[For the Beaver Radical.]

THE FAMILY JEWELS.

TRANSLATED FROM THE GERMAN OF L. SCHUCKING.

CHAPTER III.

The next day when Max rode to the Ferme des Auges to repeat his visit, he was accompanied by his servant, Hartig having flatly refused to venture a second time into 'Castle Dangerous.' Nor would Sontheim or Merwig, who had teased him unmercifully after Hartig's recapitulation of their visit to the Ferme. Their jests fell heedlessly upon our hero, who decided to go alone, accompanied only by his servant to whom Hartig had loaned his horse. It was a cloudy day; rain had fallen during the night, and it had only partially cleared; in the broad valley of the Meuse which lay beneath Max's view, hung heavy fall-like mists. Upon the forehead of the young officer the clouds seemed to have left their impress; his brows were drawn as if an inward struggle was raging in his breast, as he rode slowly toward the Ferme des Auges.

Arrived there he found that they had not expected him owing to the weather. The ladies were in the *salon*; Valentine was busily writing while Miss Ellen sat at a distant table pouring over household accounts. She seemed to attend to the management of the household as well as do the honors of the Ferme.

Mons. d'Avelon had gone over to the "forges" of Rubrai on business. Max learned later that the "forges" were extensive iron works, and belonged to the Givres domain—the property of Gaston de Ribeaupierre's mother.

"You are curious to test the oracle of the old Druid lake," said Valentine greeting him cordially. "We feared the weather would prevent your coming."

She was looking entrancingly lovely, and her frank cordiality, which elicited a glance of surprised approval from Miss Ellen, recalled Hartig's admonitions.

"The weather *is* rather disagreeable," returned Max smiling, "too much so I fear, to expect ladies to take a promenade over wet grass—I should have considered—"

"Oh no—we are quite ready to go—"

"We had better wait awhile," interrupted Miss Ellen in her turn, frowning at Valentine. "I think those black clouds portend another shower."

"As you please, Ellen; and to pass the intervening time we can test the German, instead of the ancient Gallic oracle," said Valentine jestingly as she motioned him to a seat.

"Do I resemble an oracle?" asked Max seating himself.

"All gentlemen impress us as such when they are instructive."

"You mean only those who think they are capable of instructing their fair sisters? You certainly do not class me with such pedants—rather to those who believe they can learn what is best from your sex."

"What do you term 'best'—how to please?"

"Oh no indeed! only your French thoughtlessness would have dictated that. My German seriousness answers: how to suffer?"

"Do you call that the 'best?'"

"It is the most necessary at all events, in this life. *'L'art de vivre c'est savoir souffrir,'* one of your authors has written."

"Do the sterner sex learn this from us."

"Yes, and you employ a very natural method of imparting your instruction—a method similar to that which teaches young ducks and swans to swim. They are simply cast into the water by their mothers."

Valentine laughed merrily. "That method requires an illustration," she said.

"It is not palpable enough? A fair sister crosses our heretofore monotonous orbit, and awakens within us a slumbering passion—the pain is there and we must how to bear it—how to swim in the new element. If we think we will sink, that we cannot bear up, no assistance being offered of course we struggle and learn to swim—figuratively."

"Very ingeniously illustrated," returned Valentine a little mockingly. "You must not forget, however, that we women have much to learn from your sex—above all to mistrust your flowery speeches."

Max retorted, and the conversation continued in a jesting vein until they forgot the object of Max's visit. Nor was the Maid's grotto to be thought of, for it began to rain, and soon after the noise of wheels was heard in the court.

"Father!" exclaimed Valentine springing to her feet, and hastening to meet him.

"It is Mons. d'Avelon and Mons. Gaston—Valentine's betrothed," said Miss Ellen casting a side glance at Max as she added the last words.

She had the satisfaction of seeing Max's face flush; slightly it is true, but faint as it was she detected it.

"Mons. de Ribeaupierre is Fraulein Valentine's betrothed?" he said in a forced, indifferent tone.

