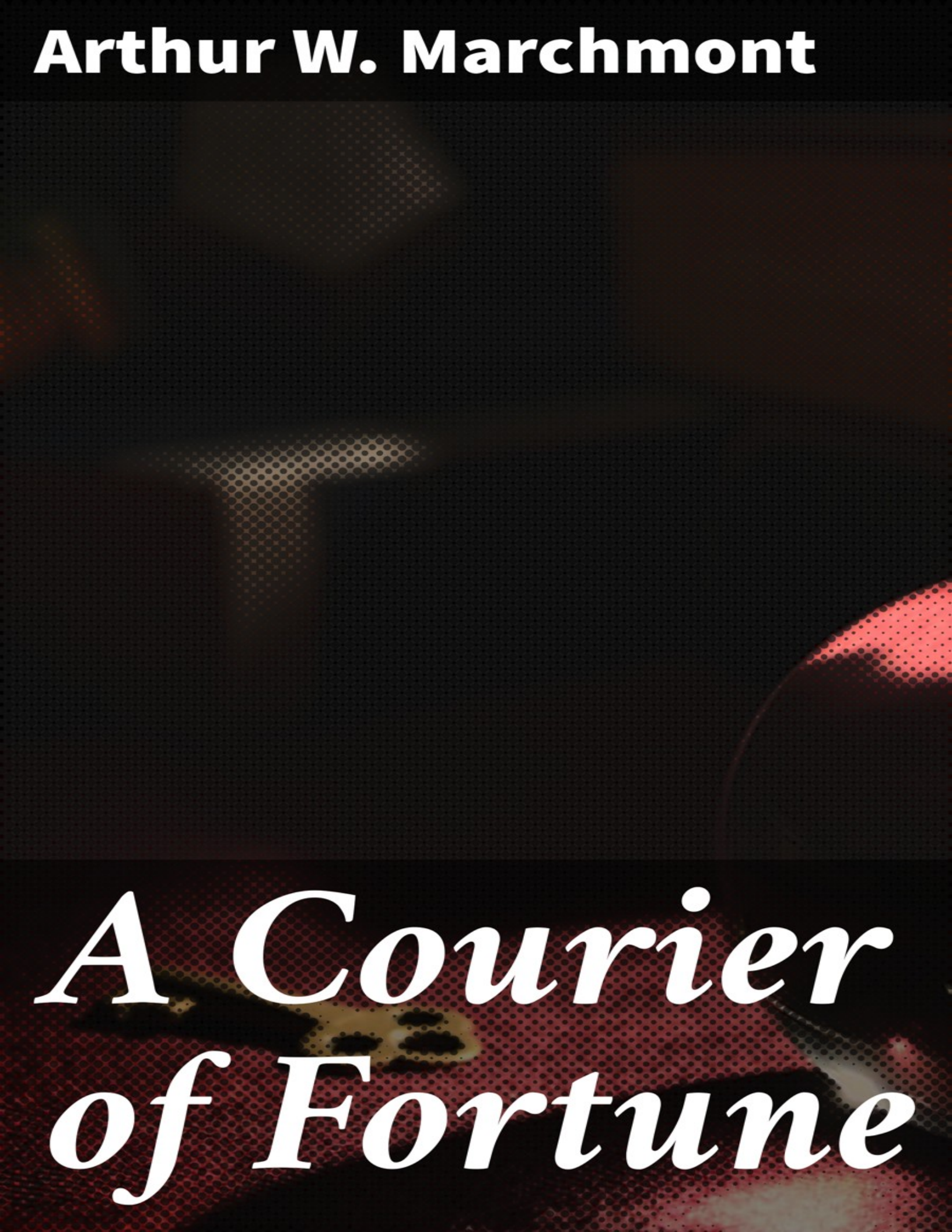
Arthur W. Marchmont



A Courier of Fortune

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CHAPTER I
THE “TIGER OF MORVAIX”

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THE hot noontide sun was pouring down into the market place of Morvaix and in the shadow cast by the great Cross of St. Jean in the centre, a handsome but very soberly dressed cavalier was sheltering from the fierce July heat and closely observing the townspeople as they clustered here and there to engage in eager animated discussion. Every now and then he cast sweeping impatient glances in all directions in evident search of some one whose delay irritated him.

