

heard repeating the words, "She is innocent, of course she is innocent!"

"You perceive, then," continued the countess, pursuing her advantage, "that I have powerful enemies, since they precede me on my journey with slanderous falsehoods, and try to turn the honest hearts of the villagers of France against me and my son. I see that they have been here, and have bribed you to insult me."

"That is true," cried a chorus of rough voices. "We were paid to insult you and to refuse you post-horses."

"Well, then," returned Olympia, with one of her most enchanting smiles, "I, too, will give you money, but it shall not be to bribe you to resent my injuries. It will be to dispose of as your kind hearts deem best."

She threw out a handful of silver, for which some began to stoop and scramble, while others, emboldened by the sight of such a largesse, crowded around, stretching out their hands for a "souvenir."

"Whoever, at the expiration of fifteen minutes, furnishes me eight fresh horses, shall receive eight louis d'ors as a token of my gratitude," said the sagacious Olympia.

No sooner were the words spoken, than every man there flew to earn the token. In less than a minute the ground was cleared, and naught was to be seen but a few women and children, still bent upon searching for the silver.

The countess returned to her carriage, where she found Eugene, looking embarrassed and ashamed. He immediately apologized for his involuntary disregard of her injunctions.

"Dear mother, forgive me; in this last dilemma I have conducted myself like a madman, while you have shown that you possess true heroism. I see how very much wiser you are than I; and I solemnly promise to attempt no more violence, where personal violence is not offered to us. But to say that I could exchange my weapons for yours, I cannot. I never shall learn to dissimulate and flatter."

His mother slightly raised her shoulders. "You will learn it in time, when you will have learned to despise your fellows as I do.—But see! Heaven be praised, here come the horses."

In a few moments, eight brown hands were outstretched to receive the gold, and, amid the huzzas of the multitude, the Countess de Soissons pursued her journey.

CHAPTER IX.

THE PARTING.

EUGENE looked gloomily out of the carriage-window, and heard a succession of deep sighs.

"Shall I tell you why you are so sad?" said Olympia to her son.

"I am sad because I feel my miserable impotence," replied he, moodily. "I am sad because I must at last acknowledge that Mazarin was right when he said that gold was the only divinity devoutly worshipped on earth."

"Speak not slightly of gold," cried Olympia, laughing; "it has probably saved my life to-day. Unluckily we are far from the end of our journey, and I may not have enough of this precious gold wherewith to purchase forbearance as we go."

"We are not far from the frontier, and once in Flanders, you are safe."

"Not so. There are no bounds to the realms of this yellow divinity. Its worshippers are everywhere, and Louvois will seek them in France and out of it. But I think I have a device whereby we may outwit our mighty oppressor, and avoid further contumely."

"What is it, mother?"

"I will take another and a less public road. You shall go with me as far as the boundaries. We can pass the night at Rocroy, and part on the morrow: you to retrace your steps, I to continue my flight in a plain carriage, with two horses and no attendants."

"I have promised to submit, and will obey you implicitly," returned Eugene, respectfully. "Since you command me to go, we will part at Rocroy."

"Ah!" sighed the countess, "I would we were there, for indeed I am exhausted, and yearn for rest."

Many hours, however, went by, before they reached Rocroy, and, wherever their need compelled them to stop, they met with the same insults; the same efforts were to be gone through, to propitiate the rabble; and Eugene was forced to endure it all, while his martyred heart was wrung with anguish that no words are adequate to picture.

At last, to the relief of the prince, and the great joy of his mother, who was almost fainting with fatigue, the fortress was reached, the foaming horses were drawn up, and the officer in command was seen coming through a postern, followed by six of his men.

It was the custom in France to search every vehicle that left the frontier; and, in compliance with this custom, the officer advanced promptly to meet the travellers. The countess had so often submitted to this formality, that when her name and destination were asked, she avowed them both without the least hesitation.

