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The Affair of Altamont:

(A ROMANCE).

By JOSEPH HATTON.

I.

In the stormy life of Cardinal Mazarin there was many a strange adventure that escaped the note-books of the current chroniclers, notably the affair at Altamont. If Mazarin had not been so much of a miser, he might have rivalled the power of his predecessor, Richelieu, who was generous where policy dictated generosity. Mazarin was continually thinking of his strong box. Richelieu paid his spies liberally, and was well served. Mazarin paid his spies badly, and was ill served. Had not this been so, he could have made no mistake as to the relative loyalty and devotion of the Count de Mauray and the Duke of Valois; but if the wisest were always wise, there would be few stories to tell worth the telling. Mazarin was a man of exceptional talent, of attractive parts and appearance, and possessed a charm of manner that captivated the Queen and made him many friends; but, as I have said, he was mean. He loved money, and was unscrupulous as to how he got it. He is believed to have been ungenerous enough to make a bargain to divide half the Altamont estates with the Duke of Valois in the event of his marriage with Henriette de la Fere, and to bring this about he strained his influence even so far as to arrest her lover, the Count Louis de Mauray at the very altar. It is a strange story, and dramatic.

The Cardinal lived in considerable state at his palace in the gay capital of France, though he saw little company and maintained a certain mystery of habit that lent itself to successful intrigue on his part and at the same time was not without its spice of peril. One quiet summer's day his confidential attendant, the Abbe Benoni, who, like his master, had not always been a priest, was considerably surprised at a piece of news which his niece, who was in attendance on the Queen, had brought him. In the midst of the solemn ceremony of marriage, and before the vows had been taken, the Count Louis de Mauray had that morning been arrested, by order of the Cardinal. The lady was Henriette de la Fere, the orphan heiress to the castle and estates of Altamont. When her father was dying he expressed a hope that Henriette would marry the Duke of Valois, though he at the same time declined to force her inclination. He knew that she preferred the young Count de Mauray, a penniless soldier, but of good family and capable of guiding his daughter in the management and control, and defence if need be, of the territories and the stronghold of Altamont. The Cardinal had induced Henriette's father to go so far as to name the Duke as his favourite suitor for Henriette; and, furthermore, until her marriage, to make her a ward of the Church.

"How came the information to thine ears?" asked Benoni.

"I had it from the Queen herself. She bade me seek thee, and . . ."
 "Seek me! Surely thou art mistaken?"
 "I tell thee she bade me seek thee, and find out where the Cardinal had hidden the lady of Altamont; for, between thee and me, Her Majesty is jealous."
 "Jealous!" Nay, my child; thou speakest treason."

"Thou wast always discreet, my uncle Abbe; but it is no scandal between us that the Cardinal and my royal Mistress are . . ."

"Begone, begone!" exclaimed Benoni, catching her in his arms and putting his big hand over her mouth. "I may not listen to such talk. Get thee gone! I am expecting the Cardinal every moment; it would not be well that he should find thee here."

He kissed her on both cheeks, and hurried her away, saying, "You will find a cloak and hood in my chamber by the oratory, and Jean will call you a coach."

Benoni, cloaked and hooded, was not only the Cardinal's private and confidential attendant, but his close friend; one might almost say his watch-dog. He stood behind the Cardinal's chair during the most private conferences. When he retired, it was only into a small room, more like a watch box than a chamber, at the back of it, in which there was always a matchlock ready loaded and primed.

His pretty niece had only just driven away, when the Cardinal entered, attended by an escort of two musketeers, who retired as Mazarin took his seat. Benoni drew his hood partly over his face, and took his stand behind the Cardinal's chair as usual.

"That dog, de Mauray, has dared to attempt marriage with a ward of the Church without asking our consent," said the Cardinal.

Benoni was not expected to do more than listen, except when his opinion was asked.

"I was only just in time to prevent the scandal, not to say the sacrilege."

"And the lady?" asked Benoni, the Cardinal having paused, as if to invite remark.

"In the custody of the Widow Margareta, my housekeeper."

"Here, in the palace?"

"Why not?" said the Cardinal, sharply.

"Your Reverence knows what is best."

"You knew this young man, this de Mauray?"

"I knew him in his early youth. I was in his father's service."