It was plain even to a stranger’s eyes that the townsfolk were greatly excited, and that the reason which had drawn the people from their houses was both urgent and disturbing. All classes were present—burghers, merchants, shopkeepers, workmen, ’prentices, down to the poorest of the labourers and peasants. Men, women and children alike were gathered there; the men set-faced and bitter, the women sad and anxious. Discontent, anger, fear and sorrow were the emotions evinced among all save the many soldiers who moved among the excited knots, with leers for the women and oaths for the men, and jibes and ribald laughter one to another.

The young cavalier’s face darkened as he listened, and more than once he started as if he would interfere, but checked himself. His keen, quick blue eyes were everywhere; and presently catching sight of two closely-cowled monks clad in the black habit of their order, who

showed at a secluded corner of the square, he left his shelter and went toward them quickly but cautiously.

As he reached them one gave him a monkish greeting and the other a military salute.

“I half feared you had forgotten the appointment,” he said, in a tone of authority; “and you are certainly forgetting your part, Pascal. Monks don’t salute like soldiers.”

“Don’t I know it?” was the reply, laughingly spoken. “I haven’t trained all our tough fellows in the monkish drill for nothing. I’ll tell my beads against Dubois here for a stoup of wine”; and taking in hand the rosary which hung conspicuously at his side, he commenced to mumble a string of nonsense words, and laughed again.

“Peace, man, peace!” said the other monk, much older in years. “You’ll be overheard and ruin all.”

“Tush! they’ll only think it’s my priestly Latin.”

“I fear I ought to have left you in Paris, Pascal,” said the cavalier. “I was warned your unruly tongue would play the mischief with a scheme that calls for tact and silence.”

“Nay, my lord——”

“Not, my lord, here. I am not Gerard de Bourbon for a few days. I have borrowed the name of that dicing scoundrel, Raoul de Cobalt, and am Gerard de Cobalt. Remember that, and watch your words until you have learnt that lesson.”

“I shall not forget. This holy man here, Dubois, will keep me in order,” answered Pascal with a smile.

“Tell me the news, Dubois.”

“All has gone as you wished. The men have all arrived; and yesterday I sought an interview with the Governor and did all as you had directed.”

“He swallowed the bait?”

“Readily. I told him that the Cardinal Archbishop had sent him a hundred fighting men for his troops, and craved permission for the hundred begging friars to remain in the city until the pilgrimage southward could be resumed.”

“Good.”

“I brought the monks in,” interposed Pascal. “A hundred tough stalwarts, every man as sober as a begging friar should be; all telling their beads with unctuous unanimity, uttering ‘Pax Vobiscum’ with fervid zeal, and praying as only Bourbons can pray—for a fight.”

“Have a care, brother,” cried Dubois quickly, as a knot of the townsfolk passed.

“Have I not always care, holy brother?” cried Pascal, taking his rosary in hand again and mumbling his Paternoster in tones loud enough to reach the passers’ ears. “A fine achievement, M. de Cobalt, but it will not last.”

“What mean you?” asked Gerard quickly.

“Soldiers are soldiers, and it takes more than a monk’s gabardine to change them. When pretty girls come buzzing round, craving ‘A blessing, holy father,’ and looking so sweet and piteous, it’s not in nature, at least in soldiers’ nature, not to kiss ’em. Cherry lips lifted in supplication are strong enemies of this new discipline. I know it myself.”

“For shame, Pascal!” cried Dubois sternly. “Are we to betray everything for a pair of laughing eyes?”

“Anything can happen when there’s a shapely nose, a kissable mouth, and two soft cheeks to complete the face. Let there be haste, I say, or, Bourbons or no Bourbons,

those lips will get kissed; and then there may be the devil to pay."

"There is reason in his madcap words, Dubois," said Gerard after a pause.

"Aye, even a fool can tell the truth," laughed Pascal.

"But we must wait till I have proofs. When the news of this governor's evil doings came to my father's ears he sent me to learn the truth; and while bidding me act as I would, enjoined me to do nothing until I had clear proofs. A Bourbon does not act on mere rumours."

"Proofs!" broke in Pascal with a swift change to earnestness. "In the devil's name, what better proof of the man's deeds could you find than that which is writ large on the wretched, starving faces of the people? Look at them—faces that the devil grins to see when he would tempt men and women to sin."

"I came in during the night only, and have seen little or nothing yet," said Gerard. "What is the meaning of this gathering?"

"This devil spawn of a governor has a new ordinance to proclaim, a new tyranny to enact," said Pascal. "He will tax afresh to half its value every ounce of foodstuff that comes into the city. As if the poor wretches were not already half-starving. And this tax will finish them. Look at them and say if the Governor is not justly dubbed the Tiger of Morvaix? They are waiting his coming now with the heralds. Of a truth I would as lief dwell in hell as in Morvaix under Bourbon sway though it be in name, and Bourbon as I am to the core."