"I hope," added she, "that the declaration of my name and rank will exempt me from the detention usual in these cases, for I am in great haste, and you will oblige me by ordering the gates to be opened at once."

"I am sorry to disoblige your highness," replied the officer, with a supercilious smile, "but that very declaration compels me to refuse you egress through the gates of Rocroy."

"What in Heaven's name do you mean, sir?" exclaimed Olympia, alarmed.

"I mean that Monsieur Louvois's orders are express that the Countess de Soissons shall not be suffered to pass the fortress, and his orders here are paramount."

With these words the officer turned his back, made a sign to his men, and in less than a minute the party had disappeared, and the inexorable gates had closed.

The countess sighed wearily. "Let us go farther," said she. "In the next village we will at least find lodgings, and rest for the night."

The horses' heads were turned, and the tired animals urged on, until a neighboring town had been reached, whose stately

inn, with its brightly-illuminated entrance, gave promise of comfortable entertainment for man and beast.

Three well-dressed individuals stood in the lofty door-way, and as the carriage drove up they came forward to meet it. Eugene, shielding his mother from sight, asked if they could alight to sup and lodge there for the night.

"That depends upon circumstances," replied one of them. "You must first have the goodness to give us your name."

"My name is nothing to the purpose," cried Eugene, impatiently. "I ask merely whether strangers can be accommodated with supper and beds in this house."

"The name is every thing, sir, and, before I answer your inquiry, I must know it—unless, indeed, you are anxious to conceal it."

"A Prince de Carignan has never yet had reason to conceal his name," said Eugene, haughtily.

"Ah! your highness, then, is the Prince de Carignan! And may this lady in the corner there be your mother, the Countess de Soissons?"

"Yes—the Countess de Soissons; and now that you are made acquainted with our names—"

"I regret that I cannot receive you," interrupted the host. "Were you alone, my house and every thing within my doors would be at the service of the Prince de Carignan, but for his mother we have no accommodation. We are afraid of noble ladies that use poison."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth, before he sprang up the steps, and closed the doors of the inn in their faces.

"Ah!" muttered Olympia, between her teeth, "such cruelty as this is enough to drive any one to the use of poison! And if I live I will be revenged on yonder churl that has sent me out into the darkness, denying me food and rest!"

"Whither will your highness go now?" asked the footman; and, by the tone of the inquiry, Olympia felt that her menials were rapidly losing all respect for a "highness" that could no longer command entrance into a public inn.

"Take a by-way to the next village, and stop at the first peasant's hut on the road."

The coachman was growing surly, and the poor, worn-out

horses were so stiff that they could barely travel any longer. The village, however, was only a few miles off, so that they were not more than an hour in reaching a miserable hovel, at the door of which was a man in the superlative degree of astonishment. He, at least, had never heard of Louvois and Louvois's orders, so that, for the promise of a gold-piece, he was easily induced to receive the desponding party. But his only bed was of straw, and he feared their excellencies would not be satisfied with his fare.

"My friend," said Olympia, "to an exhausted traveller a litter of straw is as welcome as a bed of down;" and, with a sigh of relief, she took the arm of her son, and entered the hut.

"Are you married?" asked she, taking her seat on a wooden stool, near the chimney.

"Yes; and here is my wife," said he, as a young woman, blushing and courtesying, came forward to welcome her distinguished visitors.

"Have you a wagon and horses?" continued the countess.

"A wagon, your excellency, but no horses: we have two sturdy oxen, instead."

"Would you like to earn enough money to-night to buy yourself a handsome team?"

"Yes, indeed, we would," cried husband and wife simultaneously.

"Then," said Olympia to the latter, "sell me your Sunday-gown, let me have something to eat, and throw down some clean straw in the corner, where I may sleep for a few hours. When I awake," added she to the man, "harness your oxen, and take me in your wagon beyond the frontier, to Flanders. If you will do this, you shall have fifty louis d'ors for your trouble."

