

JILL
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CHAPTER I. A CHAPELLE MORTUAIRE.

Immediate preparations were made for our departure from the spot where we were. A couple of coarse handkerchiefs were tied across the lower part of our faces, so as to stifle our voices if we should uplift them on the remote chance of any one being in hearing who would assist us. Next our feet were untied to enable us to walk. We were warned that if we attempted to escape or to call out, we should be instantly stabbed. And in order to convince us that this was no empty threat, a wicked-looking, dagger-like article, known in Corsica as a vendetta-knife, was dashed before our eyes, and we were shown that each of our captors had one of these knives stowed away in a little inside coat-pocket, where it was ready to hand at a moment's notice.

Then we moved off in single file. Napoleon went in front, with Kitty close at his heels; I came third, and César brought up the rear.

The robbers naturally selected to travel through the *maquis* rather than along the open road; and we two captives, whose hands were bound, sorely missed the assistance of those members to push aside the numerous boughs and twigs by which our progress was impeded. Now and then the man in front stopped to hold back obstacles in some very thick place, where we should otherwise have probably altogether stuck fast; but such an attention was exceptional, and, as a rule, we were left to make our way unaided as best we could, regardless of the scratches and bruises which we continually received, and whereby the discomfort and fatigue of the journey was greatly increased. Napoleon led us first down to

the mouth of the valley; then branched off in a direction away from that which the carriage and Mrs. Rollin would take; then climbed a steep hill, and proceeded along the ridge of it for some distance; then descended abruptly into another valley, and we were kept trudging over hill and dale alternately in this way during the whole afternoon. Many of the places we passed were such as might have roused a lover of fine scenery to enthusiasm; but neither Kitty nor I were in a humour to appreciate that sort of thing just then, and the beauties of the landscape were quite wasted upon us, as we toiled wearily along obscure and seldom-used tracks, through desolate wild districts, without ever once approaching a human dwelling.

My having made the men believe that neither of us understood Italian caused them to converse together in that language as unreservedly as if they had been alone, and, thanks to this, I was able to discover what were their intentions for disposing of us for the present. I learnt that we were being taken to a cave up in the hills, which had been their headquarters since their escape from prison. Here we were to be left under care of one of the robbers, whilst the other descended to the lower lands to seek out Mrs. Rollin, and open negotiations with her on the important subject of the ransom.

This cave of theirs, wherever it might be, was evidently an unpleasantly long way off from the scene of our capture. On and on we went without ever pausing for a moment; and I grew so tired that I could hardly drag myself along, and began to speculate on the chances of having to be carried before the appointed resting-place would be reached. A slackening of speed or a halt would have been a most welcome relief to me; but of that there was no hope, as our progress was already too slow to satisfy the robbers, who kept constantly urging us to hurry on faster, lest we should all

be benighted on the way. As daylight diminished, so did their impatience increase, and many were the angry oaths they uttered at the distance still to be traversed before attaining the cave.

Suddenly Napoleon stood still, and looked back at his comrade joyfully. "César," cried he, "I have a good idea! At the rate we go now, we shall not get home till midnight; whereas if you and I were alone, and not hampered by these women, we should arrive in half the time. Is not that so?"

"Obviously," grumbled César; "but what's the use of stopping to tell me what I know already?"

"Why this," returned the other; "that I propose we should disembarass ourselves of them at once."

"Stupid!" rejoined César, irritably; "don't you see that the only way of doing that is to kill them, or else to let them go; and that in either of those cases we should be throwing away all chance of deriving further gain from them?"

"Ah, but I have thought of another method of getting rid of them," answered Napoleon—"a method which will enable us to keep them alive, and in our power too. I did a good deal of business in this part of the country formerly, and learnt to know it well; thus I came to know of a place near here, which I have only just recollected, and which will be most convenient to us at this moment. It is not exactly such a place as I would myself care to stay at, but it will do admirably for shutting up these two women in, and when we have disposed of them there, you and I can travel home as fast as we please. A famous safe prison it is, where there will be no need for one of us to stay and keep guard over them, as there would be if they were housed in the cave. Thus we shall be

free to go together and see about the business with the ransom—which will, of course, be a great advantage, since two heads are better than one, you know."