"It is very probable," returned Miss Ellen, "because they have been pledged to each other since their childhood; and one might say their betrothal would be a natural consequence, since Gaston inherits Givres which joins the Ferme des Auges—and Mons. d'Avelon has no other children."

"Ah! what a nicely arranged affair!—the hearts are as closely united as the estates, I presume?"

"Why should they not be since they grew up with a united future in their minds. They would not only establish their own happiness but that of their parents also, for Mons. d'Avelon desires the union as earnestly as Madame de Ribeaupierre."

"Then if such is the case why do you say it is very probable?"

"Be—cause," she returned hesitatingly, "Valentine obstinately persists in her whim of not betrothing herself until she is of age."

"Ah!" Max bit his lips, and Miss Ellen ought, to her further satisfaction, have seen his brow darken had not her attention been attracted by the entrance of the two gentlemen and Valentine.

Mons. d'Avelon welcomed his visitor with the same cordiality he had shown the day before; Gaston on the contrary bowed stiffly.

Max noticed something like embarrassment, or rather distress in Valentine's face; and as he turned to answer Mons. d'Avelon he saw Gaston hurriedly whisper a few words in her ear, then the two retired into an embrasure of the window, where they continued the *tete-a-tete* which was seemingly of no tender purport.

Were they quarreling. To Max it seemed likely, though it might be that Gaston also had important news to relate, as Mons. d'Avelon seemed to have bought a considerable share from Givres.

Dispatches from the seat of war; of a victorious assault against the besiegers by the Prussians; of a great naval victory by the French at the mouth of the Elbe; in consequence of which Hamburg was in flames—all of which Max was able to prove entirely false.

"Yes, yes, so I told you before!" exclaimed Mons. d'Avelon, "it is a war of men against children; so of course the children must console themselves with fables. Do you hear, Gaston?"—he cried "all the reports we heard in Givre are false—mere inventions."

Gaston approached, his face malignant in its dark anger, as he almost hissed:

"Then if the reports are mere fabrications they have one advantage—we can hope to see our honored guests so much the longer in our midst!"

The malicious smile as he finished this covert sneer roused Max's blood, but he conquered the passion and returned calmly:

"You must not find fault with our being here, Mons. de Ribeaupierre—we did not come uninvited."

"I disagree with you there."

"Of course you do; when one chooses to disagree—but we will not give vent to our disagreement since we meet on neutral ground."

"That this is neutral ground must be acknowledged by both sides—neither party has the right to decide for the other," returned Gaston in a challenging, contemptuous tone.

Max had foreseen the Frenchman's intention to draw him into a quarrel, but was not prepared for the rapid advancement of what that gentlemen evidently desired. For an instant he gazed fixedly into the heated face of the young man; in a moment his resolve was taken and in a contemptuous tone retorted:

"Good manners, I think, compel us to acknowledge neutral ground."

"German manners are no criterion for us."

"They should be when French courtesy is insufficient."

"Do you object to 'French courtesy?'" sarcastically.

"Not as much as I do to the French weather which prevented our intended excursion to the grotto. The ladies, at all events, think it too damp—so perhaps *you* will act as guide, Mons. Ribeaupierre?"

Gaston, who evidently understood Max's significant invitation, answered hastily:

"Yes, certainly! We will see if the road is as bad as the ladies fear—come!" and turning he led Max through the glass door leading to the terrace, while Mons. d'Avelon stared after them in speechless bewilderment.

Valentine at this moment sprang hurriedly to his side and in a frightened whisper exclaimed: "Follow them, father! I beg of you follow them!"

"Hm, you don't suppose—?"

"Yes, yes—Gaston is so hasty and hates the Germans so fearfully—you know how angry he was because this officer was here again."

"But I'm sure *I* invited him; he is agreeable—"

"Oh hasten, father!—lose no time—go and separate them before it is too late!" she interrupted frantically.