The peasant grinned responsive. "That will I," cried he, slapping his thigh; "and, if you say so, I'll take you as far as Chimay, which is a good way beyond the frontier."

"Right," said the countess, joyfully. "To Chimay we go. Now, my good girl, bring me your best holiday-suit."

The young woman ran, breathless with joy, to fetch her attire, while the man went out to feed his oxen. Olympia then addressed herself to Eugene:

"Now, my son, we are alone, and I claim the fulfilment of your promise. You have seen me to a place of safety, and you must return to Paris. Listen now to my commands, perhaps the last I may ever give you."

"Command, dear mother, and I will obey. But do not ask me to abandon you to the danger which still threatens you."

"You exaggerate my danger, Eugene; and, by remaining with me, you increase it. You are too impulsive to be a discreet companion, and I exact of you to leave me. Disguised as a peasant-woman, and travelling in an ox-cart, my foes will never discover me, and I have every hope of reaching my destination in safety."

"It is impossible," persisted Eugene, his eyes filling with tears.

"My child, must I then force you to do my bidding?"

"No force can compel me to do what I know to be craven and dishonorable," cried the prince. "Mother, I must not—cannot obey."

"For one short moment, the eyes of the countess flashed fire, but as suddenly they softened, and she smilingly extended her hand:

"Well—let us contend no longer, dear boy; I see that, for once, I must succumb to your strong will. Here comes the woman with my disguise. Go out a while, and let me change my dress. Send the footman with a little casket you will find in the carriage-box. Here is the key. And, Eugene, do beg the man to send in our supper, that it may be ready for us when I shall have metamorphosed myself into a peasant-woman."

About fifteen minutes later, the countess called her son. "How do you like me?" she said. "Am I sufficiently disguised to pass for that fellow's wife? What a strange picture we will make—you and I, seated on a sack of wool, and drawn by a pair of creeping oxen! 'Tis well for you that you are an abbé; were you any thing else, you could not venture to travel by the side of a woman of low degree. But—come, let us enjoy our supper; I, for one, am both hungry and sleepy."

She drew a stool up to the table, which was spread with a clean cloth, and covered with platters of bread, butter, and

cheese. Between two wooden bowls stood a large pitcher of milk. These bowls the countess filled to the brim, and handed one to her son.

"Pledge me a bumper, and wish me a prosperous journey," said she, playfully, while she put the cup to her lips, all the while narrowly watching Eugene.

He followed her example, and drained his bowl to its last drop. Then, striving to fall in with her mood, he said:

"You see how obedient I am, and yet you know that I am not one of those that would be content to live in a land flowing with milk and honey."

"Thank you," replied his mother, "for this one act of obedience. I could wish you were as submissive in other things. But—what is the matter, boy? You are pale."

"I do not know," stammered Eugene, his tongue seeming paralyzed. "I am sick—I want—fresh air! Some air, mother!"

He attempted to rise, but fell back into his seat.

"Mother," murmured he, while his features were becoming distorted by pain, "have you drugged—"

He could articulate no longer, but gazed upon his mother with fast-glazing eyes, until slowly his dull orbs closed, and his head dropped heavily upon the table.

"Three minutes," said the countess, quietly. "Only three minutes, and he sleeps soundly. La Voisin was a wonderful creature! What a high privilege it is to reign over the will of another human being with a might as mysterious as it is irresistible? And greater yet the privilege of dispensing life or death! Why did I not exercise that power over the proud man that follows me with such unrelenting hate? Ah, Louvois, had I been braver, I had not endured your contumely! Poor, weak fool that I was, not to wrestle with fate and master it! But—it is useless to repine. Let me see. Eugene will sleep four hours, and, ere he wakes, I must be beyond the frontiers of hostile France."

She left the little room and joined the peasant's wife.

