swept past him. The lady lifted her veil and stood before us.

"Antoinette!" exclaimed the Vicomtesse, going to her.

The girl did not answer at once. Her suffering seemed to have brought upon her a certain acceptance of misfortune as inevitable. Her face, framed in the black veil, was never more beautiful than on that night.

"What is the Alcalde doing here?" she said.

The officer himself answered the question.

"I am leaving, Mademoiselle," said he. He reached out his hands toward her, appealingly. "Do you not remember me, Mademoiselle? You brought the good sister to see my wife."

"I remember you," said Antoinette.

"Do not stay here, Mademoiselle!" he cried. "There is — there is yellow fever."

"So that is it," said Antoinette, unheeding him and looking at her cousin. "She has yellow fever, then?"

"I beg you to come away, Mademoiselle!" the man entreated.

"Please go," she said to him. He looked at her, and went out silently, closing the doors after him. "Why was he here?" she asked again.

"He came to get Mr. Temple, my dear," said the Vicomtesse. The girl's lips framed his name, but did not speak it.

"Where is he?" she asked slowly.

The Vicomtesse pointed towards the bedroom.

"In there," she answered, "with his mother."

"He came to her?" Antoinette asked quite simply.

The Vicomtesse glanced at me, and drew the veil gently from the girl's shoulders. She led her, unresisting, to a chair. I looked at them. The difference in their ages was not so great. Both had suffered cruelly; one had seen the world, the other had not, and yet the contrast lay not here. Both had followed the gospel of helpfulness to others, but one as a *religieuse*, innocent of the sin around her, though poignant of the sorrow it caused. The other, knowing evil with an insight that went far beyond intuition, fought with that, too.

"I will tell you, Antoinette," began the Vicomtesse; "it was as you said. Mr. Ritchie and I found him at Lamarque's. He had not taken your money; he did not even know that Auguste had gone to see you. He did not even know," she said, bending over the girl, "that he was on your father's plantation. When we told him that, he would have left it at once."

"Yes," she said.

"He did not know that his mother was still in New Orleans. And when we told him how ill she was he would have come to her then. It was as much as we could do to persuade him to wait until we had seen Monsieur de Carondelet. Mr. Ritchie and I came directly to town and saw his Excellency."

It was characteristic of the Vicomtesse that she told this almost with a man's brevity, that she omitted the stress and trouble and pain of it all. These things were done; the tact and skill and character of her who had accomplished them were not spoken of. The girl listened immovable, her lips parted and her eyes far away. Suddenly, with an awakening, she turned to Hélène.

"You did this!" she cried.

"Mr. Ritchie and I together," said the Vicomtesse.

Her next exclamation was an odd one, showing how the mind works at such a time.

"But his Excellency was having his siesta!" said Antoinette.

Again Hélène glanced at me, but I cannot be sure that she smiled.

"We thought the matter of sufficient importance to awake his Excellency," said Hélène.

"And his Excellency?" asked Antoinette. In that moment all three of us seemed to have forgotten the tragedy behind the wall.

"His Excellency thought so, too, when we had explained it sufficiently," Hélène answered.

The girl seemed suddenly to throw off the weight of her grief. She seized the hand of the Vicomtesse in both of her own.

"The Baron pardoned him?" she cried. "Tell me what his Excellency said. Why are you keeping it from me?"

"Hush, my dear," said the Vicomtesse. "Yes, he pardoned him. Mr. Temple was to have come to the city to-night with an officer. Mr. Ritchie and I came to this house together, and we found —"

"Yes, yes," said Antoinette.

"Mr. Ritchie wrote to Mr. Temple that his Excellency was to send for him to-night, but André told him of the fever, and he came here in the face of danger to see her before she died. He galloped past the sentry at the gate, and the Alcalde followed him from there."

"And came here to arrest him?" cried Antoinette. Before the Vicomtesse could prevent her she sprang from her chair, ran to the door, and was peering out into the darkness. "Is the Alcalde waiting?"

"No, no," said the Vicomtesse, gently bringing her back. "I wrote to his Excellency and we have his permission for Mr. Temple to remain here."

