

Chapter IV

In affirming to Madame Delmont that the foreigner was unknown to him, however, Raoul had knowingly lied. He could not have forgotten those exceedingly remarkable features. He knew how worthy they appeared of inspiring affectionate attachment, and shivered at an encounter that seemed to promise cruel storms for the future.

In those circumstances, though, ought he to poison the tranquility that his worthy mistress was enjoying? Was it necessary to ignite the devouring flames of jealousy in her heart?

There are, unfortunately, occasions in life when it is indispensable to keep silent about the truth—when it is necessary to make a pact with deception, in order to avoid violent harm. One of them had presented itself now, and Raoul reluctantly sacrificed his natural honesty. He kept quiet about what he knew—but how desperate he was to see the evening end, in order to be free to retire to his room and reflect calmly on what he ought to do in this painful position.

At the same time, his prudence caused him to understand how important it was not to reveal what was troubling his soul. The suspicions recently aroused in Madame Delmont's bosom might lead to strange realities. He had to summon up all his energy, therefore, and, while watching over her carefully, he had to master his facial expressions, in which H el ene would not be able to read the indifference of everyday life.

Finally collecting himself, when eleven o'clock chimed on the landing clock, he hastened to sit down at the desk that was in his bedroom and wrote to tell his master what had happened:

*How surprised you will be, Colonel, when you learn that Alinska is now living in R***, and that she is the ch ateau's nearest neighbor! What is she doing in this locality, after such a long lapse of time? What is her intention? I can't tell you anything about that. She didn't recognize me—at least, when she saw me, she didn't give me the slightest hint that would allow me to deduce it. Give me your orders and I will carry them out immediately. Would you like to see her again, and obtain an interview with her to find out what she intends? Or would you prefer that Madame and your children leave the locality immediately? That departure would perhaps be the most appropriate course; you will never be happy or tranquil as long as that unfortunate Hungarian woman exists—or, at least, as long as she is able to pursue you with her presence and her reproaches.*

As he finished writing those last words, Raoul shivered, for he thought he had heard the rustle of a woman's dress behind him and felt the breath of someone leaning over his head to read what he had written. The illusion was so perfect that he did not doubt that Madame Delmont was there. Desperately confused by such a circumstance, at first he dared not raise his eyes or turn his head—but after a minute had gone by in that distressing situation, no further sound having reached his ear, he looked round and realized that he was mistaken. There was no one in the room, where a profound silence reigned, only interrupted at intervals by the cry of a solitary osprey perched on one of the ch ateau's towers.

That certainty caused him an infinite joy. He hastened to seal the letter, and after having carefully locked his door, he tried to go to sleep. For a long time yet, however, he was unable to savor the restorative balm; he could not get the mysterious Alinska out of his head, and, in his resentment against her, the honest soldier swore aloud, as he used to do when training recruits that had been sent to his company. By virtue of seeking to forget himself, however, he achieved it; his eyelids, weary of long wakefulness, finally closed, and the man within him no longer existed, save for his nocturnal relationship with the celestial intelligences.

Dawn almost always found Raoul awake in anticipation. This time, he failed in his usual custom, and the sun had already appeared above the hills of Coronsac when the former sergeant-major awoke with a start, still surprised by his profound torpor. The field-work must already have begun, and he had not presided over its commencement.

Ashamed of his failure, for which he alone would reproach himself, he hastened to get up, and ran to the farm to see whether the laborers had arrived. He had only taken a few steps outside the ch ateau when he suddenly remembered that he had left the important letter to his master on his desk. He

judged that prudence did not permit him to leave it lying around like that, so he immediately went back in to get it, intending to give it to a day-laborer in order that he might put it into the post in Toulouse.

The letter was no longer where Raoul had left it. Torn into a hundred pieces, it was strewn on the floor of the room! That sight, as surprising as it was sinister, drew a vehement exclamation from Raoul, and soon led him to exceedingly painful reflections.

Who could have torn up the letter? Who had gone into his abode so promptly, to act with such audacity? Could it be Madame Delmont, Germaine or the girl who tended the poultry? Those were the only three people who could be up at this hour. He remembered that Jeannette, the last-cited, had gone out of the château before him. Germaine, busy in the kitchen with household chores that took up all her time, could not have left her work. The windows of their mistress's apartment, carefully shuttered, indicated that she was still in bed.

Exceedingly troubled by such an extraordinary incident, he was unable to recommence the destroyed letter. He carefully gathered up all the pieces, which he burned in the nearby fireplace, and went out utterly confused by what had just happened, to which he could not assign any satisfactory cause.