César seemed still incredulous. "I believe you are talking nonsense," said he; "I cannot think of any possible prison about here to answer to your description."

"Nonsense, indeed!" retorted his companion; "no, in truth! A short distance from here, on the side of a hill, far from any inhabited house or public road, I remember that there is an old mortuary chapel. Years ago the family to whom it belonged left their country-house and went to live in Ajaccio, and since then it has never been used. This is the place in which I propose to imprison our captives. There will be no chance of their being heard, however much noise they may make; for the walls are thick, and there is nothing to bring any one into the vicinity. And as they will certainly not be able to get out unaided, we shall have no need to trouble ourselves more about them, except to supply them with food."

"A deserted mortuary chapel!" said César, reflectively; "'tis a good idea, no doubt. Only—it is getting late; and—well, to say the truth, I am not at any time over-fond of the company of the dead, and like it least of all by night. Still—it would be very convenient to do what you propose—the light is not gone yet—the chapel is close by, you say. Yes! there will be time to shut up the women, and remove ourselves to a pleasanter neighbourhood before dark. Go on, then, and let us get the job over as soon as possible."

Our course was resumed accordingly. The thought of the grim kind of hotel that Napoleon had found for us reminded me forcibly of

Schubert's song *Das Wirthshaus*, and I seemed to hear its wild plaintive melody sounding in my ears as we hurried over the broken ground through the fast-increasing dusk. Horrible as was the idea of being immured alive in a tomb, yet I shrank from it less than I should have done ordinarily. And for these two reasons: First, because the long march had reduced me to such a state of exhaustion that the prospect of rest was welcome anywhere—even in a *chapelle mortuaire*. Secondly, because it seemed safer and in every way preferable to be with the dead than with the two ruffians who had us in their power, and whom I regarded with the most profound distrust.

The chapel being near at hand, we reached it while there was still sufficient light to show something of the exterior of our prison.

We came first to a high wall, with no other opening in it than an iron gate, which was wide enough to admit a carriage. The bolt by which the gate was fastened was forced back without difficulty, and then a short straight bit of road brought us to the door of the chapel itself. This door was situated exactly opposite to the gate in the outer wall, and was secured by a great iron bar across the outside, and also by a chain and rusty padlock. With the help of a stone the men easily broke open the padlock, and then they lifted the ponderous external bar off its supports. There was now no further obstacle to opening the door before which we stood, but our captors—being not insensible to superstitious fears—did not wish to keep the entrance to the charnel-house open longer than was absolutely necessary, and therefore postponed unclosing it till the last moment.

They set our hands at liberty, and delivered to us such provisions as they had with them—consisting of a morsel of sausage, a slice

of rye-bread, a good-sized piece of extremely strong-smelling cheese, a couple of onions and apples, and a gourd half-full of wine. Having thus provided us against famine, César made us a profound bow of mocking deference, and said in French: "Adieu for the present, ladies. You see our desire to treat you with distinguished consideration induces us to place you here, with a good roof and strong walls to shelter you, rather than to take you to the rough cave which serves *us* for a habitation. We do not intend remaining to share this splendid dwelling with you, lest we should intrude on your privacy; therefore we shall now, however unwillingly, tear ourselves away, but first thing to-morrow morning we will return with a supply of food, before departing to seek out and communicate with the other lady." Then, addressing himself to his comrade, he said: "Look sharp, Napoleon; open a bit of the door, and in with them!"

The door, which only opened outwards, was pulled just far enough apart to admit a human body. The men, without adventuring their own persons an inch within the building, thrust Kitty and me roughly in, and at once closed the entrance behind us again. Then came a scraping, grating noise, which told that the great iron bar was being replaced on its supports outside, and immediately afterwards we heard the steps of César and Napoleon hurrying away at full speed from the uncanny neighbourhood of the tomb to which they had consigned us.