Suddenly Antoinette stopped in the middle of the floor, facing the candle, her hands clasped, her eyes wide with fear. We started, Hélène and I, as we looked at her.

"What is it, my dear?" said the Vicomtesse, laying a hand on her arm.

"He will take it," she said, "he will take the fever."

A strange thing happened. Many, many times have I thought of it since, and I did not know its meaning then. I had looked to see the Vicomtesse comfort her. But Hélène took a step towards me, my eyes met hers, and in them reflected was the terror I had seen in Antoinette's. At that instant I, too, forgot the girl, and we turned to see that she had sunk down, weeping, in the chair. Then we both went to her, I through some instinct I did not fathom.

Hélène's hand, resting on Antoinette's shoulder, trembled there. It may well have been my own weakness which made me think her body swayed, which made me reach out as if to catch her. However marvellous her strength and fortitude, these could not last forever. And — Heaven help me — my own were fast failing. Once the room had seemed to me all in darkness. Then I saw the Vicomtesse leaning tenderly over her cousin and whispering in her ear, and Antoinette rising, clinging to her.

"I will go," she faltered, "I will go. He must not know I have been here. You — you will not tell him?"

"No, I shall not tell him," answered the Vicomtesse.

"And — you will send word to me, Hélène?"

"Yes, dear."

Antoinette kissed her, and began to adjust her veil mechanically. I looked on, bewildered by the workings of the feminine mind. Why was she going? The Vicomtesse gave me no hint. But suddenly the girl's arms fell to her sides, and she stood staring, not so much as a cry escaping her. The bedroom doors had been opened, and between them was the tall figure of Nicholas Temple. So they met again after many years, and she who had parted them had brought them together once more. He came a step into the room, as though her eyes had drawn him so far. Even then he did not speak her name.

"Go," he said. "Go, you must not stay here. Go!"

She bowed her head.

"I was going," she answered. "I — I am going."

"But you must go at once," he cried excitedly. "Do you know what is in there?" and he pointed towards the bedroom.

"Yes, yes, I know," she said, "I know."

"Then go," he cried. "As it is you have risked too much."

She lifted up her head and looked at him. There was a new-born note in her voice, a tremulous note of joy in the midst of sorrow. It was of her he was thinking!

"And you?" she said. "You have come and remained."

"She is my mother," he answered. "God knows it was the least I could have done."

Twice she had changed before our eyes, and now we beheld a new and yet more startling transformation. When she spoke there was no reproach in her voice, but triumph. Antoinette undid her veil.

"Yes, she is your mother," she answered; "but for many years she has been my friend. I will go to her. She cannot forbid me now. Hélène has been with her," she said, turning to where the Vicomtesse stood watching her intently. "Hélène has been with her. And shall I, who have longed to see her these many years, leave her now?"

"But you were going!" he cried, beside himself with apprehension at this new turning. "You told me that you were going."

Truly, man is born without perception.

"Yes, I told you that," she replied almost defiantly.

"And why were you going?" he demanded. Then I had a sudden desire to shake him.

Antoinette was mute.

"You yourself must find the answer to that question, Mr. Temple," said the Vicomtesse, quietly.

He turned and stared at Hélène, and she seemed to smile. Then as his eyes went back, irresistibly, to the other, a light that was wonderful to see dawned and grew in them. I shall never forget him as he stood, handsome and fearless, a gentleman still, despite his years of wandering and adventure, and in this supreme moment unselfish. The wilful, masterful boy had become a man at last.

He started forward, stopped, trembling with a shock of remembrance, and gave back again.

"You cannot come," he said; "I cannot let you take this risk. Tell her she cannot come, Madame," he said to Hélène. "For the love of God send her home again."

But there were forces which even Hélène could not stem. He had turned to go back, he had seized the door, but Antoinette was before him. Custom does not weigh at such a time. Had she not read his avowal? She had his hand in hers, heedless of us who watched. At first he sought to free himself, but she clung to it with all the strength of her love, — yet she did not look up at him.

"I will come with you," she said in a low voice, "I will come with you, Nick."