The day had gone by before Raoul's mind had recovered its usual disposition. Although he was convinced that Madame Delmont was not the perpetrator of the outrage committed in his room, he was still embarrassed the first time he found himself in her presence. Trying to control himself, he tried to read Hélène's features, but nothing in particular was evident there. She was calm, and gave no indication that any unexpected discovery had disturbed her tranquility.

More astonished than ever, Raoul lost himself in vague conjectures. He was distressed when the children proposed that he should take them on a walk that evening—when, they said, they hoped to see their new friend again. He wanted to refuse, but Madame Delmont was present, and before he could say anything, she had already agreed. He was no longer able to make his sentiments known; prudence, in any case, told him how important it was not to give rise to any anxiety in the soul of his colonel's wife. He therefore suppressed a gesture of impatience that escaped him, and slowly went down the hill, as his young companions desired.

Scarcely had they entered the little meadow when the Hungarian woman Alinska emerged inopportunistically from the wood. She was carrying a mallet, two balls and a beautiful doll, intended for the children. As soon as they had seen their new friend they ran toward her, and Juliette—the bolder of the two—did not hesitate to throw herself into her arms. That innocent action seemed to disturb her; she took a step backwards, and looked at the foolish girl with an expression so somber and peculiarly sinister that the courageous Raoul stood there in confusion. But that first impulse did not last; a slight smile came to animate the foreigner's features, and she distributed the presents she had brought with a charming grace.

Enchanted with the mallet and balls, Eugène ran to a nearby road to try them out. Juliette, happy at the sight of her doll, asked permission from the lady of the wood to collect flowers to decorate its dress, bosom and forehead. The foreigner raised no opposition to that. She drew away slightly, however, and when she saw that the children were busy with their new amusements, she drew nearer to the sergeant-major.

The latter, leaning on a poplar planted in the meadow, remembered the past anxiously; he feared that new storms might trouble his colonel's rest. He was not content, but he did not know what to do to ward off impending disaster. Utterly self-absorbed, he had not heard the lady approaching him when he was snatched from his reverie by the sound of a voice that was familiar to him, but which, at that moment, had a certain hoarseness and solemnity, apt to disturb anyone who heard it.

"Well, Raoul," she said to him, "what have I done to you to set you against me forever? Will your unjust aversion never cease to pursue me with the same rigor?"

Surprised to the highest degree by such questioning, the soldier raised his eyes, stood aside from the tree that was supporting him, and seemed reluctant to reply. Making an effort to collect himself, however, he said "What do you want, Alinska? Why have you abandoned your homeland? What are you looking for in the depths of France? Has time no empire over you? Do you think that you are still as you were in your youth? If so, I pity you—or rather, I deplore the folly that is carrying you away."

"Time," the foreigner replied, in the most solemn tone possible, "no longer has any hold over me; there is a period of existence when its empire ceases, when sentiments become as inalterable as

eternity, of which they are an integral part. Have no fear of my presence; it's not my will that directs me. I no longer belong to myself; I have a cruel, imperious master who commands my every step. My past wound still bleeds, and time, as you call it, has lost the right to scar it over."

"Why cling to futile hopes?" Raoul replied. "It's all over between you and the colonel. Perhaps he did wrong, but he can no longer think about that. It's already several years since he married a wife worthy of his affection. Do you intend to trouble the peace of the household? Will vengeance lead you to break the heart of the woman who has given him her hand?"

"Could he do that, Raoul? Was it your master's prerogative to give himself freely? Was it not with the blood in his veins that he signed the promise never to go to the altar with anyone but me? Do you not know that, you who have just brought up the past, which will be reanimated in its entirety to crush the perfidious individual that you are supporting? Was I less beautiful than our new mistress? Was I less virtuous? Did crime ever undo the white veil protecting my face? What have I done wrong? Was it in returning love for love, abandoning myself without reserve to a sentiment I believed to be sincere? Have I gone back on the promise that I signed with my own blood in my turn? Is it not still in Edouard's power? Is he legitimately married, according to Heaven's law? What are my misdeeds? Let him enumerate them; he will search in vain to oppose me with them, while I can strike him down by presenting the mass of his own to him."

While speaking thus, the beautiful foreigner did not seem to belong to this world at all. Her form, tall and slender at the same time, the vague uncertainty bursting forth in her gaze, and the marks of indignation imprinted in her features—which gave her mouth a terrible expression—might have allowed her to be mistaken for one of the redoubtable intelligences that serve as intermediaries between humankind and the divinity, which the latter sometimes invests with a portion of his omnipotence for the punishment of human perversity.

Raoul could not sustain the scrutiny of her staring eyes, which seemed to be pursuing his thoughts into the remotest crannies of his soul. He admitted, internally, his master's wrongdoing—but in his view, that wrongdoing was irreparable. The years appeared to have sanctioned it; the colonel's marriage was indissoluble; and Alinska, in spite of the justice of her claims, had to renounce her demand that they be met—so he tried to make her understand that by means of his response.

