

The Home Reading Circle

AT THE HOUSE OF THE SCARLET WITCH.

By MAX PEMBERTON.

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SYNOPSIS.

The Abbe Morel, cure of the village of Yvette, is journeying to Paris with his valet and groom. As they enter the woods of St. Cloud, near Paris, they are overtaken by three masked horsemen. They are well dressed—two of them are flighty built men, but the other has a slight girlish figure. The abbe and his party are a little suspicious of their intentions, which suspicion is not relieved when the tallest of the riders addresses him as the bishop of Blois, and warns him of the witches that haunt the woods. The abbe protests that he is not the bishop, but the rider insists that he is. The abbe then explains that he is going to Paris to place his ward, Corinne de Montesson, in a convent. He has heard that she is the friend of all the ne'er-do-wells in Paris, and lately has helped the notorious highwayman, Coque-Hel, to escape from the police. Corinne has the favor of the king, and had hoped that she would help him in his ambitions, but she has remained an obscure abbe. This, together with the reports of Corinne's escapades, has determined him to go to see his refractory ward and put her in a convent.

PART II.

This seemed a very simple resolution in theory; but when the Abbe entered the dark woods of St. Cloud after his conversation with the three jesters in the masks, the practice of it began to be difficult. He remembered that the last time he had been to Paris, they had led him such a life in the great house that he had been truly thankful to get back to his little hamlet and to his own poor people. He had just a lurking suspicion that his authority might be laughed at again. Besides, he was not in Paris yet, and there before him lay the dark woods against which the three strangers had warned him.

"Fah," said he as he quitted the high-road and plunged into the darkness of the silent thicket, "strange sights and sounds, indeed. Am I a child to be frightened by old women's tales? Never let it be said. Thank God, there is a ducking stool still for witches; and I shall know where to complain if I am molested. We must be in Paris before midnight—that is certain. The reflection comforted him. It was very dark in the woods, and so silent that the sound of distant church bells or the barking of dogs sounded like voices from a far-off world. The sun had sunk below the rim of the western hills now, and only a deep blue-gray light, blending with pink at the peaks of the clouds, marked the lingering day. In the thickets themselves the mystery and spell of the night was already omnipotent. The Abbe could not but feel a certain dread and foreboding. His two servants did not attempt any such talk. They told each other, consolingly, that they would be dead men before morning; and so they rode hand in hand, each devoutly hoping that the other would be the victim of the night, and that the Abbe, their master, would precede them to the grave. No superstition was too gross for them to believe. They swallowed every goblin and witch and demon, dwarf that tradition had named for a hundred years or more. There was not a ghost in all France that they would not have staken their life upon."

"I have heard it said," muttered Francois to Jean, as they drove their stubborn asses still deeper into the woods; "I have heard it said that you have but to look upon the woman to be forever blind."

"Jean crossed."

"Did I grant that our master sees her first?" said he.

"And worse than that," said the valet, "if you are young and good-looking she will kiss you upon the forehead, and then you are branded like one who has been sent to the galleys."

in blood, every tree trunk to be a scarlet phantom conjured up by the ghostly flames. But it was the light flashed, livid, smoking, terrible—the darkness fell; and from the wood there came a scream of many voices raised in an awful wail like the wail of departed spirits or of men in their agony.

At the first flashing of the fire, the Abbe's pony became still, shivering with fear. Nor was his master in any better plight.

"Come," said the Abbe to himself, as he wiped the perspiration from his forehead and tried to take heart a little, "why do I fear when I have but ten crowns in my pocket? Who would harm the Cure of Yvette? Not the footpads of Saint Cloud, I am sure. And do not believe in spirits—certainly they are for ha's tales. What I saw was the fire of some charcoal burner. No doubt that was it. My men will come up presently, and we will all go on together. I could laugh to remember what a figure I cut."

He did laugh, but the remembrance, but it was a poor attempt—hollow and mocking like the thought which bred it. And he began now to be very anxious for the company of his servants, bidding them come forth from the thicket where he believed them still to lie.

"Francis, Jean!" he bawled, "it is I, your master, who calls you. What do you fear, knaves? Am I not here to protect you? Oh, surely, I will lay my earthly monies upon your backs tomorrow!"

"To his amazement, neither Jean nor Francois answered his appeal; but in the wood behind him there arose again the eerie wail, and now it was long sustained and piercing like the wail of wretched spirits. "Hail to the Lord Bishop of Blois!" was the cry; "hail! hail! Whither he goes, there go we—lolalla—lolalla—lolalla!"

The echo fell from wood to wood and grove to grove until it died away in moaning and afar, at the heart of the forest. When the last note was still, the Abbe heard a voice, sweet and fresh and young, crying:

"What shall be done to the Lord Bishop of Blois?"