“We have had other and weightier matters to occupy us than the troubles of a small province so remote,” said Gerard, with a frown at Pascal’s words. “But if the tale of wrongs be warranted, the Governor, Duke de Rochelle though he be, will answer to me for them.”

“By all reports he will answer to no man but himself.”

“Enough, Pascal,” said Gerard, with a wave of the hand. “There appear to be over many soldiers, Dubois.”

“And report says theirs are the only mouths that take enough food,” broke in Pascal. “Your fighting man must be fed, of course; but when it comes to feeding him with the food for which all others starve, it is first cousin to cannibalism.”

“The number of the soldiery has surprised me,” said Dubois seriously. “They are far too many for our small band to do much. It is well your cousin’s army lies so close to Cambrai. This governor will fight hard.”

“If his soldiers are loyal to him, it argues in his favour,” replied Gerard thoughtfully. “We know to what lengths the burghers of a town may be driven by their jealousy of us soldiers. We must wait.”

“And if we wait but a little while there will be no grievances left. Those who have them will be dead,” cried Pascal with a shrug of the shoulders.

“I need no taunts of yours, Pascal, to stir me to do great Bourbon’s will,” answered Gerard with some sternness.

“I meant no taunt, and spoke only my mind as friend to friend,” said Pascal.

“The Governor is coming now,” put in Dubois.

“We had better not be seen longer together. Where shall I find you at need?”

“The Duke has lodged Pascal and myself in his castle,” answered Dubois, and the two were turning away when Gerard exclaimed, in a tone of excitement—

“See, Dubois, see, that man riding by the side of the Governor. Do you recognize him?”

“It is that villain, de Proballe.”

“The old rat, so it is,” declared Pascal. “If there is devil’s work to be done in Morvaix he’ll be in it. Paris was too hot for him. I thought he was in hell by now. By the saints, he is long overdue.”

Gerard did not wait to hear the conclusion of the speech, but mingling with the crowd watched the proceedings with close interest.

It was a very strong force of soldiery, both horse and foot, that gathered in the market place round the statue, large enough to brush away like so many flies the crowd of citizens, who fell back hushed and awe-stricken before the muskets and halberds which were used with much wilful violence.

The Governor of the city, the Duke Charles de Rochelle, seated on his charger, a magnificent coal black Flemish animal, drew up in the centre of the cleared space, and gazed with amused contemptuousness upon the shrinking burghers.

He made a striking centre-piece. Short and slight of figure, yet suggesting suppleness and strength, his fifty years sat lightly on him. His fair hair had scarce a touch of grey, and his pointed auburn beard and flowing moustache

might have belonged to a man twenty years his junior. His features, strong and regular, would have been handsome but for the small close-set grey eyes, whose cold, hawk-like glitter was rendered additionally repulsive by a strong cast.

“The eyes of a wild beast,” thought Gerard, who had been watching him intently. “Well named the Tiger.”

At a signal from the Governor, the herald stepped forward amid a blare of trumpets and read the proclamation. The people listened in dead silence; but at the close, loud murmurs broke out which even the presence of the soldiery could not wholly check.

“It means starvation to us,” cried one lusty voice, and a powerful fellow, a smith, wielding the heavy hammer of his trade, broke through the ring of the soldiers and made as if to approach the Governor.

“What dog is this that dares to bay?” It was the Duke who spoke.

“I am no dog, my lord, but a burgher of Morvaix, and I do but speak what all here know,” answered the smith sturdily.

The Duke fixed his keen eyes on the man’s face, and without a word signed to some of those about him. Three soldiers sprang toward the smith, who faced them fearlessly, and lifted his hammer.

“I have done no wrong. No man shall touch me,” he said threateningly.

“Down with the rebel dog,” cried the Duke; and at the words the soldiers, who had hesitated, rushed upon the smith. Two went down with broken heads from blows of the terrible hammer; but the third got his halberd in, and as the

man lay on the ground some others dashed forward and one of them thrust home to his heart.

“So perish all rebels,” cried the Governor, in a ringing tone to the crowd; and at the threat and the sight of the smith’s blood the people shrank together and cowered.

The Duke smiled coldly on the crowd, and without another word signed for the procession to reform and march on, the people shrinking and cowering in silence from the troops as they passed.