At first we stood without moving from the spot to which we had been pushed, just inside the door, waiting to see if we should be able to distinguish anything when our eyes had become accustomed to the darkness; for the interior of the building was perfectly dark. Meanwhile we profited by the liberty that had been

restored to our hands to remove the handkerchiefs across our mouths, which had hitherto prevented us from speaking.

Kitty's knowledge of Italian being limited, she had not comprehended what the men had been saying to one another; consequently she did not now know the nature of our abode, as I discovered from the first words she uttered when her mouth was free of its gag:

"I wonder what sort of place this is," she said; "don't you? It's a bore to have no light; however, I'm going on a bit further, to explore without it, as we can't possibly have it."

I laid my hand upon her arm, and checked her as she was about to advance.

"You had better be careful how you move," I said; "we are shut up in a *chapelle mortuaire*."

"A *chapelle mortuaire*" she echoed, interrogatively; "let me see—what is that? Oh I remember! Wasn't that the name of those buildings which you told me you had seen near Ajaccio, and which you called 'villa residences for the dead?'"

"Yes," I replied, doing my best to speak unconcernedly and carelessly, and to conceal from her the feeling of disgust and aversion with which the place inspired me, and which was growing stronger every moment; "rather an appropriate place for me too, I think, seeing that I'm nearly dead with fatigue. I haven't the least wish to move about, and intend to sit down just where I am now. The door will make a capital back to lean against."

I was not sure but what the knowledge of where she was might perhaps prove a shock to Kitty's nerves. But there was no trace of

discomposure to be detected in her voice or manner as she answered me. "So it will," she said, "and I vote that we have dinner at once. Those wretches never offered us any five o'clock tea; and what with that and the long walk, I'm quite ravenous! You've no idea what a relief to my mind it was to find that they didn't intend to leave us all night without food."

Of course we both wanted to seem as happy and as much at our ease as possible, in order thus to help to keep up each other's spirits. I, however, was not very successful in the effort; for though I was perfectly free from any dread of the supernatural, yet there were material horrors attached to the position which I could not forget. I thought of the sights that would be revealed if there were light; of the grinning skulls, mouldering bodies, crumbling coffins, and ghastly relics of mortality, which might be expected in a tomb; and I remembered that these things must be so close to me that I might perhaps at any moment strike my hand against them. There was a gruesomeness and eeriness about the place, to which my state of bodily exhaustion rendered me unwontedly susceptible, and I felt more nervous and creepy than I had ever done in my life before.

"I don't think that I *can* eat in this terrible place," I said, with an involuntary shiver, in response to Kitty's suggestion of dinner.

Whether or not she was at all inclined to be affected by our dismal surroundings, as I was, I do not know; at all events she did not show it, and redoubled her efforts to raise my spirits when she perceived how much disposed I was to break down.

"Oh yes—you'll not think of where you are in a few minutes more, when you've got used to it," she returned, seating herself beside me, and proceeding to distribute the food. "What a funny idea to have a

picnic in the dark—quite novel, too; I daresay no one ever did it before. Where is the bread? Oh you've got it. As for the cheese, there's no need to ask where *that* is, because one's nose may safely be trusted to supply the requisite information. I must say a knife would be rather handy; but I'm afraid we must do the best we can without, for I left my pocket-knife where I was sketching, and Messieurs César and Napoleon have omitted to provide for our wants in that respect. How lucky that my aunt is not with us, and obliged to dine in this primitive fashion, without any proper appurtenances! If she were, I verily believe she'd be unhappy lest any acquaintance should behold her in the act of committing such an enormity—even though the fact of the spectator would involve light to see by, and a chance of assistance; both of which *I* should consider to be most desirable things at this moment."

