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My Strange Companion,

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"Gabrielle, you are pulling my hair abominably to-night! What can be the matter with you, child?"

Two homely sentences enough, my readers, you will say, yet I recall them even to this day as the keynote to a strange and tragical event which crossed my commonplace old life not long since—a mystery that like so many others is still unsolved, and must wait the turning up of the Everlasting Lights for explanation or elucidation.

Gabrielle Dumont was what you English would call my "maid-companion." She was a native of a small town in Auvergne (so said her letters of recommendation), and she was in my service exactly two months and a day. I myself am an old woman, and if you would know more, an old maid too.

I was somewhat of an invalid at the time I speak of. Not a chronic or hopeless one, thank God, but just a weary convalescent on the return journey from the Great Borderland, who was seeking to grope back into life with the aid of the bright sun and warm breezes, which are native elements in at least one sheltered little out-of-the-way nook on the shores of the blue Mediterranean. My home itself was a cosy apartment on the Boulevard Malesherbes, but this winter the fogs and bleak airs of Paris were out of the question, and the authorities—that is to say, the doctors and an elder brother whom we all had looked up to from childhood as the family potentate—were unanimous in banishing me to the South. Not to the bustle of Nice or Monte Carlo, of course, for I was still too weak and shattered to face the season at a fashionable tourist resort, but to a quiet sheltered spot, almost unknown to the ordinary multitude.

So far so good. I was content—almost eager to go, for the very thought of sea and sunshine seemed to bring a nameless sense of rest and refreshment to my tired nerves and brain. At length the locale was decided, the hotel proprietor communicated with, to the satisfaction of all concerned, and it only remained to wire him the date of my arrival, or more accurately speaking our arrival, for here rose the one stumbling-block in an otherwise smooth situation. In my convalescent condition it was impossible for me to go alone, and yet who, except an utter stranger, could be found to fill the gap? My brother himself held an important diplomatic post, and could not at that moment absent himself longer than would suffice to deposit me at my journey's end and return post-haste to Paris, so I determined on a hiring—a maid-companion, as I said before, and to trust myself to her tender mercies.

But to find such a person, that was the question; and although my kind brother most cheerfully added this new burden to his already heavy load, I could see it gave him some anxiety. We Severins are, I believe, a somewhat peculiar family, at any rate we are a very independent one; you may imagine therefore that the bare notion of having a stranger suddenly "planted" on me was scarcely less irritating than the traditional red rag is said to be when flaunted in the face of a long-suffering bull.

It was in this cheerful spirit that I received Gabrielle Dumont—my dear Gabrielle—into my service. How or where my brother had heard of her existence, I did not trouble to find out, my confidence in him was so supreme. It was sufficient that in a week's time he told me that, subject

to my approval, he had engaged the very person for me—a strong, lady-like young woman, and that her references left nothing to be desired. I heard him with a stifled groan of resignation, and the very next day came Gabrielle herself, so the compact was sealed.