"A young traitor!" said the Cardinal, who was turning over papers while he talked to his attendant.

Benoni was silent.

"I said he is a young traitor."

"I heard your Reverence."

"You are his friend?"

"I am your trusted servant—and more than that, your devoted friend, Monsieur."

"I know it, Benoni; forgive me, my friend and ally to the death."

"To the death!" said Benoni.

"It is meet that the Duke of Valois marry Henriette; her father wished it."

"The lady prefers the Count; or so I gather from the incident of this morning."

"What should a child know of preference? She is a ward of the Church; her duty is plain."

"The heart does not always go with duty," Benoni answered, with a quiet emphasis that went home to the Queen's priest-lover.

"So much the nobler the sacrifice which is the privilege of Henriette de la Fere. And now, friend Benoni, thou shalt be a witness of our interview. I would not be alone with her."

II.

At a signal an outer guard entered, and presently Henriette de la Fere was ushered into the room, accompanied by two of her own ladies and the Widow Margareta, who withdrew as the Cardinal, with much courteous action, bowed the lady to a seat.

Then there ensued a strikingly dramatic scene between the Cardinal and the beautiful heiress of Altamont. Benoni stood grimly in his place behind the Cardinal's chair, a figure not calculated to inspire hope in the breast of the maiden, who appealed nevertheless for mercy, and begged humbly for the release of her lover, until the Cardinal began to dictate terms to her and force upon her the suit of the Duke of Valois; and then, all timid and depressed as she had been at the outset of the interview, she rose to her feet, her eyes flashing defiance, and her manner as haughty as if the Cardinal had been her slave rather than her gaoler.

"The Count is a traitor. I have evidence of his intrigues with the Frondeurs."

"Your evidence is false. The Queen has no more faithful subject."

"What of the Church? He would carry off her ward, and—"

"He would wed the woman who loves him."

"He would marry the Castle of Altamont," said the Cardinal. "Acquainted with poverty, he seeks a rich wife—and with Altamont the power to render important aid to Turenne."

"Then take the castle, take the estates, take every possession my father left to me, and give me the man I love!"

"Spoken like a romantic, thoughtless girl," said the Cardinal.

Benoni stood firm as a rock, but his old heart was beating with sympathy for the lovers.

"And are you not romantic?" said the maiden, with a meaning and defiant smile. "Is not her gracious Majesty, the Queen, romantic?"

The Cardinal raised his hand, with an impatient protest.

"Nay, you shall hear me," said the daring young woman. "What is the Queen giving up for you?"

"Cease, I say. Your words are treason."

"I will not cease. Is love treason? Only when it is any other love than yours, monsieur le Cardinal!"

"You have been set on to say this! Who has set you on—the Count?"

"You took care he should not, if he wished. You kept him fighting for France far beyond her borders; and on his return, have thwarted him with persecution and the Bastille. And me—you have robbed me of my lover—my husband!"

"Your husband never!" exclaimed the Cardinal. "The Duke of Valois is—"

"A traitor to Love, to the Queen, and to France."

"Such a denunciation fits rather the Count de Mauray."

"It is false," exclaimed the lady, "and time will prove it."

"It is true; and you know it!"

"May God open your eyes to the truth, Sir Cardinal! But listen one moment, and with patience. You may take my estates, and you may put me under arrest, you may take my life, but you shall never marry me to the Duke of Valois!"

"I have listened to you, and I am patient. Now listen to me. You are a ward of the Church; I am to you as your father, and the Church is your mother and all in all to you. You will at least give audience to the Duke, and listen to his respectful suit—"

"I will not."

"Oh, but you will."

"Who will compel me?"

"I will."

"Whereupon, at a signal, there entered an armed attendant, with the Widow Margareta and two of Henriette's ladies."

"Conduct Mademoiselle Henriette de la Fere of Altamont to her room, and await my orders."

III.

Henriette, without deigning to acknowledge the Cardinal's low bow, followed her maids and left the intriguing priest: who, turning to Benoni, as if nothing unusual had happened, said, "I have an appointment with Her Majesty; I shall return presently."

Benoni left his post behind the great chair, and, anticipating the Cardinal's desire for secrecy, preceded him to a private exit, drew aside a portiere, and opened a narrow door. The Cardinal, his hands behind his back, as was the custom with him when in deep thought, disappeared. Benoni closed the door, carefully covered it with the heavy tapestry, and paced the room slowly, talking to himself.

