

The Storyteller.

IN THE TIME OF LAFAYETTE.

I.

EARLY IN THE NIGHT.

It was a terrible night. Not terrible because of storm, not terrible because of the lightning or the wind or the rain, but terrible because of the wickedness of men.

The whole city of Paris seemed to have gone mad. Persons who had been kindly enough, who had little children of their own, and dear old grandfathers and grandmothers, watched the carts go by that held old people on their way to have their heads cut off by the instrument called the guillotine. And those who saw all this, who applauded it, had suddenly become cruel because they had turned their backs on God.

It was a terrible night, over a hundred years ago, when Hugh O'Regan and Henry Bache met in the streets of Paris. Hugh was the most wretched of boys, for he had just lost his mother; and Henry was even more wretched, for he had lost both father and mother, and besides, he could say no prayers, for he knew none.

Louis XVI., now imprisoned by his people, had been kind to Americans. He had sent his troops over there to help George Washington in the great struggle against the tyranny of the English King George. And he had received Benjamin Franklin well at his court, and given him all the help he could. It was through Mr. Franklin that young Bache and his parents had come to Paris from Philadelphia. They had been the guests of the good Marquise de Lafayette, wife of the celebrated Marquis: she had learned with great sorrow that the Baches were of that fashionable school of infidels who had done so much harm in France.

Hugh O'Regan was about the same age as young Bache. His grandfather, the Count O'Regan, had served under Dillon in the Irish Brigade, and he and his mother had come to Paris to live in this grandfather's house while he went to the Jesuits' school. Early in the evening he had left his mother, to go for some bread and fruit, as all their servants had deserted them.

When he returned, she was gone. He found a piece of white paper on the floor, on which was scrawled in charcoal: 'I have been arrested. Trust in God. We shall, at best, meet in Heaven. "Je te laisse mon coeur."'

About the same time Henry Bache had followed a crowd who were singing and dancing. He was 15 years old, and his curiosity must be forgiven. When he returned to the house in which his parents had lodged since Lafayette had left Paris, they were gone. He ran through the deserted house until he found a servant hidden in a closet.

'The citizens had taken the aristocrats to the guillotine,' the servant said, as well as Henry could understand, for he did not know French well; 'and he had better run or they would cut off his head, too.'

And so, on this terrible night, when the streets of Paris resounded with shouts and vile songs, and torches flared everywhere, and men and women and children, with red caps on their heads, danced and sang songs in honor of Liberty, these two boys stood on the corner of a street, knowing not which way to turn.

Hugh wore a black velvet suit, with fine lace at the sleeves and neck. His silver buckles flashed in the light of a fire that had been kindled in the square, about which the people danced, singing a song they called the Carmagnole.

His hair, long and curly, fell on his shoulders. A light sword, a gift from his grandfather, hung by his side. He was large for his age, and, at home in Ireland, so noted had he been in all athletic exercises that he was rather too proud of his strength. He held his three-cornered hat in his right hand and looked at the dancers. Only a moment before, he heard it said that they had almost torn an aged priest to pieces, who had been on his way to a bed of sickness.

Henry Bache, who stood near him watching the hideous dance, was slighter than Hugh. Baseball had not been invented in America, but he could ride a pony with anybody, toss quoits, and he had even tried his skill at quintain—an old-fashioned form of polo, which had been revived at Mr. Robert Morris's place near Philadelphia. He wore a plain suit of linsey-woolsey; his hair was cropped short under a broad-brimmed straw hat. He had no buckles on his shoes, and no sword. His blue eyes had lost their usual look of keenness and interest; they were full of pain and anxiety. Hugh noticed him; he saw at once that he was not a French boy.

The dance became faster and faster. The torches flared; the light and shadows made the faces of the people under the red caps more wicked than ever.

'Ca ira! ca ira!' they howled.

'Tigers!' said Henry Bache, half aloud. Hugh heard him. A little boy had fallen in making his way through the crowd. His father, who wore the red cap, held him in his arms and kissed him. Even the red cap could not change the look of love on the father's face, as he consoled the little boy. Hugh saw Bache nervously clasp his hands together, in the red light. Hugh was impulsive; he touched Henry gently on the shoulder. Henry started; but a glance at Hugh's honest eyes reassured him—besides, that Hugh wanted to be friendly was evident from the low bow he made. The plain American almost smiled as he saw it. It reminded him of the airs and graces of some French officers who had danced in a minuet at Mr. Robert Morris's grand house, and at whom the citizens had greatly laughed.

'You speak English,' Hugh said, in his soft voice, 'and you are in trouble.'

'And you are Irish,' said Henry, holding out his hand, 'and—with a quick look at his face—'and are in trouble.'