In common justice, I am bound to admit that from the very first moment, biased and prejudiced as I was, my heart went out to her more than half way. Gustave had not exaggerated when he described her as a "strong and lady-like young woman," but she was at the same time something more—shall I say, a great deal better? Yes! There was an undefined charm about her whole personality which impressed me powerfully and almost in spite of my very self. Beautiful she certainly was not, for both face and figure were suggestive rather of youthful vigour than grace of feature or delicate outline, and yet I now realise that it was this same atmosphere of blessed strength which gave her whole presence the magnetic attraction it undoubtedly possessed. Not that there was anything ungentle about her. On the contrary. She was tall and strongly but sparsely built, her complexion pale, almost too pale perhaps, and the eyes, which were grey, rather deeply set, in expression melancholy. Of the nose and brow, I conceived but a faint impression. It was the mouth and chin that pre-occupied me, inasmuch as it was in them that lay the dominant note of unmistakable individuality. The lips were mobile and sensitive, the contour of the jaw inclined to squareness beneath the ears, but tapered somewhat as it reached the extremity. The hair, which was bright nut-brown, seemed to be neatly stowed away under a modest little black bonnet, and here the picture ended, save for the detail of two white well-shaped hands (nervous, passionate hands they were, too)—a supplement which, woman-like, I did not fail to make note of. No! Gabrielle was no waxen-faced, alabaster-limbed beauty, but she was strong of body and of soul, with that gentle strength which appeals so peculiarly to the sick and weak. It was on my lips more than once during our brief interview to ask her point-blank why a girl of her evident refinement and education should seek a situation usually filled by those of so different a social standing; but somehow my intuition scented sorrow not far off and I held my peace. Old maids have often their own reasons for not trampling wantonly over other people's Calvaries, and perhaps I may have had a very special one—anyhow in less than ten minutes' time I had initiated my future companion into the mysteries of her new duties. They were simple and light enough. Gabrielle was to walk, drive and take her meals with me; furthermore, when needed, she was to write at my dictation, and read to me, and twice a day she was to present herself in my cabinet de toilette for the purpose of brushing my poor white locks. This last was the only "menial" service (I believe that is the official term) which I should require of her, and for the rest she was to respect my privacy, and not overwhelm me with a thousand and one irritating little attentions which, as I told her plainly, would fidget me to death. I can see her passive face now, as I recited for her benefit the index of my requirements. As I emphasised the closing clause, the faintest shadow of a smile just touched the gravity of her eyes and mouth, but it was in-

stantly repressed, and she replied in that deep calm voice which God knows I would to-day give anything to hear again, "Madame la Comtesse may rest tranquil. I know my duty, and shall not intrude myself upon her." A conventional speech you will say, but it contained a promise that was faithfully, only too faithfully kept.

Over the events of the next few weeks I need not linger. The only record they offer is my safe arrival in a lovely little sun-kissed spot, an almost sapphire bay, set, by some glorious whim of Nature, against the sombre background of the rustling olive-groves which shadow the base of the great mountain of dreams—the immortal Alpes Maritimes. But I am forgetful . . . (ingrate as we should say at home) not to add that during these peaceful days my health had been making rapid progress, and that my bete noir, the maid-companion whose intrusion on my independent solitude I had so bitterly resented, was daily and hourly becoming what my better judgment could have easily foretold she would become—my ideal friend.

Poor Gabrielle! Never again in this wide world will my cherished little fads and foibles be so tactfully understood or respected. I verily believe it was every bit as much her restful influence as the soft breath of the southern seas that coaxed my wasted weary old frame back into life. There was only one thorn in the rose which Heaven had vouchsafed to place in my feeble fingers, and that was the invariable reticence which Gabrielle preserved as to her own identity, or anything approaching a ray of light on her personal history whether past or present. There was no disguising the fact—she was a puzzle to us all, even to the good old Cure of the little church on the hill, who in the same breath would speak of her as "une vraie sainte," and then shrug his shoulders or shake his head dubiously after the manner of his cloth. I am bound to admit that this barrier of reserve not only annoyed but wounded me deeply. Gabrielle was a mystery, and although I flatter myself that my own powers of diplomacy are of no mean order, not once, even by the most delicate strategy, could I induce this strange girl to drop her self-imposed domino. At times uneasy suspicions would crowd up in my imagination, but I had only to look into her pure grey eyes or listen to her deep honest voice to banish these shadows as an injustice little short of outrage.

There were two points, however—very trivial ones, which now and then pulled me up with a jerk and made me think. The first was the keen interest, I might say the actual avidity, with which she scanned the Paris newspapers, which punctually with each stroke of noon were laid in the little salle de lecture by our obliging waiter. The second was the invariably arrival every Tuesday and Friday of the week, of a certain letter bearing the Versailles post-mark, and addressed in that elaborate Italian handwriting so much in vogue at that time amongst the demoiselles de la haute Societe. I can see the twirls and twiddles of those G's and D's now! A woman's hand, there could be no doubt of that, and what was more natural—a sister's, a friend's, why not a mother's? . . . Yet somehow those letters disquieted me strangely.