Gerard’s hot blood had fired at the scene, and he stood looking after the Governor with a heart hot with indignant anger at the foul injustice he had witnessed.

His two followers in monkish garb crossed to him and as the three whispered together, they were startled by the sound of a woman’s wailing. It was the dead man’s wife. She had heard the news and came rushing upon the scene in wild disordered distress, carrying her babe in her arms.

As she was nearing the body, a girl attended by a page, whose attire evidenced his mistress’ high station, met her and with tender solicitude offered such consolation as was possible.

Gerard’s gaze, attracted by the girl’s beauty, followed the couple as together they approached the body, which had now been lifted by some of the sympathizing townsfolk; and then with a cry of anger he dashed hotly toward them, followed by his companions.

There was indeed cause for his anger. Several of the brutal soldiers had rushed upon the men carrying the corpse, and with oaths and blows and threats of the Duke’s

anger, seized the body from them and flung it on the ground.

The girl, courageously placing herself between the soldiers and the frightened townsfolk, had turned upon the former and ordered them away; but the bullies, strong in the protection of their tyrant master and presuming on their license to deal as they would with the people, first jeered at her coarsely and then thrust her roughly aside while one of them ran and kicked the corpse with wanton brutality.

It was the attack on the girl which drove Gerard to interfere. He was by her side in an instant, flung the man who had touched her to the ground, and with eyes flashing and hand on his sword, dared the men to interfere further.

The soldiers were still present in the square in great force, however, and attracted by the tumult many came rallying to the side of their comrades. At the same time, inspirited by Gerard’s daring, a great crowd of the townsfolk closed up behind him; and it seemed impossible that a conflict could be avoided.

There was a moment of hesitation, however, while the two opposing bodies glared angrily at one another, and Pascal with ready wit seized it to step between them, and with uplifted crucifix threatened the soldiers with the ban of Holy Church if they attempted further violence to either dead or living.

While he was haranguing them in loud and vehement tones, a number of men in monkish dress appeared almost as if by magic, and pushing through the citizens ranged themselves at his side, thus giving an impressive background to his exhortation.

The soldiers, abashed by this strange opposition, hung back in doubt, and the citizens having in the meanwhile borne the dead body away, the trouble ended in nothing more serious than muttered threats and oaths from the soldiers and stern remonstrances from the monks.

When the soldiers had drawn off, Gerard turned to seek the girl the attack on whom had provoked him to interfere, but she had vanished.

With an eagerness which brought a smile to Pascal's face, Gerard plied those about him with questions regarding her, and learnt that she was Mademoiselle de Malincourt, and had gone away to comfort the trouble-stricken woman whose husband had been the victim of the morning's tragedy.

"You did shrewdly, Pascal," said Dubois, when the two were alone.

"Our good fellows won't thank me, for, like myself, their fingers were tingling to be at some of the rascals' throats. Where's the young lord, Gerard?"

"Gone in search of——" Pascal's laugh interposed to finish the sentence.

"Aye, aye. We can understand. There's a woman in the thing now, of course. And we shall hear more of her, or I am a monk indeed, and no soldier, which God forfend."

CHAPTER II
THE MAISON DE MALINCOURT

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SOME two or three hours after the scene in the market place a girl sat at her spinning wheel on the terrace of the Maison de Malincourt, opposite the head of the stately flight of steps leading down to the wide gardens. She had placed her wheel in an angle of the southern turret so that she could ply her task in comfort, protected from the rays of the July sun.

She was Lucette de Boisdegarde, the foster sister and close friend of Mademoiselle de Malincourt, for whose coming she was now waiting with as much patience as her quick vivacious temperament permitted.

Her industry was only fitful. At times her shapely little foot pressed with insistent vigour upon the treadle and the wheel flew round rapidly, as if keeping pace with the thoughts that drew her dark pretty face into a frown of petulance and made her large eyes flash with gathering purpose. But the wheel was often still and she would sit back, idly fingering the threads of gleaming flax and thinking, while her gaze would roam over the blaze of lovely flowers in the garden, or stray away to the red roofs of the city which showed through the skirting trees beyond, or rest curiously on the vacant seat at her side on the cushions of which lay some needlework.

She was in one of these preoccupied moods when her sharp ear caught the sound of a footstep. In a moment she set the treadle of her wheel whirling swiftly, while she

crooned to herself the air of a ballad of the time, and appeared too deeply engrossed in her work and song to have eyes or ears for anything else.

Yet young Denys St. Jean was worth looking at. Well-built he was, soldierly in bearing and self-reliant in mien, with a fair frank honest face, though now grave with thought and purpose, as he turned the corner of the Maison at a slow deliberate pace.