Mons. d'Avelon took the hat Miss Ellen brought just then—even her expressionless features betrayed alarm—and dashing it over his eyes and ran out of the room. When he reached the courtyard he saw them just emerging from the south gate leading to the hill. He called loudly, but they semed to ignore his call and accelerated their footsteps.

"Let them go—to the devil if they want to!" he growled panting for breath. "I can't watch over them like a nurse over a pair of naughty children. If they're determined on breaking their heads they will do it sooner or later!" and muttering angrily he turned and walked toward the stables.

As Max and Gaston left the avenue and began to ascend the hill the former began:

"I know very well, Mons. de Ribeaupierre, that you intended by this challenge to prevent my return to the Ferme. Let me tell you that your wish will not be fulfilled—I shall return in any case."

"Truly?—I must confess that you possess a wonderful amount of the German tenacity, added to the rest of your qualities—to use no worse term."

"I hope to convince you that this affair between us had better end peacefully," said Max not heeding the sneer. "I should have preferred to wait a little longer before I make the exposition I am about to honor you with, but you have compelled me to it—so let it be. Although you hate me because I am a German and your enemy, yet this must not prevent us from recognizing each other as honorable gentlemen; and I trust you with a secret which, should it ever pass your lips, will bring sorrow and shame to a family for which you have a great regard—but enough; your indiscretion would be infamous, so I will speak without demanding any assurance of secrecy on your part."

"Heavens! What a mysterious peroration!" exclaimed Gaston shrugging his shoulders.

"It was necessary," returned Max shortly. "Listen; I told you that a quarrel with you would not prevent my visiting the Ferme des Auges. It is true! for I have as much—if not more right here than Mons. d'Avelon, or rather Herr Von Daveland, who is accountable to me for every farthing he has."

Gaston halted suddenly and stared at the speaker in unbounded surprise.

"It is as I tell you," resumed Max, quietly; but do not imagine that I am here to demand an account of him—not by any means; for Herr d'Avelon is my uncle, the brother of my dead father, and Valentine is my cousin."

"Ah—still better!" muttered Gaston sarcastically. "It is very singular though, that *Herr* d'Avelon does not seem to wish to acknowledge the relationship—or have *you* cause to conceal it from him?"

"I have—I have excellent reasons for concealment! I should not have come to this place a *guest* to-day had not my cousin impressed me with the other impossibility of carrying out a design whose end was *not* a peaceful reconciliation of two conflicting interests—"

"In a word: all this preamble means that you intend to sue for Valentine's hand?"

"I do!"

"*Peste!*" exclaimed the Frenchman with rage inflamed face; "your cool declaration is remarkably unique—particularly to her betrothed."

"You have not attained that position. I know that Valentine has not yet consented to your bearing that relation publicly," returned Max coolly.

"Then *you* mean to demand her hand on the strength of your assserted claim? Your do not imagine how very absurdly your naively asserted claim to the Ferme des Auges strikes me; but your German fancy so happily sustains you, that you innocently imagine your nicely planned scheme will succeed without further trouble. How do you mean to prove your singular claim to the Mons. d'Avelon's estate? If you had such proofs would you have trusted me, above all others, with your secret?" he asked ironically.

"My proofs are simple and I submit them to you in proference to any other, because I have very good reasons for doing so—I trust I may never have to submit them to any one else—listen: When my grandfather died he left a considerable fortune; a large estate which, according to the law of primogeniture, was the heritage of the eldest son—my father; and the family jewels—among them my grandmother's diamonds, which fell to my father's young wife. These jewels were invaluable in our eyes; they were the savings of several generations; for in ancient times families could not invest their surplus funds in bonds or stocks, for these were very few; nor in mortgages, for the land was held by wealthy and frugal gentle folks or by serfs, who were prohibited from contracting debts. There were no communications with banks in larger cities, so the surplus funds were invested, sometimes in gold or silver plates, sometimes in diamonds, to increase the family jewels—the heritage of the eldest son. Those of our family were valued at about fifty thousand dollars—"

"Well—let us come to the point," interrupted Gaston impatiently.