Thus she ran on, joking, laughing, making light of every discomfort, and chatting to me as if she had thought me her equal, as if the tomb had been a leveller of ranks to the living as well as to the dead, and as if in entering it all social differences between her and me had been annihilated. She could have devised nothing better adapted to accomplish her object, and help me to shake off the gloomy influences that oppressed me. Her example of bright good humour and courage was irresistible, and before our unilluminated repast had progressed far I became myself again, and eager to show a spirit as brave as her own. To this desirable result, too, the creature comforts of which I partook tended not a little to contribute. Though the victuals were hardly to be called choice, and the wine had acquired a nasty flavour from the gourd in which it was contained, nevertheless they revived me as well as the most sumptuous cates could have done; and when dinner was at an end I was a different creature from what I had been before.

Kitty made no comment on the change in me, but I have little doubt that she perceived it, all the same, as she now, for the first time, turned the conversation seriously to the predicament in which we found ourselves.

"It seems to me, Jill," she said, "that you and I are having to do penance, with a vengeance, for our disbelief in escaped *penitenciers*! We must give our minds now to what we are to do next; but before entering on that subject I want to tell you how *very* sorry I am to have been the means of bringing you into this scrape. I can't help feeling that it is all my doing, and that if I had not gone on to sketch, or had not taken you with me, you, at all events, would be in safety at this moment."

Proud as she might be, pride had not yet taken enough hold of her to crush the naturally generous disposition which was more distressed at being the cause of another person's sufferings than at having to suffer itself. I was touched at the thoughtfulness on my account evinced by her last speech; and as I did not wish her to blame herself unfairly, I assured her that I had accompanied her quite as much for my own pleasure as hers. And in order to prove that we should not in any case have got off scot-free, I repeated to her the conversation I had overheard before we were captured, from which it appeared that the carriage would have been attacked if she and I had not separated from it and walked on alone.

"Thank you," she said, when I had completed my tale. "I can't tell you what a comfort it is to me to know all that, and to think that I am not the sole cause of this bother! And now to consider our next proceedings. The two things chiefly borne in upon my mind at this moment are—first, that it's no use blinking the fact of our being in an extremely awkward position; and second, that it won't do to be

afraid, because fear, as Solomon says, 'is nothing else but a betraying of the succours which reason offereth.'"

This was no doubt true. But, unluckily, no amount of calmness and courage would show us any reasonable prospect of escape—look at the situation in what way we would.

It was no use to hope that our friends would rescue us, since it was manifestly impossible for them to have an idea where we were. When Mrs. Rollin continued her journey from the place where we had left her, she would, we knew, have reckoned on my remaining on the road, whether Kitty did or not. Consequently she would have gone on driving contentedly towards St. Lucie di Tallano without the least fear of leaving us behind; and there was no saying how long it might have been before either she or the driver became uneasy at not overtaking us. Then, when they *did* take alarm—as they must have done, sooner or later—there was nothing to make them suspect what had really happened. They would probably suppose we had simultaneously expired, tumbled over cliffs, sprained our ankles, or fallen victims to some other likely or unlikely catastrophe; and then they would have begun hunting about vaguely for us, without the slightest clue to where we were. Thus it was in vain to trust to external aid reaching us, and the question was, Could we anyhow manage to escape by our own unassisted exertions? Alas! the prospect was no better in that direction either. The door through which we had entered was the only outlet apparent, and that was, as we knew, fastened on the outside by a great heavy bar, which rendered exit in that way impossible. Shouting was of no avail, because the place was so solitary that we might have screamed till we were hoarse without a chance of producing any other effect.

Altogether, therefore, we saw no possible means of getting away from our prison, and came reluctantly to the conclusion that we had no alternative but to resign ourselves to stay where we were, and await the course of events patiently. This was by no means a satisfactory termination of our deliberations, and, having arrived at it, we sat in melancholy silence for a minute. The silence was broken by Kitty who said cheerily: "I'm sure we shall both be the better for some rest, so let us lie down and go to sleep."

