AFTER LOUISE

BY MARY DEVEREUX

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY DON C. WILSON

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CHAPTER II.

Through the weeks of the late summer, old Tatro, the butler, had been attending the meetings held by the peasants. But, being a firm believer in the old regime, he had reported faithfully to Monsieur le Baron all that had transpired at these gatherings, telling him of the vicious speeches made by Fauchel, and of the latter's evident determination to influence the peasants against the people of the chateau.

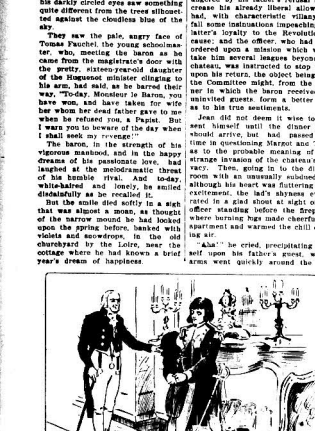
On a certain September morning, after one of these reports from Tatro, the baron said, "Find Margot, and send her to me."

When the faithful old servant had left the room his master looked out of the window toward the park, into his darkly circled eyes saw something quite different from the trees silhouetted against the cloudless blue of the sky.

They saw the pale, angry face of Tomas Fauchel, the young schoolmaster, who, meeting his master as he came from the magistrate's door with the pretty, sixteen-year-old daughter of the Monsieur Coutlon clinging to his arm, had said, as he barred their way, "Bon-jour, Baron. I have, have won, and have taken for wife her whom her dead father gave to me when he relieved me, a Pauper. I warn you to beware of the day when I shall seek revenge."

The baron, in the strength of his vigorous manhood, and in the happy dreams of his passionate love, had laughed at the melodramatic threat of his humble rival. And to-day, white-haired and lonely, he smiled disdainfully as he recalled it.

But the smile died softly in a sigh that was almost a moan, as thought of the narrow escape he had looked upon the spring before, banked with violets and snowdrops, in the old churchyard by the Loire, and the cottage where he had known a brief year's dream of happiness.



"Is it thou, my beloved Pizarro?"

But he now roused himself as Margot entered, and bade her to be seat ed.

"Margot, I have sent for thee that I may unburden my mind somewhat as to matters which have been weighing heavily upon me for many months past," he begun.

Margot looked at him in silent wonder mingled with some alarm, as she could see no reason for his words, for the mood which seemed to inspire them.

"These are troublous times," he resumed more calmly, and dropping the familiar manner of speech he had previously used; "times when but a few hours suffice to turn friends from apparent security into confusion and danger. I wish, therefore, to place a considerable sum of money in your care, for I feel that perhaps it may be worth much to you with me. It is all I have of my own to give Jean; and it will believe me to know that, no matter what may come to me, we love ever Etienne may seek to rob the boy, my Jean will never know actual want."

The baron was now standing by the side of his chair, resting his hand on the edge of a panel in the oaken wainscoting. It flew open, disclosing a small recess, wherein were a small metal box and a number of little canvas bags.

"Come here," he said, turning to look at Margot over his shoulder. She came to his side.

"See," he explained; "you do so, and so," showing her how to manipulate the secret spring. Then, after closing the panel, he added, "See now if you can open it."

She did so, and the panel opened again.

"Ah, that is well. Now you know where the boy's fortune is hidden, and I trust you to guard it for him. The bags contain gold coin, and the papers a few thousand francs, that are his, as they were his mother's; also some jewels, for which the finder may show need, should any one seek to deprive him of his rights as my son. I shall leave the chateau directly, and to when and where you will take them from Jean, I cannot tell you. Remember, Margot, I charge you solemnly, that wean I am not here, if I am taken away, I trust you, above all others, to protect my boy's future, and provide for his welfare."

"That will I do with my life!" Margot declared fervently.

"I was very sure I must take day when Jean came running in to announce that he had seen soldiers riding in the direction of the road leading through the park.

Bidding me to keep out of sight until the cause of such a visit could be ascertained, Monsieur le Baron descended to the reception-room, where the officer in command of the soldiers soon presented himself, and delivered a letter from Coutlon, in which the baron's hospitality was requested for the bearer and his escort.

