

without a detachment of soldiers swinging past, coaches flashing by, crowded in and out with men whose trade was war, returned mariners, with a cargo of prize-money and intoxicants, pursuing their jovial way, or a successful press-gang hurrying to the sea. But three days gone a detachment of French prisoners had been escorted inland by that route to an unknown fate—decapitation the villagers imagined and hoped, for they lived in hourly dread of the pressing that the atrocious acts of these same prisoners' compatriots rendered operative.

The night was so still that twigs snapping beneath the cold sounded like tiny pistol shots -- the weather when any heavy sound comes to the senses in a series of pulsations of the air long before the ear can be relied upon. Far off became apparent two fire-flies, and vanished again; carriage lamps. Followed a faint humming; the rumbling of carriage wheels. Millie Ankerdine's eyes danced as she leaned over the bridge in an eager aspect of listening; there was a quick tearing, a slight thud, an arrested cry, and broken fragments of ice and wood work floated upon the dark water over her head.

The loiterer, whose teeth were chattering like a pair of castanets, burst from his place of concealment, and flinging himself in without a moment's hesitation, gripped her by the hair as she rose fighting to the surface a second time. There are times when the most punctilious of men must waive ceremony. He swam ashore -- but a few strokes--placed her quietly so that the weight rested on one of his arms only, and ran toward the house. Not a moment had been lost up to now; he stared at the girl's face as they emerged into the light from the open door--the eyelids were flickering, and colour coming back to her cheek. Placing her upon the grass carefully and untying a silk kerchief from his neck, he bound its wet folds in such a manner as to shadow and disguise his eyes and brow. Then he picked his burden up again and sped into the house.

II.

"What the devil's all this noise about?" muttered Mr Ankerdine testily as an unaccustomed clamour penetrated to his study and attracted him forth to seek its import. He detested a noise and fault-finding was the breath of his nostrils.

Before the great hall fire, the once lacy drape of a dinner dress oozing dark pools and steaming lazily, lay his daughter; a stranger, trickling rills of moisture from each fold of his clothing, was chafing her hands and vociferating for assistance; he ceased suddenly as her father appeared with servants at his heels, and stood back beyond the play of the fire-light.

Mr Ankerdine knelt down beside her, and the few immediate and deft touches of his hands showed that he had dealt with injury by water before.

"Here, Martha," he said shortly to one of the women standing by. "Take Miss Millicent to her room and give her some hot brandy at once, do you understand? Keep the fire going and get her into dry things, and I will come up and see her.--Ah right, Millie, I will attend to that."

The girl had almost completely revived, and the old man's remark was in answer to an almost imperceptible movement of her head toward where the stranger was still standing, shivering like an aspen in the breeze. The old man advanced with outstretched hand and more geniality than his face usually expressed.

"I have to thank you for rescuing my daughter, I suppose, sir," he said; "the best kind of gratitude is the practical. You must be made comfortable first, and I can din you with words after."

The man bowed with a dignity strangely discordant with his bedraggled appearance. "You have visitors that come," he replied jerkily, biting his words through his chattering teeth. "I should be de--in the way, that is to say."

Mr Ankerdine had no time to answer. A post chaise dashed up to the porch with a grunting of leather and jingling of harness, a broad-shouldered young fellow completely enveloped in a huge wrap, precipitated himself, and gripped the old man with both hands, exclaiming, "How's the gout, sir? And where is Millie, not here to welcome me?"

"At the bottom of the pond but for this gentleman," said Mr Ankerdine. "I must introduce you when I--Hullo!" he gasped in a species of stupefaction, for the gallant stranger had slipped out into the night, and Lieutenant Rigden, his daughter's prospective husband, had, with an articulate sound that might have denoted almost anything, but certainly not apology, started in pursuit.

The first man, stimulated by the slow diffusion of warmth as his limbs cursed with blood again, held his own at first. Rigden's ulster impeded him, and he was cramped with travelling. He doggedly crashed on however, careless of obstructions, for perhaps half a mile, when the fugitive's rapid steps slackened, and the distance between them lessened until his laboured breathing became quite perceptible and told its own tale. Rigden threw down his coat and approached with every faculty alert for a tussle he knew might be severe. It was needless; the man bowed with the same incongruous air of dignity as before and held out his hands with the empty palms upward. He was too exhausted to speak, but he smiled faintly.

"You must come back with me, Monsieur de Frontignac," said the young sailor. "It is the fortune of war."

"Again the fortune of war," replied the Frenchman. "A cold fortune at present, mon ami." He fell into step beside his companion without resistance, and accepted with a short word of thanks the latter's offer of the thick coat. Beside that no word was spoken until they reached the house, and were greeted in no very complimentary humour by the owner thereof.