"Long live the Lord Bishop of Blois—lolalla—lolalla!"

It was a strange scene; the torches, which many of the masqueraders had now lighted, casting a livid glow upon the scarlet dresses and masks and whitened faces of the dwarfs and demons and horrid monsters who now flocked about the amazed Cure of Yvette. He, on his part, knew not whether the whole were a hideous dream, or the perpetration of some masquerade of which he was to be the victim. Possibly he was, for his mind there was borne the question—

Even the learned were gross in superstition in the middle of the eighteenth century, and the excellent abbe was no exception. He had now swarmed about him contributed to his bewilderment. A hundred possibilities occurred to him while the cries were still ringing in his ears. He had heard of the terrible jests which courtly masqueraders had perpetrated on those who were obnoxious to them. Could he have given offense in high places—or was it true, after all that the woods of St. Cloud were peopled by spirits and elves and witches, and that he had fallen into their power? He said he would believe no such tale, and with this resolution to nerve him, he turned of a sudden upon the horde who pressed about him and began to argue with them.

"Sirs," said he, "I have heard much talk of the Lord Bishop of Blois, and I see plainly that you mistake me for him. Know then that I am but a simple priest, the cure of Yvette, sirs, and that I ride to Paris upon an affair of very great importance."

The Abbe, deafened by the clamor, put his fingers into his ears and began to shiver with fear.

"Ciel," he murmured, "you are all mad."

"Ciel," repeated the scarlet company, "we are all mad."

"The sally was roared rather than intoned; and at the end of it, the whole company bent low in their saddles, the men doffing their hats to the terrified Abbe, the women blowing kisses to him. Then the scarlet woman, who appeared to be the mistress of the throng, raised her fresh young voice and asked again:

"What must be done to the Lord Bishop of Blois?"

And for the second time, the answer came:

"He must suffer—he must suffer—lolalla—lolalla—lolalla!"

The Abbe was really frightened now. The wailing melancholy of the chaunt; the hideous shapes of the men who rode at his side; the strange, distorted, whitened faces seemed to him to resemble nothing human, nothing known. Minute by minute, the conviction crept upon him that here was the scarlet witch of whom the common people spoke in their folk-tales. The more he said to himself, "it is a jest," the farther was his mind from accepting that assurance. He remembered that he was alone with jesters so terrible.

"Oh," he moaned, at last, "what do you want with me? what would you do with me?"

"Sirs," echoed the crowd with stentorian voice, "what do you want with us? what would you do with us?"

"Sirs," wailed the Abbe, "for pity's sake have done with it and take me where you will. I have but ten crowns upon me, and that you shall find in my pouch. Get them, I pray you, and permit me to go in peace."

A mocking peal of laughter attended this simple confession.

"What shall be done to the Lord Bishop of Blois?" asked a great, horned goblin who rode upon the smallest of the small white ponies.

"He shall buy a supper at the House of the Scarlet Witch."

The command moved the company to frenzies of turbulent delight. Before the wretched victim could protest or answer, strong hands had seized his bridle rein to lead his pony through the woods; other hands had clapped a bandage to his eyes, and knotted it so tightly behind his ears that the whole of the strange vision of grotesque and grinning figures was shut instantly from his view. He knew only that his pony was carrying him rapidly through the forest; that the air became fresher as he mounted to the higher places of the park; that he was led to a light before his breast was stopped and he was lifted gently to the ground. Never once, however, while the procession moved, did the throng cease their unearthly monotonous chant, nor ever lay a voice of the night—the wail of spirits wandering or of phantoms at their pleasures. When it stopped at last with a sudden crash, the Abbe's pony stopped, too. A strong arm encircled his waist, he was lifted from the saddle and bidden to walk; he knew that he was entering some room in a house—a gentle hand forced him into a seat, it removed his bandage; he could see again.

By this time the unhappy man was incapable of surprise. The scene in the wood had robbed him of all power of reason. When they stripped him of his bandage and he was able to look about him, he neither spoke nor wondered. Yet the spectacle was strange enough to have amazed a bolder man. For the Abbe sat then in a room draped in scarlet; and more than that, he sat in a high chair before a long table lit pleasantly by the soft, light of many wax candles; and so weighed down with plate and exquisite cut glass that the scarlet drapery below was hardly to be seen. As for the company, that also was a scarlet company; devils, demons, witches; their whitened faces now hidden by crimson masks, their very hair appearing to be of the brightest red. Even the walls were draped in the same glowing colors; while the attendants, some in hideous masks, some garbed like scarlet elves, capped the scheme fittingly. Yet this was the curious thing—the word was spoken, no greeting given. The company sat like statues. The Abbe shuddered again; he could not altogether suppress the thought that he might be supping with the risen dead.