Seeing Lucette he started and his face brightened; and he smiled as he perceived her absorption in her task was overacted. He hesitated just an instant as if about to speak to her, but with a slight frown checked the inclination, walked on a few paces, lingered again, and then stopped.

Lucette meanwhile was treading her wheel vigorously and singing sweetly to herself—

There was once a maiden in Arcady,
Whose lover so feal and true
Came riding forth from the sullen north
Her sweet white hand to woo.

During the verse Denys stood with his back to the singer, his arms folded in an attitude suggestive of antagonism; but once or twice, when he half-turned toward her, the smile on his lips and the light in his eyes told of very different feelings.

When the song ceased he maintained his attitude of indifference, keeping his back to her and his arms still folded, waiting for her to speak; but when she gave no sign that she knew of his presence, he turned and stole up behind her softly, with a smile of expectation, and bent over her.

Her industry and absorption appeared to increase, however, and her foot pressed the treadle, the wheel flew round, and her white fingers flashed hither and thither, tending the flax, gathering the thread, adjusting this and smoothing that, while all the while she crooned the old ballad.

Her patience beat him at length.

“You know I’m here,” he whispered.

“Ah, Antoine, I knew your tread.”

“Antoine!” exclaimed Denys with an angry start, “what do you mean by that, Lucette?”

The wheel stopped and she looked round, her face a pretty mask of coquettish surprise and her eyes beaming with mischief.

“So, it is not Antoine!” with just a suggestion of disappointment in the tone, a little shrug of the shapely shoulders, and a pout. “Only you. I thought you were gone for ever.”

“You will drive me away, if you treat me like this. What did you mean about knowing Antoine’s tread?”

For a second she let her roguish eyes rest on his, and then she smiled.

“His feet are so big and so clumsy,” she said, and turned again to her wheel.

“Do you mean you meet him so often you can recognize them?”

“Recognize them! Mon Dieu, they are not feet to forget when once seen,” she cried lightly.

“You can’t pass it off like that, Lucette. Were you expecting him here this afternoon? Is that what you mean?”

He was still angry and his tone very earnest.

“I didn’t expect *you*, Monsieur Catechist.”

“And you meant to amuse yourself with him in my absence?”

She turned and made a pretty grimace of dismay and spread out her hands.

“Is it an hour since you said you would never speak to me again? What then does it matter to you? Would you play the dog in the manger?”

“Will you answer my question?”

“Why do you come back at all when all is at an end between us? You said so.”

“Don’t you know why I come back?” The tone was full of feeling; but Lucette merely shrugged her shoulders.

“To see if you had made me miserable, I suppose? You have not;” and she burst again into her song, when Denys caught her by the wrist, and looked intently into her face.

“Do you mean you don’t care, Lucette?”

“I care not to have my arm bruised with your great clumsy hands. Antoine would never——”

“To hell with your Antoine!” he burst in vehemently. “You play with me as a cat with a bird;” and throwing her hand from him he turned and strode away. He got no farther than the corner of the house, and looking back saw her leaning against the wall nursing her arm as if in pain. “Forgive me, Lucette,” he cried remorsefully, hastening back. “I am a brute; you fire my blood when you make me jealous. If you love Antoine de Cavannes better than me, say so now, and let me go. But don’t torture me.”

She stood nursing her arm and looking up at him.

“Torture *you*, is it? Torture *you*?” and she held her arm up in reproach.

“You have only to say the word, and I’ll never trouble you again. It can’t be both Antoine and me. Choose!”

“Choose!” she repeated, mocking his serious tone. Then with a laugh and a change to coquettish hesitation: “Hot-tempered, handsome Denys or splay-footed, ugly Antoine, eh? It can’t be both of you, eh? And if——” She paused teasingly.

“In God’s name, can’t you be serious?”

“When I am, I’ll choose neither of you, but just bury myself in a nunnery. So good-bye, my lord surly-face;” and she burst into a laugh.

“You mean that good-bye?”

“When did I wish you anything but good?”

“You’ll drive me away from you and from Morvaix,” he said angrily.

“Oh, you’ll soon be back again.”

“You think you can play with me as you will.”

“Stupid! As if I cared where you go! But you can’t leave Gabrielle. You can be many nasty things, but at least you can’t be untrue to your trust.”

His angry features relaxed somewhat at this.

“I wish I could read your heart.”

“So does Antoine.”