"Lie down!" repeated I; "surely that won't be safe, will it? It's too dark to see, and there might be—well—things that one wouldn't care to touch, knocking about in a place of this kind, you know. I should think we'd best try and go to sleep without changing our present position."

"No; we shouldn't rest nearly as well sitting upright, as we should lying down," answered Kitty; "and it won't do for us to play tricks with our strength in any way, or to risk losing an atom of it that is to be had. Very likely there may be nothing disagreeable up the middle of the floor, or, at all events, nothing that we cannot easily clear away. Let us stoop down and feel our way straight before us till we have a space to lie down in."

There seemed a tacit agreement between us that the ghastly objects by which we knew we must surely be surrounded were not to be defined in words, but to be kept strictly to ourselves, lest the imagination of one should supply some additional detail which had not occurred to that of the other, by which means the horrors of the situation might have been considerably increased. I am sure this was a wise precaution. As it was, I know I found my imagination vivid enough to picture a good deal more than was at all agreeable

to think of; and it would, no doubt, have been still more troublesome if supplemented by that of Kitty also.

I did not by any means relish her proposal that we should clear sufficient space to lie down on; for I could not help shuddering at the thought of the things one might expect to come in contact with when groping about without light in a *chappelle mortuaire*. Still, I was not going to have her despise me as a fool or a coward, so I made no objection, and set to work heroically to perform my share of the unpleasant task.

The only suspicious thing which I met with in the course of my explorations was some small-sized object, whose substance was cold and clammy, and whose identity I could not at all determine by touch. An exclamation of disgust rose to my lips when my fingers came against this unknown horror; but I managed to restrain any outward manifestation of emotion, and merely pushed the obstruction aside quietly, without letting Kitty know that I had found anything unpleasant.

As I made this effort to spare her feelings, I was struck by the quaint probability of her being at the same instant engaged in a similar endeavour to spare mine, and I realised that the common danger to which we were exposed was a link which united us so firmly that our separate identities were, for the time being, well-nigh merged into one. Whatever affected the condition of one of us must necessarily affect that of the other also; whence it followed that the bodily and mental welfare of both was a matter of mutually vital consequence, and that each was as anxious to shield the other as herself from any annoyance or shock that could possibly be avoided. Truly a queer sort of selfish unselfishness!

It did not take us long to make sure that we had room to lie down without fear of coming against any repulsive relics of mortality; then we extended ourselves upon the ground, pressing closely together for warmth, as the night was cold. Hard and rough as was the couch, and perilous as was our situation, we were too tired to be kept waking by either discomfort or anxiety, and were speedily asleep.

CHAPTER II.

A NEW USE FOR A BIER.

As I had no means of knowing the time, I cannot say exactly how long my slumbers lasted, but, as near as I can guess, it must have been about a couple of hours before I awoke. On opening my eyes I saw, with much surprise, that the moon had found its way into the tomb, as there was a patch of yellow light shining upon the opposite wall, and relieving the profound obscurity that reigned elsewhere. This was a most cheering and hope-inspiring spectacle; for, as the door was still closed as before, the moonlight certainly could not be entering in that way; and the obvious deduction was, that the chapel walls must have some second opening which we had not yet discovered. Whatever it was, might we not escape through it?

I aroused the still sleeping Kitty to point out to her the pleasant sight, and we got upon our feet to examine into the matter more nearly. The light was evidently admitted through some aperture situated in the gable of the roof just above the doorway, and the shadows by which the patch of light was traversed proved that the aperture was defended by bars. What the object of the opening may have been I know not,—perhaps ornament, perhaps ventilation, perhaps some whim of the architect's. Anyhow, there it was; and though darkness had prevented our seeing it on our first arrival at the chapel, yet now the friendly moon had come to our assistance, and was indicating it as a possible means of regaining liberty. Never in my life had I felt such a sincere admiration for the moon, and such a conviction of its utility to the world, as I did then.

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