"I have prevailed upon my son to return to Paris," said she, in that caressing tone which she had practised so successfully through the day. "His health is delicate, and the hard-

ships of our hurried journey have so exhausted him that he has fallen into a profound sleep. Do not disturb him. I entreat of you, dear friend, and, when he awakes, give him this note."

She drew from her pocket-book a paper, and, giving it to the woman, repeated her request that her dear boy should not be disturbed.

"I will take my seat at the door, madame, and await the wakening of Monsieur l'Abbé, to deliver your highness's note. But will you too not rest awhile, before you go on? I think you look as if you needed sleep quite as much as your son."

"No, no, thank you, I must reach Flanders before sunrise," replied Olympia, "and do beg your husband to use dispatch, for I am impatient to start. Will you also be so obliging as to call my servants? I must say a few words to them before we part."

When the men came in, their mistress, in spite of her costume, wore a demeanor so lofty, that they were afraid to betray their cognition of her disguise, and were awed back into their usual stolid and obsequious deportment.

"You have witnessed," said the countess, "the persecutions that have been heaped upon me since yesterday, and of course you are not surprised to find that I have adopted a disguise by which I may hope to escape further outrage. You have both been among the trustiest of my servants, and to you, rather than to my son, I confide my parting instructions. He is now asleep, and I will not even waken him to take leave; for he would wish to accompany me, and so compromise both his safety and mine. I therefore journey in secret and alone. As for you, be in readiness to return to Paris by daylight, and do all that you can for the comfort of my son on the way."

"I served his father," replied the coachman, "and will do my duty by his son, your highness. Rely upon me."

"And I," added the footman, "will do my best to deserve the praise your highness has so kindly vouchsafed to us, by serving my lord and prince as faithfully as I know how."

"Right, my good friends. You will always find him, in return, a gracious and generous master. You will have no difficulty in procuring relays or lodging on your return to

Paris: oblige me, then, by travelling with all speed, for it is important that my son arrive quickly. And now farewell, and accept this as a remembrance."

Dropping several gold-pieces into the hands of each one, their proud mistress inclined her head, and passed out of the hut.

"If your highness is ready," said the peasant's wife, meeting her on the threshold, "my husband is in his wagon waiting."

"In one moment," replied Olympia; "I must return to take a last kiss from my son."

She hastened back to the little room, and, stepping lightly, advanced to the table, where Eugene, his head supported by his arms, lay precisely in the position wherein she had left him. She lifted the masses of his shaggy, black hair, and gazed wistfully upon his pale face. "And if the stars are not false," whispered she, tenderly, "this feeble body enshrines a mind that shall win renown for the house of Savoy. God bless thee, my fragile, but great-hearted Eugene! As I gaze upon thy pallid brow, my whole being is inundated by the gushing waters of a love which to-night seems more than maternal! So should angels love the sons of men! Take from my lips the baptismal kisses that consecrate thee to glory! May God bless and prosper thee, my boy!"

She bent over the sleeping youth and kissed his forehead o'er and o'er. When she raised her head, among the raven masses of Eugene's hair there trembled here and there a tear, perhaps the purest that ever flowed from the turbid spring of Olympia de Soisson's corrupt heart.

One more kiss she pressed upon his clasped hands, and then she hurried away. The cart was before the door; she took her seat, and slowly the creeping oxen went out into the darkness, bearing away with them a secret which, to the wondering peasant-woman, was like Jove's descent to the daughter of Acrisius.*

Four hours passed away, and the power of the drugged cup

* Louvois's hate pursued the Countess de Soissons to Brussels, where the beggars were bribed to insult her as she passed them in the streets. She was so persecuted by the rabble that, on one occasion, when she was purchasing lace at the convent of the Béguines, they assembled in such multitudes at the

was at an end. Day was breaking, and, although by the uncertain light of the gray dawn, no object in that poor place was clearly defined, still everything was visible. Eugene raised his head and looked, bewildered, around the room. He saw at once that his mother was not there, and with a gesture of wild alarm he sprang to his feet.