The fact was that Etienne, recently angered by his father's refusal to increase his already liberal allowance, had, with characteristic villany, let fall some insinuations impeaching the latter's loyalty to the Revolutionary cause; and the officer, who had been ordered upon a mission which would take him several leagues beyond the chateau, was instructed to stop there upon his return, the object being that the Committee might, from the manner in which the baron received his uninvited guests, form a better idea as to his true sentiments.

Jean did not deem it wise to present himself until the dinner hour should arrive, for he was anxious for time in questioning Marzot and Tatro as to the possible meaning of this strange invasion of the chateau's privacy. Then, going in to the dining-room, he found the baron seated, although his heart was fluttering with excitement, the lad's attention was fixed in a dried shoot at sight of the officer standing before the fireplace, whose appearance had taken the apartment and warmed the chill evening air.

"Aha!" he cried, precipitating himself upon his father's guest, whose arms went quickly around the boy.

"There was silence, as if those outside were afraid to do or say an unexpected resistance.

"There were more than fifty men outside; with them were some women; and Tomas Fauchel was their leader.

"Monsieur le Baron, will you permit me to arrange the defence as I see fit?" inquired the young officer, turning to his host.

"Most assuredly, sir; for I have full confidence in your ability," was the reply.

"Then entrench every door in this hall, and close all the doors leading from it, so that all here will be in readiness to fire upon the rebels on approaching authoritatively. "And do you, Gérodette," looking toward his soldiers—"with Monsieur le Baron stand here beside Monsieur le Baron, that the baron may endeavor, and not a ball into every head that appears there."

Gérodette saluted silently, and the officer continued: "If Tatro will act as guide, to pilot myself and the other out through some unobserved way, we will make a detour, and treat our rebels to an attack in the flank."

Some of the buried-in trenches had to be dug, but the preparations were quickly extinguished by the baron.

A moment later the discharge of musketry outside told that the lieutenant and his men had come upon the rebels. They had not waited for more yells and imprecations, but with a cheer had made a mission which were taken by several leagues beyond the chateau, were instructed to stop there upon his return, the object being that the Committee might, from the manner in which the baron received his uninvited guests, form a better idea as to his true sentiments.

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"Truly it is, little Monsieur de Soto," answered Gérodette, the officer, laughing as he kissed Jean's flushed cheek, as the lad, the baron looked on with amusement, and old Tatro paused in the report he was making to shake his head and lift his white hair, to stare with equal surprise at the unceremonious salutations of affection between the stranger and his master's son.

When they were seated the officer explained to Monsieur le Baron—all in a way and to him by the name of Etienne—how he had come to know the boy, and Jean, now quite in his element, and entirely at ease, rattled on after a fashion that relieved his father from any extra effort at entertaining his guest.

It was nearly six o'clock. The officer and his host were seated in the drawing-room, having a game of chess, Jean very proud and correspondingly sleepy, because of sitting up so late, and this usual bedtime being thus from a near-by divan, when Tatro, his face and voice showing the excitement, rushed into the room and exclaimed, "Mon Dieu, Monsieur le Baron, the peasants and a large crowd of them are coming up the avenue! Hark—you can hear their yells!"

The chessmen and board fell to the floor as both players sprang from their chairs, and Jean, all sleepiness banished from his eyes, stood beside them.

"Call my soldiers at once," ordered Bonaparte, speaking to Tatro. "Monsieur le Baron," he added, turning to him, "we will do all in our power for your protection."

"The dozen soldiers appeared, and were ordered to take possession in the hall, where they stood, with ready arms, behind their commander and Jean, who were nearer the stood, by barred door, listening to the wild hubbub of voices now close to the chateau.

"The lieutenant waited until there was a lull in the noise, then, raising his voice, he called out, "Have a care, friends, for the baron is not with our protectors. I am an officer of the Assembly, and in its name I bid you disperse."

"Yes, mother," he said, "I know, dear, it is cruel, in playing cards?"