How quaintly she spoke his name, and gently, and timidly — ay, and with a supreme courage. True to him through all those numb years of waiting, this was a little thing — that they should face death together. A little thing, and yet the greatest joy that God can bestow upon a good woman. He looked down at her with a great tenderness, he spoke her name, and I knew that he had taken her at last into his arms.

"Come," he said.

They went in together, and the doors closed behind them.

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Antoinette's maid was on the step, and the Vicomtesse and I were alone once more in the little parlor. I remember well the sense of unreality I had, and how it troubled me. I remember how what I had seen and heard was turning, turning in my mind. Nick had come back to Antoinette. They were together in that room, and Mrs. Temple was dying — dying. No, it could not be so. Again, I was in the garden at Les Îles on a night that was all perfume, and I saw the flowers all ghostly white under the moon. And then, suddenly, I was watching the green candle sputter, and out of the stillness came a cry — the *sereno* calling the hour of the night. How my head throbbed! It was keeping time to some rhythm, I knew not what. Yes, it was the song my father used to sing: —

*"I've faught on land, I've faught at sea,
At hame I've faught my aunty, O!"*

But New Orleans was hot, burning hot, and this could not be cold I felt. Ah, I had it, the water was cold going to Vincennes, so cold!

A voice called me. No matter where I had gone, I think I would have come back at the sound of it. I listened intently, that I might lose no word of what it said. I knew the voice. Had it not called to me many times in my life before? But now there was fear in it, and fear gave it a vibrant sweetness, fear gave it a quality that made it mine — mine.

“You are shivering.”

That was all it said, and it called from across the sea. And the sea was cold, — cold and green under the gray light. If she who called to me would only come with the warmth of her love! The sea faded, the light fell, and I was in the eternal cold of space between the whirling worlds. If she could but find me! Was not that her hand in mine? Did I not feel her near me, touching me? I wondered that I should hear myself as I answered her.

“I am not ill,” I said. “Speak to me again.”

She was pressing my hand now, I saw her bending over me, I felt her hair as it brushed my face. She spoke again. There was a tremor in her voice, and to that alone I listened. The words were decisive, of command, and with them some sense as of a haven near came to me. Another voice answered in a strange tongue, saying seemingly: —

“*Oui, Madame — malé couri — bon djé! — malé couri!*”

I heard the doors close, and the sound of footsteps running and dying along the banquette, and after that my shoulders were raised and something wrapped about them. Then stillness again, the stillness that comes between waking and sleeping, between pain and calm. And at times when I felt her hand fall into mine or press against my brow, the pain seemed more endurable. After that I recall being lifted, being borne along. I opened my eyes once and saw, above a tile-crowned wall, the moon all yellow and distorted in the sky. Then a gate clicked, dungeon blackness, half-light again, ascent, oblivion.

CHAPTER XII

VISIONS, AND AN AWAKENING

I HAVE still sharp memories of the tortures of that illness, though it befell so long ago. At times, when my mind was gone from me, I cried out I know not what of jargon, of sentiment, of the horrors I had beheld in my life. I lived again the pleasant scenes, warped and burlesqued almost beyond cognizance, and the tragedies were magnified a hundred fold. Thus it would be: on the low, white ceiling five cracks came together, and that was a device. And the device would take on color, red-bronze like the sumach in the autumn and streaks of vermilion, and two glowing coals that were eyes, and above them eagles' feathers, and the cracks became bramble bushes. I was behind the log, and at times I started and knew that it was a hideous dream, and again Polly Ann was clutching me and praying me to hold back, and I broke from her and splashed over the slippery limestone bed of the creek to fight single-handed. Through all the fearful struggle I heard her calling me piteously to come back to her. When the brute got me under water I could not hear her, but her voice came back suddenly (as when a door opens) and it was like the wind singing in the poplars. Was it Polly Ann's voice?

Again, I sat with Nick under the trees on the lawn at Temple Bow, and the world was dark with the coming storm. I knew and he knew that the storm was brewing that I might be thrust out into it. And then in the blackness, when the air was filled with all the fair things of the earth torn asunder, a beautiful woman came through the noise and the fury, and we ran to her and clung to