The foreigner listened to him with a disdainful smile, but without interruption, without manifesting any surprise or discontent. Perhaps he was already flattering himself that he had convinced her of the pointlessness of the step she had taken, when she stopped him by placing her right hand on his shoulder.

That gesture, made with a kind of negligence, nevertheless produced a surprising effect. At the place where Alinska had touched him, he felt an extraordinary commotion; he seemed to pass rapidly into the heart of an ardent furnace, then into an ocean of ice—but the sensation disappeared as soon as the hand that had given birth to it was withdrawn.

"And have I given him back his promise?" said Alinska, tranquilly, without responding to the arguments that had just been put to her. "Will he be able to show it to me?"

"What does it matter whether he has it or not? It is no longer able to regulate his destiny. Whether it is in his hands or yours, what use is it? The tribunals will pay no heed to it."

"It might be, frivolous Frenchman, that the human law of your land does not punish that kind of perjury, but there are incorruptible judges outside this world; they have received it, have recorded it in their tablet of eternal bronze; it is to them that I have addressed myself to obtain justice, and I believe that I might expect their equity."

"Upon my faith, Alinska," said Raoul—who, scarcely occupied with venerable matters of religion, saw nothing in life but the present moment—"you've waited a long time to see that justice executed. Believe me, you'd best go back to your homeland, to your family. Be persuaded that the colonel, in exchange for that promise, for whose return he will ask you, will not hesitate to give you everything he can, to help you enjoy a peaceful existence."

"That is no longer in his power," said the foreigner, in a tone more solemn still. "I no longer have any family; the entire Earth is my new homeland; it is to her bosom that I have confided Edouard's promise. And as for the advantages that you offer me in his name, I have no need of them; I have a considerable portion at my disposal—and if you would care to promise not to send word to your master that I am here, I will promise in my turn to outbid the demands that you might make on his

fortune.” Taking an extremely well-stuffed purse from her girdle, she went on: “Here, take this, as an advance on what you shall have later.”

Alinska’s bizarre words left the soldier completely nonplussed. He knew that the Hungarian woman, the daughter of simple villagers, was certainly not rich, but now she was offering him proof of an extreme opulence. That was not calculated to reassure him, but at least she was flattering herself in her turn to think that she could seduce him. Raoul’s hand made no move toward Alinska’s; he did not dart any covetous glance at the gift she was offering him.

“I too, Alinska, have more than I need,” he replied. “Thank you for your generous offer; it could not tempt me if I had any intention of sending word to my master that I had seen you.”

“You have that intention, liar,” she replied, swiftly. “You’ve already tried to put it into action.”

That direct attack, and the insult addressed to him—for which a person of a different sex would have paid in blood—threw Raoul into an inconceivable perplexity. He hesitated as to whether to let his anger burst forth or try to hide it, but the force of his character carried him away, and he cried, resentfully: “Give thanks to your dress, which protects you from my vengeance. And what title do you merit, imprudent woman, who do not hesitate to introduce yourself into someone else’s house in order to spy on the actions of its inhabitants? You’re abroad early, it seems to me, but be certain that it will be a long time before you can get into the Château de R*** without my knowing it.”

Another smile, whose significance was indeterminable, was Alinska’s only direct response; she seemed disdainful of the soldier’s attack. Suddenly assuming a dignified attitude, however, which contrasted with the simplicity of her manners and costume, she said: “Remember, Raoul, that you have played an active part in my misfortunes. Now that they’re complete, don’t throw yourself blindly on to a road that might lead you to ruin. Believe me, remaining neutral in the struggle that might develop is the only mean to shield yourself from the gusts of the imminent tempest.”

There was an extraordinary gleam in her eyes as she finished. She made a gesture whose significance was terrible, and drew away at a rapid pace, following a path that soon hid her from any gaze, without paying any heed to the voices of the little children—who, wearying of their playthings, were coming back in order to talk to her.

Raoul, confused by the scene that had just been played out, and entirely preoccupied with the future misfortunes that he anticipated, stayed motionless in the same spot for some time.

Eugène finally drew him out of his reverie. “Can you hear the thunder rumbling in that thick cloud, Raoul,” he said. “Look—see how beautiful the lightning flashes are. There’s definitely going to be a storm.”

“A storm!” Raoul exclaimed. “Is her prediction coming true already?”

As he pronounced these words, he looked up at the sky and saw an enormous mass of vapors toward the west, over the Garonne, which emitted livid lightning bolts from time to time, while the rumble of thunder was repeated all around by echoes.

Prudence did not permit the excursion to be prolonged; he took his young friends by the hand and, choosing the quickest and most direct path, went straight back to the château, which he reached before the rain began to fall.