Such a haunting suggestion was quick to pass. Though a grim foreboding pursued him while he asked himself where he would be, what he would do, what he would say when they called him the Lord Bishop of Blois and said that I must suffer? He, good man that he was and there was none better in France, was like other men in possessing a healthy appetite. The groaning table put some heart into him. "I have ridden far and a well boiled capon with a cup of Burgundy will not amuse me," he thought. And so for the first time since he had entered the terrible wood he permitted himself to hope. "They will let me ride on when supper is done," he assured himself, "and I shall be in Paris, after all, by the last day of the month. It would never do to be delayed over tomorrow, for the king returns to Paris then, and Corinno will see him and cheat me once more. Certainly, I must be in Paris tomorrow. Meanwhile, I will see what sort of a supper it is, for I am very hungry."

One of the servants had set a plate before him now, a plate upon which was a little silver dish exquisitely garnished and served. So tempting did the morsel look that the good Abbe hastened to plunge his fork into it, but at the first mouthful he made an ugly grimace and was unable to withhold an exclamation.

"Ciel," cried he, "that is nothing but bread crumbs."

He looked round the table appealingly, but no one in the masked company vouchsafed to him an answer. All were busy upon similar dishes, of which they appeared to partake with exceeding relish. Indeed, they had finished their portions before the Abbe had recovered from his astonishment; and while he was still looking at them a lackey, dressed in crimson, carried in a dish, upon which was a smoking fish of great size, and began to serve slices of it to the Abbe first, and afterward to the other suppers.

At the same moment another attendant filled the Abbe's glass—a magnificent glass of the rarest Venetian work—with wine from a crystal goblet, and then did a similar service for the rest of the company. The action reassured the hungry cure. For the second time he plunged a ready fork into the dish before him. "Fish is fish," he said to himself, while he snatched his lips in famished anticipation. The assurance scarce had comforted him when he uttered a cry of surprise, for he felt a cold ecclesiastical no. abbotical.

"Nom du diable," he exclaimed, "but this is bread, too."

How it came to be, in what manner the cheat had been contrived, the Abbe knew no more than the dead. Yet there was the fish right enough, and a second mouthful convinced him that it was made of nothing but bread.

"St. John," cried he, sitting back in his chair, "who ever heard of that—a fish made of bread crumbs; and everyone eating it as though it were a mullet from the king's table. Body of St. Paul—they are all mad."

Mad or sane, the scarlet company appeared to enjoy the fish very much. Their heads bent over their plates, the suppers varied their occupation of eating only by the equally pleasant one of taking long draughts from the crystal goblets before them. They did not appear so much as to notice that the Abbe was appealing to them. His words, his exclamations, his questions, fell alike upon deaf ears. Not a man listened to him; not a woman raised her eyes to watch him. Nor did his anger, which presently succeeded to his hunger, express itself in any other way than a dull, unobscured. Had he roared like a bull, the masked company would have remained oblivious of his presence.

"Ho! ho!" said he at last, while he leant back in his chair, and raised the goblet in his hand, "a plague upon the table which sets bread crumbs before a hungry man!"

He put the goblet to his lips and took a long draught from it. The wine, he had said, would at any rate wash the tasteless bread from his mouth—and so he held the cup long. When at length he put it down, there was upon his face the most unceremonial grimace that had ever sat there.

"Maledetto," cried he, "but that is water."

To be Continued.

ONE MILLIONAIRE'S START. Penniless, He Went Right Over to Bank and Got Money. From the Times-Herald.

During this same blow a goat happened to get in the road and had his hair blown off, leaving his hide as clean as a shined basson. The animal looked so much like a Mexican dog with horns that he was placed on exhibition.

Another caper which this tornado cut was to blow the side whisks of a traveling man and plant them on the side of a woman's face, where they continued to grow.

Here is another pretty fair one: A farmer was ploughing around an oblong patch of ground one day and at night the tract of unploughed land still contained about five acres. When he quit for the day he left the plough sticking in the furrow, as farmers do, and caught the plough, taking it around the "hand" until it was all ploughed.

A Kansan abroad recently found a crowd that did not seem to appreciate his conversation concerning the conspiracy of the foreign capitalists to compel the Populist farmers of Kansas to pay their honest debts, so he pulled out his stock of tornado stories, hoping to attract attention:

"I saw a cyclone once," said he, "that picked up a straw stack and moved it a mile and put it back, straw on straw, as it was."

That occurred many years ago, it is true, but that young German today is the head of a corporation capitalized at \$4,000,000, and his name, if I were to give it here, would be recognized instantly as one of the leading business lists of the selection of jurymen. I commend this country.

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SKINS ON FIRE CUTICURA



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