"Mother, my mother!" exclaimed he.

The door opened, and the smiling peasant with a deep courtesy came forward to wish his highness good-morning.

"Your mother, excellency, has been gone these four hours," said she.

"Gone! Gracious Heaven! whither, and with whom?"

"She went to Flanders, excellency, with my husband. Do not feel unhappy, sir, I beg of you; my husband is a good, prudent fellow, and he will take her safely to Chimay. Here is a paper she left for you, and she bade me say that, as soon as I had given you an early breakfast, you would return with your servants to Paris."

Eugene clutched at the note, and returned to the table to read it. Its contents were as follows:

"My dear child, you would not obey me, and yet I could no longer brook the danger of your attendance. Although I am no adept in the art of poisoning, yet I have learned from La Voisin to prepare harmless anodynes, one of which I mingled with the cup of milk you took from my hand to-night. You sleep, dear Eugene, and I must go forth to meet my fate alone. Your knightly repugnance to what you looked upon as a desertion of your mother, has forced me to the use of means which, though perfectly innocent, I would rather not have employed. I knew no other device by which to escape your too loving vigilance.

entrance, that the nuns, to save her from being torn to pieces, were compelled to permit her to remain with them all night. Finally the governor of Netherlands was driven to take her under his own personal protection, by which it became unlawful to molest her further. After the governor became her champion, the prejudices of the people wore gradually away, until at last Olympia held her levees as she had done in her palmy days at the Hôtel de Soissons.—See Abbé de Choisy: *Mémoires*, p. 224. Renée: "Les Nièces de Mazarin," p. 212.

"Go back to Paris, my Eugene, and go with all speed, for there you can protect, there alone you can defend me. There are my enemies; and, although I dedicate you to the church, I would not have you put in practice that precept of the Scriptures which enjoins upon you to forgive your traducers, and bless those who despitefully use you. No, no! From my son's hand I await the blow that is to avenge my wounded honor and my blasted existence. Farewell! The spirit of Mazarin guide you to wisdom and success! Olympia."

"I will avenge you, my own, my precious mother," said Eugene, his teeth firmly set with bitter resolve. "The world has thrown its gauntlet to us, and, by Heaven I will wear it on my front! I have swept the dark circle of every imaginable sorrow, and my soul is athirst for strife. 'Tis a priestly office to vindicate a mother's good name, and I shall be the hierophant of an altar whereon the blood of her enemies shall be sacrificed. And now, dear maligned one," continued he, kissing the words her hand had traced, "farewell! Thou wert my first passionate love, and in my faithful heart nothing ever shall transcend thee!"

Half an hour later he was on the road to Paris; but, desirous to escape notice, Eugene travelled without footmen or outriders, and confined himself to a span of horses for his carriage. The simple equipage attracted no attention, and no one attempted to peer at its silent occupant, so that on the morning of the next day he had arrived in Paris.

It was a clear, bright morning, and perchance this might be a reason why the streets were unusually crowded; but as the prince was remarking what a multitude were astir to enjoy the beauty of a sky that was vaulted with pale-blue and silver, he observed at the same time that all were going in one direction. The throng grew denser as the carriage advanced, until it reached the Rue des Deux Écus, when it came to a dead stop. And after that it advanced but a few feet at a time, for the whole world seemed to be going, with Eugene, to the Hôtel de Soissons.

At last they reached the gates, and the prince was about to alight, when, directly in front of the palace, and within the

court, he saw the sight which had attracted the multitude thither.

Before the principal entrance of the palace were six horsemen, two of whom in their right hands held long trumpets decked with flowing ribbons. Behind these, bestriding four immense hosses of Norman breed, were four beadies in their long black gowns, and broad-brimmed hats, looped up with cockades. Behind these four were two mounted soldiers, dressed like those in front, in the municipal colors of the city of Paris, and in place of trumpets they carried halberds.