'Alas, yes,' answered Hugh, in that soft tone and accent which betrayed his nationality, 'I am very sad, and I know not what to do.'

'And I am even sadder,' said Henry, drawn to this boy by the sense of his loneliness. One who spoke his language seemed like a friend. 'I am most wretched. My father and mother have been taken away by these demons who pretend they love liberty. Liberty means a different thing over in our country. We did not hurt women, or murder, or sing and dance like fools for liberty. We fought like men. Why, even old Parson Duche, who wanted General Washington to betray the cause, was not hurt. Oh, that we were home again!'

'We would fight in Ireland, if we could,' said Hugh, who, grave and sad, looked much older than he was. 'We are not permitted to know what freedom is—but,' he added, brightening, 'we helped you Americans. My cousin, Arthur Barry, was in the war.'

'There were many,' said Henry, 'of your country. And might I ask your name?'

'The Count Hugh O'Regan.'

'Count?' whispered Henry, looking around. 'They would kill you if they heard you say that. Many persons are guillotined every day simply because they bear titles.'

'I am what I am,' said Hugh, proudly. 'We were in Brittany when these horrors broke out, but my mother hastened hither, believing she could save my grandfather's house, which was in the charge of servants, and put me quietly to school. I had been only two days with the good Abbe Gaillard when—but what is that?'

What seemed to be a black bundle on the ground outside the circle of dancers moved and stood erect. A man, hideous in face, rushed at it and beat it to the stones. It fell with a groan.

Hugh half drew his sword. 'Stop!' Henry Bache said. 'If you fight you are lost. And I must ask you to help me, though I know not how. I have lost my father and mother, and I must save them!'

'And I, my mother. You must help me, too.'

Henry felt a strange sense of consolation in thus recognising a fellow in misfortune.

'Done!' he said, striking his hand into Hugh's, and feeling better. 'Done!'

Hugh was silent; he rested his eyes on the dark object which seemed crawling out of the circle of flickering red light. From above the black cloak showed a white head; the figure half rose to its feet. And then, as the torches of the dancers flared up for a moment, he knew the face.

'Mother of God, help us!' he whispered, clutching Henry's arm. 'Tis Father Gaillard—the wretches have almost killed him!'

Henry looked, too.

'A Papist priest,' he said, bitterly. 'Let him alone. He is as bad as the rest.'

Hugh took his hand from his companion's arm.

'We must part, sir,' he said. 'I am but a boy; but I will save that priest or die. You can go your way.'

'You will be murdered!' cried Bache.

'Perhaps so—'tis in a good cause: that old man is not only a priest, but my friend!'

Hugh was about to rush forward. Bache held him in his strong, wiry clutch.

'Say—he has reached the shadow of the tree. No—I spoke hastily. You promised to help me, and I will not desert you—even if I must risk my life for a Romish priest.'

Hugh's face was flushed, his eyes blazed. Bache was cool—'as cool,' he afterwards said, 'as a cucumber.' He drew a long-bladed pocket-knife from his pocket, while he held fast to Hugh's arm with his right hand.

'If we go forward, we shall attract attention to the old man. Wait—a moment—let me think. I tell you,' he said, as Hugh struggled, 'that you are a fool! Wait! I will help you; and no American breaks his word!'

Hugh stood still, his eyes fixed on the figure that now lay in the shadow of the trees. It was plain to him that his companion was right. Some soldiers had joined the dancing ring, and two drums lay on the ground, cast there hastily—for there was no order among the soldiers in those days.

'I will draw them around me,' said Bache, struck by a sudden thought.

'God help us!' ejaculated Hugh.

'You will run to the right, into the Faubourg; at the first corner is my lodging; it was an inn, and there is a sign hanging above the door. Go in—Jacques the servant has run away long ago. And now for it! How do you say "I am an American"?' asked Bache.

'Je suis Americain!'

'Now,' whispered Bache, growing very pale, and setting his teeth, 'go to your old man; but I expect you to help me to the death.'

'We never break our word!' answered Hugh, creeping through the shadows towards the tree.

Henry Bache breathed hard. Then he sprang forward like a deer, jumped on the big drum, and seized the little one. Rat-rat—rat-tat—rat-tat—rat-tat!

The dancing circle half stopped for a moment, but some continued to howl and sing. Henry rattled his drum again.

'Je suis Americain!' he called out, in a shrill, high voice. 'Yankee Doodle.' And then he crowed with all the strength of his lungs.

'Vive l'Amerique!' cried the soldiers. And Henry began in a high voice the song 'Yankee Doodle.'

In an instant he was surrounded by a laughing, shouting crowd. He rattled away on his drum, and cried, looking towards Hugh:

'Run—for your life!'