"When my father took possession of his inheritance the jewels had disappeared," resumed Max in a quiet tone. "But their loss was by no means a mystery. They disappeared with my father's younger brother, who was a wild, obstinate and passionate young fellow, destined for the army, from which he had been dismissed after a few years' service, for quarreling with a superior; and at the time of my grandfather's death was without occupation living with his parents. After the funeral it was found he had disappeared as had also the jewels—that he had taken them was not to be doubted, for he confessed the theft in a letter he left for my father. This letter was short, angry, and full of insults; he wrote:

"The law—or rather a cursed injustice, gives you everything, houses, lands—all, even the leaves in the forests; and to me nothing but the permission to exist beneath your roof upon a pitiful rental, and the felicity of beholding *your* progeny multiply. May our ancestors, who made such infamous laws repent of it in hell! which would give me little satisfaction here, so I mean to have a better. I leave you in possession of the estates, the vast extent of field and forest which was my father's as well as yours—whilst I take possession of the jewels; with them I can live a life, which in my estimation is a more manly one than that which would have to depend on your gracious charity. If you have the heart to do it, then brand your only brother as a thief and hound him to the death. I shall however take care to evade any search you may please to make."

So the letter, which I have in my possession, runs.

"Well, you must acknowledge that he was not altogether unreasonable! And you assert that Mons. d'Avelon and this—diamond thief, are one?"

"I do, d'Avelon is Daveland."

"Is the similarity between the names your sole proof?"

"By no means. I recognized a ring on Valentine's hand, a heart shaped diamond over which three small rubies are set, in such a manner as to represent a flaming heart. When a boy, this ring was described to me more than a dozen times by an aunt who regretted its loss more than all the rest, because it had been presented to my grandmother by a celebrated princess who died more than a century ago. I observed further, that Mons. d'Avelon betrayed the utmost confusion when he read my name on the card yesterday, and to hide this confusion he hastily left the terrace; when he returned, he asked in a voice which betrayed his agitation, spite of its seeming indifference, concerning my nativity. I gave him a false account to calm him. Again, I noticed a written paper on Valentine's desk—the characters are the same as those in the letter I told you of."

Gaston was silent for several moments; then in a voice, whose attempt at sarcasm did not conceal his uneasiness, asked:

"Is this the first time you discovered your lost uncle?" accenting the last word.

"Why do you ask?"

"Oh I did not know but what you might have been deceived more than once in discovering diamond thieves in innocent persons."

"Then you do not believe me?"

"No, I do not. But suppose I did; suppose you were right what then? Would you do what your father was too generous, too noble to do? Would you think it your duty to punish your father's brother for taking what was justly his own but which an infamous law gave to his brother? Would you, presuming on your right, demand Valentine—or perhaps the diamond's which he no doubt has disposed of long ago?"

"Had I intended any of these I should certainly not have sought this interview with you, Mons. de Ribeaupierre. But let me proceed for you have not heard me out. My father, as you observed, did not pursue his brother. He managed his estates successfully for years, until a series of undeserved misfortunes fell upon him and straightened his circumstances. An extensive conflagration reduced his forest rental; a mining corporation, in which he had invested large sums, went into bankruptcy; to this was added failure of crops, the unfavorable decision of a lawsuit with a neighbor, in short my father at last saw himself reduced to the necessity of selling the estate—which the new legislation empowered him to do—and our home, the home of generations of our family, passed from our hands. With his wife and children he repaired to a city and spent the remainder of his fortune in the education of his children." Here Max paused an instant, then with a sigh resumed: "I, the eldest of his children, am to-day almost a beggar, with nothing but the meagre salary of a civil officer. Had my uncle not taken the jewels my father would have been able, with the proceeds of their sale, to meet the calamities which overtook him and spared our estates. My uncle doubtless purchased this estate with the stolen jewels, of course increasing its value by good management—in a word he has what should be mine, and I have less to-day than he had when my grandfather died."