"Arrested at the very altar. A secret marriage, then? A strange and cruel interruption of a sacred sacrament. The exigencies of State, the Cardinal will say, the policy of the Church, have to be cruel to be kind. So fine a Frenchman as the Count, so beautiful and devoted a demoiselle—and of such distinction—and wealth! Aye, there's the rub. Better had she been a peasant than heiress of Altamont; better the Count had been a mere squire; for such love as theirs needs only its own jewels for adornment, nor riches to make life an idyll! A sad, unhappy world; and do

we Churchmen seem to make it better!"

A noise outside the palace interrupted his soliloquy. He went to the deeply recessed window, that gave upon a side street leading to the courtyard.

"An emeute!" he exclaimed, more by way of interrogation than alarm. "No! Troops are passing hurriedly. I see no fugitive; and yet, of a surely, it is a hue and cry. The Cardinal fears a rising of the citizens and the Frondeurs. We live in troublous times."

For a few seconds he stood in eager watchfulness.

"Mon dieu! It is a fugitive. Surely an escaped prisoner is making his way along the parapet. By Our Holy Mother, it is the Count himself."

He opened the lower casement of the great window, and beckoned.

"This way," he said, in a whisper; adding to himself, "Mon dieu, what am I doing!"

The next moment the Count de Mauray, who had escaped from the Bastille, leaped into the room. He was dressed in his wedding costume, though it was bespattered with mud and dust. He looked around the room anxiously.

"Where am I?" exclaimed the Count.

"In the private reception room of His Eminence the Cardinal Mazarin."

"Escaped from the cells to be devoured by the tiger, eh?" said the Count.

Benoni, pushing aside his hood and showing his full face, replied, "Not if I can help you, Count."

"What! Benoni? Guiseppe Benoni? My old friend! Are you my good angel in disguise?"

"In no disguise, Count. I am the Cardinal's attendant and devoted servant, the Abbe Benoni."

"The devil!" exclaimed the Count.

"No; neither angel nor devil."

"Anyhow, for old friendship's sake, let me embrace thee, Guiseppe."

Benoni folded the young fellow in his arms, and then went straightway to the secret doorway of the Cardinal and listened.

"You will help me, Guiseppe?"

"Aye, even if I were less beholden to you, for the sake of Mademoiselle Henriette of Altamont."

"To-day my wife; snatched from my arms by thy devilish master."

"Hush! Come this way," said Benoni, leading him behind the Cardinal's chair.

"This is my private cell; it is little more, but the Cardinal never enters it."

"And dost thou stand behind his chair, as thy predecessor, they say, stood behind the great Richelieu's throne?"

"Aye," said Benoni.

"And with thy cowl about thy face?"

"Aye," said Benoni.

"Not that way, then," said the Count; "not to thy cell; but this way. Give us thy cloak and hood, thy beads and cross, and thy office. I will stand behind his chair and learn his plans, the secret of his damned conspiracy against me. Let me be thyself, Benoni, for one short hour, the Abbe Benoni!"

"That would be treason of the blackest," said the Abbe.

"What was it when the Count, my father, saved thine from a cruel death?"

"The love of the master for his servant, which survives in me," said Benoni, removing his priestly attire and clothing the fugitive.

"Let me instruct you," said Benoni. "Stand here."

The Count stood behind the Cardinal's chair.

"Observe this panel."

He showed him a door in the wainscot.

"Touch this button, the door opens. I shall be there. It communicates with my cell, a sudden escape being necessary, which Our Blessed Mother forbid! Every secret of the place is known to me. When the Cardinal desires to be alone he will raise his right hand."

Benoni imitated the Cardinal's signal.

"Upon that you will retire. . . Hush! He comes. . . If you are discovered?"

"Then fear not," said the count, drawing a dagger. "I will explain how I assailed you and forced you to relinquish your cloak and hood, and—"

"Hush! Be cautious, and God be with you!"

IV.

The Cardinal entered as he had quitted the chamber, without escort, but accompanied by one of his favourite henchmen, Gaspard the Hunchback, a trusted spy and a man of great cap-