Angered again at this, a hot retort was stayed on his lips as Gabrielle de Malincourt stepped out of one of the tall windows of the terrace close to them.

“Ah, my good Denys, and, of course, Lucette,” she said with a smile.

“It should be the other order, mademoiselle, I fear,” he answered. “Lucette, and of course, Denys. It is Denys who is ‘of course.’”

Gabrielle glanced at them both and understood.

“Quarrelling again! Lucette, Lucette. You treat him villainously. But never mind, Denys. I know what’s in her heart whatever her lips may say.”

“Gabrielle, I——” began Lucette in protest, when Gabrielle interposed.

“Yes, yes, I know what you would say. But I am not Denys. When the sea is very calm some people like to rock a boat to make pretence; but when the storm comes in reality it’s all very different. Wait till there comes a bit of a storm, Denys, and you’ll see the truth. If Lucette had been I just now in the market place and you had been at hand, you would have seen to whom she would have turned.”

“Has anything chanced, mademoiselle?” asked Denys quickly.

“That which made me wish for you, good Denys. I had visited poor old Jacques Boulanger and was returning through the market place just when the heralds had proclaimed this new and shameful ordinance of the Governor’s—a tax so cruel that it makes my blood boil. A terrible thing occurred. Babillon, the smith, sprang forward to protest, and the Governor, holding him for a rebel, had him done to death there on the spot by his brutal soldiers.”

“How horrible!” exclaimed Lucette.

“But you, mademoiselle?” asked Denys.

“I had just heard the news when his wife came rushing through the place like one distraught, and I was seeking to

comfort her in her anguish when the soldiers—oh, they are fiends, those men!—attacked the citizens who had lifted the smith's body to bear it home, flung the dead on the ground, and when, burning with indignation, I ordered them to desist, they turned on me, one of them thrust me violently aside, and would have done I know not what next, had not a cavalier, a stranger, rushed up to help me."

"Would I had been there, mademoiselle!" exclaimed Denys angrily. "Would you know the fellow again?"

"Do you mean the stranger cavalier?" asked Lucette, with a light of mischief in her eyes.

"Nay, Lucette, do not jest," said Gabrielle earnestly. "The man was punished for his act, Denys. The cavalier struck him to the ground and faced the whole of them fearlessly; and I dreaded for a moment that a conflict would follow, for there are not many in Morvaix who would see me harmed. But a monk intervened then and the danger was averted. Babillon's body was carried away, and I went with the wretched woman whom I have but now left, all desolate, broken and whelmed by her sorrow. These are ill days indeed for Morvaix."

"But the men who maltreated you, mademoiselle, can be found, nay, must be found and punished," cried Denys warmly.

"It is of no matter now, Denys. It is over; beside the cruel wrongs done to the people, my little hurt is nothing. These soldiers, moreover, are but hirelings, and do no more than hirelings' work. But there is one quest—you must find the cavalier who served me."

Lucette looked up.

“You learnt his name, Gabrielle?” she asked quickly.

“Nay, for I left the place with Babillon’s wife—wife alas! no more, but widow, poor soul.”

“The cavalier, Gabrielle, was he handsome as well as brave?” asked Lucette after a pause.

A faint tinge of colour tinted Gabrielle’s cheeks as she answered.

“In truth, I scarce had time to see, Lucette; but he seemed in all respects a manly man, a figure of distinction truly. Tall and knightly in mien; his face unbearded and full of strength, yet kindly and courteous; fair in colouring; and his blue eyes, keen and flashing fire as he faced the soldiery, were gentle and solicitous when viewing my plight; his voice resolute with the tone of one accustomed to command; yet tuned to gentle accents, as it seemed to me. I much mistake me if he be not a knight of loftier station than his sober brown attire would seem to bespeak him. A most gallant gentleman and a brave heart.”

“You saw much, cousin, it seems, although you had no time, as you say;” and Lucette, with a smile to herself, turned to her spinning wheel.

“I will seek him out, mademoiselle,” said Denys, “and no doubt shall find him. Shall I give him any message?”

“I could not even stay to thank him, and would wish to do so. Let him know as much.”

“Before I go, there is a grave matter on which I would speak with you.”

“Not now, Denys, but afterward. He must not think Gabrielle de Malincourt ungrateful. I beg you hasten at once in quest of him.”

“I will go,” he answered, and turning toward Lucette, said nervously: “Lucette, I——”

“We can finish our quarrel when you return,” she interposed. “I may forgive you if you do Gabrielle’s service quickly.” Her tone was one of indifference, but he read the smile in her eyes and went with a light quick step upon his errand.