It was the festa of my favourite Saint, and it was also a Friday and the thirteenth day of the month, that on our return from mass I retired to my room to write letters, leaving Gabrielle below in the little salon to enjoy her letter, and the pile of newspapers which I saw were already displayed in the verandah, where we usually sat when the sun was shining and the breeze from seaward.

Time went on, an hour or more and I had finished my correspondence, but, contrary to her wont, Gabrielle did not appear to offer to carry my letters to the bureau—an attention she never failed to pay me daily, about half an hour before the midday mail went out. On this par-

ticular occasion I had an important letter to despatch. It was, in fact, a draft upon my bankers, and there was no one to whom I could entrust its registration save Gabrielle herself. It was therefore with feelings in which impatience and a certain amount of vexation were mingled that I sat and waited for the familiar tread of her firm swift feet upon the stair. Alas, they never came—they can never come again—not in this world.

I had been twice to the dim square landing, and had called her name, but to no purpose. What could have happened? Had she left me suddenly, or was she stricken ill, helpless, and unable to answer my summons? I could bear the suspense no longer. At all risks I must go and see, but how to brave those dizzy old stairs without her aid? Never mind, it must be done, and my stick and I, we did it. Once upon the level, my progress became less difficult, and in a moment I had crossed the corridor, and stood facing the verandah where, but a short time since, I had left Gabrielle in apparently her usual health and spirits. The door was closed, and as I pushed it hurriedly open my first impression was that I was alone—all was so strangely still and silent, but this was the delusion of an instant. With my next breath I was stifling, literally beating back a cry, which, if it had been uttered, must have brought every soul in the hotel to the spot. Gabrielle was there, in the very chair in which I had left her, the identical letter between her fingers, an open newspaper at her feet, but it was a Gabrielle I had never seen before, and God grant I may not remember even in my dreams.

Was it human—this pale distorted face with its great gaunt eyes, and a line of thin white foam on its dry open lips? It was as though a whole volcano of burning passion were let loose within her soul, and the horrible conviction smote me that I was at the mercy of an unfortunate madwoman. The very desperation of the situation gave me courage. "Gabrielle," I said, and by a supreme effort I managed to enunciate the words quietly, "you are ill, my child, or in grievous trouble." . . . Perhaps the sympathy in my voice may have touched some breaking heart-string, for the poor clenched hands went hurriedly to her face, and I could see great tears drop thick and fast through the long nervous fingers. "Melanie," she whispered to herself, but the voice was not Gabrielle's—"Melanie . . . ma mie Melanie."

Then I laid a gentle hand upon her shoulder and the old woman's touch seemed to recall her wandering senses, for it was my own Gabrielle, my unselfish, dear companion that staggered hastily to her feet, looked me blankly in the face, and exclaimed in the tones that I had learnt to look for and love so well, "Ah, my God! Madame la Comtesse has descended the steep stair alone. . . . Madame must pardon me. . . . these spasms of the heart. . . . I am subject to them. . . . Tenez, Madame. . . ." and with that my stick was taken from my hand, and a strong young arm substituted, and once more, for the last time, we passed out together into the sun.

But I was thoroughly unnerred. My confidence was shaken, and I felt my duty was plain. Either Gabrielle must treat me with perfect frankness or she must leave me forthwith, and as we walked to and fro among the oleanders and fragrant orange trees I spoke my mind fearlessly to that effect. Her only answer was to raise my hand tenderly to her lips. "Come, child," I said, more moved than I cared to show, "cannot you trust your secret to a white haired woman whom sorrow has made old before her time? Am I then so unworthy. . . . ?" Ere I could finish she had interrupted me. "Madame la Comtesse, my dear, sweet lady, you have been kindness, goodness itself to me. If I could but requite you, even by the sacrifice of my poor life, how happy I should be." I felt what was to follow ere the ominous "but" had left her lips, so I broke in hastily, "Reserve your