

A RECOGNITION

The Baron de Chatenay had dined at his club, and about half-past eight, having sipped his black coffee, he sallied forth in the beautiful June moonlight, undecided how to finish the evening. Finally, having passed several theatres, he crossed the street and paused in front of one of those small but well-conducted places of amusement with which Paris is filled. Having purchased his ticket, he was about to ascend the short staircase which led to the foyer, when he bethought him of the overcoat still on his arm, and turning, placed it in the keeping of Madame Amelie, to whom he was well known. At the same time he observed that her companion was absent, and that she seemed to be alone in custody of the numerous wraps which lay on the broad counter before her.

'I do not see Madame Girard,' said the Baron. 'Is she taking a little vacation?'

'No, Monsieur,' was the reply. 'She is not taking a little vacation, but a very long one. She will return no more.' 'No more? I am sorry. I am used to seeing her here. She is a very obliging person. Where has she gone?'

'To the hospital, Monsieur.'

'Do you tell me so!' exclaimed the Baron, who was fifty-seven, with an unusually kind heart, and more interested in human nature than in the drama he was about to witness, of which one act had already been played.

'The first act is just finished, sir,' said Madame Amelie. 'If you do not mind, I can tell you the whole story in a few moments, during the intermission.'

'I beg that you will do so,' answered the Baron, leaning on the counter. 'Poor Madame Girard!'

'Well, this is the truth of it. For a long time I had noticed that she was not looking well, and that her usual kind disposition was sometimes a little ruffled, but I laid it all to the number and fatigue of her labors, as well as to the approach of old age. I know how it is myself, Monsieur. At last I said to her one morning:

'But you are not well, Madame—I know you are not well. Your skin is so yellow and your eyes so dull—there must be something the matter with you. For a moment she did not answer me. Then she said, in a voice very calm and unconcerned, "I am going to die presently, Amelie. I have an incurable disease." At first I did not know what to say. I was so shocked, so distressed, and so surprised at her apparent indifference. But after I had collected my senses I tried to persuade her that she was mistaken, that while there was life there was hope, besides repeating all the other senseless and futile remarks that people make, under the same conditions, every day of the year. After I had quite finished, she looked at me with the same calm expression and answered as before.

"I am going to die very soon."

'What could I do, Monsieur? What could I say? I had simply to keep silence and hope for the best. After that time, as though the revelation she had made me had taken away some of her strength with the breaking down of the barrier of reserve and secrecy, so long maintained, she began to fail rapidly. She never complained, but could no longer attend to her duties as she had formerly done. She came and went in a cab, but I was glad to do her work and my own for the sake of keeping her beside me; we had been companions so long. But at last the day came when she could endure no more; she was obliged to go to the Hotel Dieu.'

'That is best,' said the Baron.

'She is in Ward 17. I went to see her last Sunday. She seems well content, though she suffers greatly. Poor woman, she never had much happiness in life. She was very well-born, married early to a man who spent her fortune and then deserted her, after death had taken from her two lovely children. But she was glad to know that they were in heaven, Monsieur, after she had begun to struggle with the world. She had a little money saved, but her illness has consumed it all. It is sad to think that she must die as a pauper, is it not, Monsieur?'

'Very sad,' answered the Baron. 'I had always observed something superior about Madame Girard.'

'Will you believe it, Monsieur,' said Madame Amelie, 'that of all our patrons, many of whom knew her very well, you are the first to inquire for her? That is also very sad; do you not think so?'

'Probably they thought, as I did, that she was taking a vacation,' observed the Baron.

'That may be. But she will be glad, I know, to hear that you asked, Monsieur. She was always so grateful for every kindness.'

'I will thank you for my coat,' said the Baron. 'The second act has begun; I will come another evening. Good-night, Madame Amelie.'

'A perfect gentleman!' said Madame Amelie to herself as the Baron slowly sauntered through the vestibule to the crowded boulevard.

Arrived at his bachelor apartments, he lit a cigar and entered upon a long reverie. He had known the friendly work-woman for twenty years. Something in her face, deeply lined with care and sorrow, had attracted him from the first night, when he had heard her ask of Madame Amelie, in a whisper, the name of the gentleman—his own—whose cloak had just been given to her care. And there was a fleeting reminiscence in the turn of her cheek, in the shape and expression of her eyes—which must in youth have been very beautiful—a suggestion of some one he had known, that always vanished before he could place it. And she had been so grateful! Several times when he had pressed an extra franc into her toil-worn hand, he had seen the tears come to her eyes. He remembered her profile, so clear-cut, he might say so aristocratic.

Baron de Chatenay had entirely forgotten the poor work-woman till one morning two weeks later, when he found himself, returning from a business errand, directly in front of the Hotel Dieu. His gaze fell mechanically on the huge pile, with its solemn aspect, and at the same moment he thought, 'Who has been speaking to me lately of the Hotel Dieu?'

Then he remembered the history of Madame Girard related to him by her old companion, and at once became possessed by the desire to enter and inquire for the sick woman. He was really a man who deprecated his own goodness, and as he approached the entrance tried to persuade himself that he was prompted rather by curiosity than the wish to do a kindly act for a suffering fellow-creature and perhaps in some manner aid in softening the horrors of her dying bed.

His courteous manner, his gentle voice, his air of distinction, all made a most favorable impression on the Sister who received him and led him through long corridors and up and down stairways till they came to Ward 17, and the door was pushed open to give him admission.

Madame Girard occupied the third bed from the right. He saw her at once; her eyes were closed, her hands clasped on her bosom, her face so pallid that at first he thought her dead. As he approached, hat in hand, the two Sisters who were standing beside it separated and made room for him. 'She is very low,' said one of them; 'she may die at any moment. Are you a friend of this lady, Monsieur?'

'I have known her—in the line of her employment, for many years,' replied the Baron. 'She was a good creature.'

'Yes,' was the rejoinder, 'very patient and gentle and grateful for every service. Refined also, above her station, Monsieur.' The visitor was regarding closely the face of the sick woman, who had slightly turned towards him. He started, so strikingly did her profile resemble that of his own mother on her death-bed. Suddenly she opened her eyes and a look of recognition illumined their clouded depths. The trembling hands unclasped; she held them towards him, one would say almost as though wishing to embrace him. Confused, but anxious to gratify what would probably be her last wish, De Chatenay leaned forward.

'Armand!' she murmured, so faintly that the Sisters at the foot of the bed could not have distinguished what she said. But he, hearing his own name, instantly and fully comprehended.

'Marie-Louise was—the twin sister—of the Baron de Chatenay.'

'She wanders,' observed the nun, and as she spoke the tired eyes closed. It seemed to the Baron that years of agony were compassed in the short space of time in which he stood gazing at the form before him, that of his twin sister, who had secretly left his father's house forty years before with a servant and 20,000 francs, which she had taken from her mother's escritoire. A little flutter of the eyelids, a scarcely perceptible sigh, and the tragedy was over.

'Here, Sister,' said the Baron de Chatenay to the attendant, placing two notes of a hundred francs each in her hand, 'have some Masses said, and see that she is not buried in a pauper's grave.'

When he left the hospital the Baron directed his steps towards a certain chapel which he often passed in his walks, but never entered. But to-day he did so, impelled by the desire of asking God's forbearance with a careless life, for grace, protection, mercy. He often goes there now.—'Rosary Magazine.'

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