Gabrielle had dropped into the vacant seat by Lucette and now leant back thinking, her lips slightly parted and her eyes dreamy.

“He was a handsome man, coz, this cavalier of yours?” Gabrielle started at the question and then met her friend’s half-quizzing look calmly.

“I have never seen a nobler, Lucette. I hope our good Denys will find him. Why do you plague that good fellow so sorely?”

“Nay, it is he plagues me. He is always quarrelling.”

“*You* are always finding cause to make him, you mean?”

“He is a man, and must be kept in his place;” and Lucette shrugged her shoulders.

“By bickering and teasing and wrangling? Does it please you?”

“There is always the making up again;” and Lucette laughed roguishly.

“Beware how you try him too much. He is sterling mettle.” She paused and suppressed a sigh as she added: “How happy you should be!”

Lucette glanced across at her and her manner changed.

“You are thinking again, Gabrielle. You are not sad?”

“Yes, I was thinking. I ought not to be sad, to-day of all days; and yet——” The rest of the sentence was an unmistakable sigh, deep and sincere.

“He may prove a gallant cavalier, Gabrielle, your Gerard; as gallant maybe as your hero of the market place. Don’t look like that, dear.”

“I am afraid, Lucette, horribly afraid. You cannot tell how it is with me. I am perhaps overwrought by this terrible scene in the market place, and—oh, I know not what I feel;” and with a shudder she covered her face with her hands.

“It will all come right, dear,” whispered Lucette gently, after a pause; but the words seemed to jar upon Gabrielle, who lowered her hands, and with a look of irritation replied almost petulantly.

“You judge from your own little outlook. You tease Denys and force a sham quarrel, knowing he will make it up and all will come right, as you say. But how would it be with you if you were in my place, given to a man you had not seen since you were a child; betrothed to one you know nothing about, and who may turn out to be—oh, what am I saying?”

“I should hate him before he came to claim me, Gabrielle,” said Lucette vigorously, tearing at the flax she held in her fingers. “Claim me!” she added, incensed by her own word. “I would make him feel that the claiming was no easy task. Oh, I should hate him! But you need not wed him. You are the mistress of Malincourt.”

“You do not understand, Lucette.” The girl looked up in genuine surprise at the change in Gabrielle’s tone, suddenly calm, proud and cold. “It is my duty to my family. My

parents ordered it so, and it is not for me to disobey. I owe it to my house."

"I can't understand you, Gabrielle. At one moment you are a girl with all a girl's heart and feelings, and the next, you are the grand dame, cold, passionless, proud—just the embodied spirit of the traditions of your house."

"Were you a Malincourt you would understand. I have to live my life and must perforce be content."

"But pride makes an ill substitute for love in a marriage, Gabrielle. And your motive is pride. If this M. Gerard de Cobalt, this distant kinsman and unseen betrothed, should turn out to be a hideous depraved wretch——"

"Peace, Lucette; you do but plague me. M. de Cobalt will be here to-day or to-morrow; and you will remember he is my affianced husband."

"I am sorry my reckless tongue wounds you, Gabrielle. I love you so dearly;" and Lucette bent across and kissed her tenderly. "Pray God it may all be well with you. Forgive me."

"There is nothing to forgive, dear," answered Gabrielle sweetly. "You are right. I have two natures; and if the girl in me rebels sometimes, it is kinder to check than to encourage rebellion. To-day, somehow, it is harder than usual to check it. I shall be glad when M. de Cobalt comes. My uncle gives me good account of him, and speaks of him as brave and gallant."

"Does M. de Proballe know him?"

"No, he has never seen him—at least not for many years; but he has heard much of him, and from what he says all should be well."

“From what he says,” commented Lucette, with a little frown of disdain.

“You trouble me, Lucette, with these reflections on my uncle. You do not like him, and so would have me share your feeling. We’ll say no more;” and with a sigh she leant back to think.

Lucette, seeing her mood, resumed her work and set her wheel speeding busily on; but chancing to glance round a moment later she stopped abruptly with an exclamation of surprise which attracted Gabrielle’s attention.

A man was standing close behind Gabrielle’s chair in an attitude of excessive humility. He bowed low and spread out his hands as she turned to him, while an expressive curl of contempt drew down the corners of Lucette’s mouth.

“What is it? Why did you not say you were here?” asked Gabrielle sharply.

“I feared to interrupt miladi, and was awaiting your permission to speak my errand.” His voice was soft and his manner deferential.