"Millie has asked for you," he observed drily. "She appeared surprised that you should prefer scouring the country at midnight to greeting her. However, each to his taste. The young generation's code of manners I do not attempt to understand. She is in the drawing-room, and has also expressed a desire to see this gentleman if convenient to his evident desire for privacy. She is quite able to converse, and I anticipate no unfavourable results from her immersion."

The sailor deferred apologies until his own impatience had been satisfied, and led the way to the drawing-room at once, locking the door and placing the key in his pocket so soon as they were inside, a manoeuvre which did not escape the young lady's notice, and added a spice of alarm to the shy affection with which she returned her lover's caress.

"Why did you do that, Edward?" she whispered anxiously in his ear. "Is there danger outside, or is that a bad man? I fell into the pond, and he jumped in too on this freezing night and saved my life, dear."

"Thank God it was saved, little girl," he replied, snatching a hearty kiss with that genial air of unquestionable dominion which, together with a hearty contempt for the cut-and-dried conventionalities of love or warfare, has gone not a little to establish the sea service's powers of conquest over soft hearts as well as the tough ones of its country's enemies. "But that this gentleman should have been the agent rather complicates matters. We must at any rate thank him, Millie, so first let me introduce in form the Count de Frontignac, captain in the navy of Republican France, Monsieur, I have the honour to present my fiancée."

The Frenchman, with a discretion that did credit even to his discreet nation, had been immersed in a book ever since his entrance. He now advanced and bent over the slim fingers extended, and even the stained and disordered clothes still wet upon him did not destroy the grace with which the action was accompanied. "My good luck has not been entirely dead, then, that I could render even so small a service to so gracious a demoiselle," he said.

"Why, you are soaking, sir!" exclaimed the girl. "Edward, what has you and papa been doing? How wicked you are. He will die." She coloured with annoyance and made as if to summon a servant.

"Be more quiet, Millie," exclaimed Rigden, stopping her. "There are more important questions than those of etiquette and raiment to be discussed. That this gentleman is brave you will know from what he has done to-night--more than brave, for he risked almost certain death by discovering himself to save you; but he will be also dangerous to succour. His frigate was captured recently by a British

squadron, and he was to be sent along with the prisoners to London under escort. I assume he has escaped and is attempting to reach the coast. Millie, this man preserved to me all I hold dear, but--he is one of my country's most active enemies."

"Perhaps you are mistaken," said Millie, with a woman's readiness to escape wide questions by a side issue. "Report may have magnified his fame, though it could never have exaggerated his glances," she added, shooting a little glance at the subject of their colloquy which sent a twitching to his mouth. It was a transient grimace of hope.

"No mistake here," said Rigden with a short laugh. "I was one of his captors, and the last time we met was upon his quarter-deck, when he gave me this." He drew down one corner of his cravat and showed a thin red seam running along the base of the neck. "It was a near thing, monsieur. Another inch would have done my business."

"It was the misfortune for you that a marine should then intervene and receive the coup you prepare for me," replied the Frenchman, watching Millie, who had covered her eyes to shut out the sight and the man who had drawn it; "he dropped in his tracks, that man--my countryman dead. Your advantage, monsieur, then, and again now; fate, perhaps, or God. Who knows? It is unfortunately for me only." He shrugged his shoulders very slightly and looked towards Millie again.

She drew her lover aside and placed her hands on his shoulders. The Frenchman was staring into the fire.

"Edward, you must let him go, and help him too. Is this man's honour or woman's gratitude, to drag back to a dungeon one who has voluntarily thrown himself upon our mercy? If so, noble deeds were better unacted,

and will be if they are to be repaid as we would repay this."

"Listen, Millie," said the young man in a very low voice; "You know your father's obstinacy."

"Yes," she replied in the same tone.

"You know the condition necessary to be fulfilled before our marriage?"

"That you are to be a captain--yes."

"You know that I have not yet received my promotion?"

"Ye-es," very low.

"That th's gentleman is an important capture to lose, and that by restoring him to the authorities, I am certain of recognition; which means a ship, and--a wife?"

"This is what I had begun to fear," she said breathlessly. "You must not let it scale one feather weight in the balance. We owe him my life, and not the broad pennant of an Admiral would cover the blot on your honour if you give him up. Edward, can you?"

The sailor bit his lips, but could not withdraw his gaze from the beseeching blue eyes that had not looked into his own for two years. He hesitated only for a minute; then turned round and said curtly, "Venus has triumphed, monsieur. Your country's history can show parallel examples which will enable you to appreciate my attitude. Mr Ankerdine must be avoided, and a suitable fiction prepared by this lady and myself for his subsequent delection. I will search you to see that no papers are concealed--pardon me, there shall be no indignity, and duty to my cloth, which has come out something hardly in this encounter, renders it necessary--also some clothes are required and food. I will then do myself the pleasure of putting you upon the safest route."

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