"This is rather a tragical family history," said Gaston in a changed voice, after a moment's deliberation. "Now that you have told me everything, I confess I cannot, if I would, withhold my sympathy, which your confidence in me has increased; what do you mean to do?"

"Have I not told you? I do not wish to terrify Mons. d'Avelon or Valentine by revealing my relationship to them. I will try to win Valentine because—I love her—"

"And because it is the simplest and easiest way to gain possession of what you consider yours," interrupted Gaston. "But I too have claims upon Valentine."

"You may think you have; I do not contradict you; and I shall yield silently should Valentine prefer you to me; nor shall her father ever know how nearly we are connected, but quietly continue in possession of what he considers his till the end. But pray understand me: I will not exercise the same regard for a stranger; when Mons. d'Avelon dies you, nor no one else—for Valentine may choose some one else—shall inherit this estate. My claims are plain and easily proven. I have the letter in which my uncle confesses himself the purloiner of our jewels, and peace once more restored between France and Germany, no court will refuse to sequester the estate that was purchased with my father's—with my inheritance."

"Mons. d'Avelon's estate is prescribed."

"A property gained criminally can never be prescribed."

Gaston turned and walking to a rustic seat a few paces onward, sat down and drawing forth an *etui* lighted a cigar. For several moments he silently watched the blue clouds curling upward, then in a composed voice said:

"The long and short of it is, you want to discourage my addresses to Valentine by showing that she will be a fortuneless bride?"

"Would this serve to discourage you?" asked Max rather scornfully as he seated himself beside him.

Gaston blew forth the spiral clouds silently.

"I am sorry," he began at length, "that I can have no faith in your belief that Mons. d'Avelon is your uncle. I have heard from my mother that he was a Belgian by birth and that his family live in Belgian, relatives with whom my mother was in communication some years ago. Mons. d'Avelon's wife was a distant relative of my mother, and it was *her* dowry which enabled him to purchase the Ferme des Auges," triumphantly.

"That may be; then he spent the proceeds of the jewels earlier, and my claims would by no means be diminished thereby."

"And concerning the ring;" continued Gaston ignoring Max's words, "it proves nothing at all. Such a bauble can be purchased in any shop where such antigue jewelry is sold."

"And his confusion when he learned who I was, and his chirography?" asked Max.

"Are you certain he was confused? And what evidence could be based on the similarity between a hand writing of to day and that of thirty years ago! I have a proposition to make: remain at the Ferme to night and to-morrow morning I will bring you proofs that will convince you of your error."

"What sort of proofs?" asked Max dubiously.

"A copy of his marriage contract, proving that his fortune is the dowry his deceased wife brought him, and not the proceeds of your grandmother's jewels. Also the letters my mother received when d'Avelon wished to marry her cousin, and which contain the most detailed information respecting his early life."

"I would, indeed, like to see these proofs," returned Max still doubting, "but I must beg the favor some other time; I dare not be absent from my quarters in Void over night."

"When such an important matter is to be decided, are you such a slave to your fancied duty?" asked Gaston rather sneeringly. "Besides I am obliged to go to Neufchateau to-morrow forenoon, where I may perhaps have to remain for several days—or weeks."

"At what hour could you let me have these papers?"

"I shall return to Givres to day immediately after dinner, then I will speak to my mother—"

"You promised not—"

"Have no fears, I will not betray your secret in my inquiries concerning Mons. d'Avelon; I will secure the papers and leave them here with you on my way to Neufchateau to-morrow early—about seven o'clock. You can send them back to Givres after examining them. Are you agreed?"

Under the circumstances, Max concluded to risk the captain's displeasure; he would send his servant with a message to Sontheim, so that his absence would at least not create any uneasiness. Gaston undertook to procure him an invitation to spend the night at the Ferme. Mons. d'Avelon was passionately fond of chess; it would be sufficient to incidentally turn the conversation on this subject after dinner, and on the old gentleman's learning Max's partiality for the game an invitation to try their skill would of course follow—and Mons. d'Avelon's games were of no short duration.

TO BE CONTINUED.