“What is it? Speak.”

“My master, the Baron de Proballe, desires to know if it is convenient for him to wait upon you, miladi?”

“My uncle? Certainly. Where is he?”

“At present in his apartments, miladi.”

“Tell him I will see him at once.”

“I am miladi’s most humble servant,” was the reply with another deep bow, as he went.

“What a loathsome snake is that Master Dauban,” exclaimed Lucette, looking after him.

“My uncle says he is a very honest fellow and as faithful as a man can be.”

“I should need a higher character than that,” said Lucette with another very expressive shrug.

“The Baron de Proballe is my uncle, Lucette,” replied Gabrielle in a tone of reproach, as she rose to go into the house. And Lucette, by way of reply, turned her head away with a toss and made a grimace to herself as she bent over her wheel.

CHAPTER III
SINISTER HINTS

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SCARCELY had Gabrielle left the terrace before Lucette's wheel stopped and she began to think instead of work. Little frowns and smiles chased each other alternately across her dark expressive face, and here even pearly teeth showed ever and again between the full, mobile lips.

"Has the day's adventure changed everything?" she mused. "He seems to have been very handsome, this gallant cavalier. I wonder. It would be a hard fight. I know how her pride can stand like a fortress; and I know how love can pull and pull and pull. Don't I know it?" and she smiled and sighed in turn. "Poor Gabrielle! What a struggle! Heart whispers, 'I love him'; pride answers, 'My pledge is given.' Ah me! he will have to be a manly man, as she says, if he will win her. But she will have a traitor in the fortress after all, if she really love him. Ah me! I know how it would end with me. But Gabrielle—well, she is Gabrielle."

At that moment a frown chased away the smiles, for Master Dauban, the man she had dubbed a snake, came out from the Maison and approached her.

He was one of those creatures on whom nature sets the outward marks of his inward character. His whole appearance and manner suggested slyness and secretiveness. His light brown shifty eyes were deep set in his sallow face, his cheeks smooth and round, and his lips thin and straight; while his voice, unctuous and oily, and his glances, always quick and restlessly furtive, no less than the

fawning gestures of his hands and his soft tread proclaimed him a born spy. At least so Lucette thought, and she hated him accordingly, as she hated all things mean and base.

But his feeling for her was very far removed from hatred, and as he came up now his glance was full of admiration.

“I am the happiest of men to find you alone, Mistress Lucette.”

“I am not the happiest of women to find you anywhere—near me, Master Dauban,” she retorted.

“You are as cruel to me as you are beautiful.”

“And you are as handsome as you are honest,” she cried with a shrug. He winced.

“Why do you always wrong me so?”

“In calling you honest, you mean?”

“You are in truth a sweet rose, Mistress Lucette, but the thorns of your wit are sharp and draw blood.”

“They are meant to prevent snails and slugs from crawling too near me, Master Dauban.”

“I take all you say in good part.”

“In ‘good part.’ And what good part is there in you, I pray? I have never seen it.”

“I can be a firm friend.”

“To yourself, maybe.”

“And an ugly enemy, too, at times.”

Lucette looked him up and down, and her lip curled as she answered with almost savage contempt—

“Who has fallen so low as to fear you, Master Dauban? Have you been trounced by some scullion of the kitchen? You should beware how you offend any one with hands to strike with.”

“It is easy to scoff, mistress,” he returned sullenly, stung by her words.

“Aye, truly, where you are the object. If you do not like the truth, go away; you came of your own will and do not stay by mine. In truth, Malincourt would be none the worse for your going altogether.”

“I have a strong reason for wishing to stay. You are the reason,” he said, shooting a glance at her. “Why won’t you let me be your friend?”

“There is but one act of friendship you could show to me.”

“What is it?” he asked eagerly. “Try me; try me.”

“Put a hundred leagues between us and never lessen the distance. It would indeed be an act of true friendship if you would never let my eyes rest on your face again.”

“That is a hard saying. I could not live apart from you,” he declared with much earnestness.

“I see no reason in that why you should not go away,” she laughed. “The world could manage to exist without you; although your master might miss you.”

He looked at her cunningly.

“You do not like my master, I fear, Mistress Lucette.”

“Ah, has he set you to find out what I think of him?”

“I could tell you things,” he said slyly, lowering his tone and glancing about him.

She paused a moment and her eyes questioned him. She checked the mocking reply which was on her lips, and asked, as if with an assumed indifference, covering real curiosity—

“What could you tell me?”