As he saw this extraordinary group, who had apparently selected the court of the Hôtel Soissons wherein to enact some ridiculous pageant, Eugene could scarcely believe his dazzled eyes. He looked again, and saw the horsemen raise their trumpets to their lips, while the air resounded with a *fanfare* that made the very windows of the palace tremble in their frames.

The multitude, that up to this moment had been struggling and contending together for place and passage, suddenly grew breathless with expectation, when a second *fanfare* rang out upon the air; and, when its clang had died away, one of the black-robed beadies cried out in a loud voice:

"We, the appointed magistrate of the venerable city of Paris, hereby do summon the Countess Olympia de Soissons, Princess of Carignan, widow of the most high the Count de Soissons, Prince Royal of Bourbon, and Prince of Carignan, to appear within three days before our tribunal, at the town-hall of our good city of Paris."

The trumpet sounded a third time, and another beadle continued the summons:

"And we, the appointed magistrate of the venerable city of Paris, do hereby accuse said Countess Olympia de Soissons and Princess de Carignan of sorcery and murder by poison. If she hold herself innocent of these charges, she will appear within the three days by law granted her wherein to answer our summons. If she do not appear within three days, she shall be held guilty by contumacy, and condemned."

Scarcely had these last words been pronounced, when the people broke out into jubilant shouts over the fearless recti-

tude of the honorable city fathers, who were not afraid to lift the avenging arm of justice against criminals in high places.

Amid the din that followed, Eugene escaped from his carriage to the private entrance, through which twice before he had passed in such indescribable anguish of heart.

Not a soul was there to greet the heir of this princely house, or bid him welcome home. The servant, who, after his repeated knockings, appeared to open the door, gazed at his young lord with a countenance wherein terror and sympathy were strangely mingled.

"Are the princesses at home?" asked Eugene.

"No, your highness, they took refuge with their grandmother, the Princess de Carignan."

"Took refuge!" echoed Eugene, staring at the man in dumb dismay.

"Yes, my lord, they were afraid of the people, who have gathered here by thousands every day since the countess left. This is the third summons that has been made for her highness, and at each one the people of Paris have flocked to the hôtel with such jeers and curses, that the poor young ladies were too terrified to remain."

"They acted prudently," replied Eugene, recovering his self-possession. "But where is the steward? And where are the other servants?"

"Latour accompanied the princesses, your highness, and has not returned. The remainder of the household have taken service elsewhere."

"What! my valet, Dupont?"

"He thought your highness had left Paris for a long time, and looked for another master."

"Then how comes it that you are here, Conrad?"

"I, my lord? Oh, that is quite another thing. I belong to a family that have served the Princes de Carignan for three generations. I myself have served them from my boyhood, and if your highness does not discharge me, I shall not do so, were the hôtel to be attacked by every churl in Paris."

As Conrad spoke these words, Eugene turned and looked affectionately at his faithful servant. "Thank you, Conrad, for your loyalty and courage; I can never grow unmindful of

such devotion. From this day you become my valet, and if you never quit my service until I discharge you, we will roam the world together as long as we both live!"

Tears of gratitude glistened in Conrad's honest eyes. "Then to the day of my death I remain with my dear lord," replied he, kneeling, and devoutly kissing the hand which Eugene had extended. "And I swear to your highness love and fealty, while God gives me life wherewith to serve you."

"I believe you, Conrad," replied Eugene, kindly, "and I thank you for the solitary welcome you have given me on my return to this unhappy house. Your loving words have drowned the clang of yonder trumpets without.—And now let us part for a while: I feel inclined to sleep."

The prince turned into a hall that led to his apartments, and entered his bed-chamber. He had scarcely taken a seat, and leaned his weary head upon his hand, before the trumpet pealed another blast, and the beadle again summoned the Countess de Soissons to answer before the tribunal of justice for her crimes!

The people shouted as though they would have rent the canopy of heaven; and Eugene, overcome by such excess of degradation, burst into a flood of tears.