THE POCKET BOOKS

THE NOBLE ROGUE

By BARONESS ORCZY

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PART I

CHAPTER I

This act is an ancient tale new told.
—SHAKESPEARE.

M. Legros, tailor-in-chief to His Majesty Louis XIV and to the Court of Paris and Versailles, bowed himself out of the room; with back bent nearly double, and knees trembling in the effort, he receded towards the door even whilst Monseigneur the Archbishop spoke a final and encouraging benediction.

"Have no fear, my good Monsieur Legros," pronounced Monseigneur with urbane kindness; "your affairs shall come under the special notice of the Holy Father. Be of good cheer, right and justice are on your side. Solemn vows cannot be flouted even in these days of godlessness. Go in peace, my son; you are dismissed."

"And if the Holy Father—hem—I mean if Monseigneur would take cognizance of the fact—hem—that I will place—" stammered M. Legros with some confusion. "I mean, Monseigneur—that is—I am a man of substance—and if the sum of fifty thousand francs—or—or a hundred thousand—"

"Nay, my son, what would you suggest?" quoth Monseigneur with a slight lifting of elegantly-arched brows. "The thought of money doth not enter into the decrees of the Holy Father."

"I know—I know, Monseigneur," said M. Legros with ever-growing confusion. "I only thought—"

"An you thought, my son, of pleasing God by the bestowal of alms in these days of licentiousness and of evil luxury, then by all means do so in accordance with your substance—I will see to the proper distribution of those alms, good Master Legros—the two hundred thousand francs you speak of shall be worthily bestowed, our promise thereon."

M. Legros did not think of protesting. The sum mentioned by Monseigneur was a heavy one in these days, when the working and trading classes had but little left for their own pleasures once the tax collector had passed their way. But the worthy tailor had made no idle boast when he said that he was a man of substance; he was well able to pay a goodly sum for the gratification of his most cherished desire.

He received his final congé almost on his knees, then he disappeared through the doorway. Lacqueys to the right of him, lacqueys to the left of him, lacqueys all the way along the carpeted stairs down to the massive front door, formed a living avenue through which M. Legros now passed with his back not yet fully straightened out after its many humble curvatures.

Soon he reached the narrow, ill-ventilated street on which gave the great gates of Monseigneur the Archbishop's palace. Instinctively M. Legros gave a deep sigh of content and relief, inhaling the fresh autumnal air which could not altogether be excluded even from these close purlieus where roof almost met roof overhead, and evil-smelling gutters overflowed along the roughly-constructed pavements.

The good master tailor had succeeded passing well in his momentous errand. Monseigneur had been overgracious, and two

hundred thousand francs was after all only a small sum to come out of Rose Marie's ample marriage portion. M. Legros now walked with a brisk step along the right bank of the Seine, then crossing the Pont Neuf he found himself near the Châtelet prison, and thence by narrow by-paths at his own front door in the Rue de l'Ancienne Comédie.

Here he gave a sharp rap with the polished brass knocker, and within a very few seconds the door was opened and an anxious feminine voice hailed him from out the darkness of the narrow passage.

"Eh bien?—Monseigneur?—What did he say?"

M. Legros closed the door behind him with great deliberation, then he turned, stretched out both arms and, catching the speaker round the shoulders, imprinted two well-sounding kisses on a pair of fresh young cheeks.

"He says," said the worthy bonhomme gaily, "that Rose Marie, the fairest maid in France, shall be called Countess of Stowmaries before the year is out, for right and justice and indissoluble marriage vows are all on her side."

A little gasp—which sounded almost like a hysterical sob—broke from the woman's throat. It seemed as if the news—evidently very anxiously expected—was overwhelmingly good. There was silence in the little passage for a moment, then the fresh voice, now quite cheerful and steady, said lightly:

"Let us go and tell maman!"

Together father and daughter went up the steep, slightly-winding stair which led to an upper story. Rose Marie, silent once more, felt

as if her young heart would presently burst through her corselet, so rapidly did it beat with excitement and anticipation.

She followed her father into the large, cheerful-looking room which gave on the first landing. Here a bright fire blazed in an open hearth; blue cotton curtains hung on each side of the single, narrow window, through which the last rays of this October day struggled faintly.

A large iron stewpot, from which escaped a jet of savoury-smelling steam, stood invitingly upon the hob, and beside the hearth, wooden spoon in hand, her ample proportions carefully draped in a thick brown linen apron, stood Mme. Legros herself, the wife of one of the wealthiest men in the whole of Paris.

"Eh bien! Legros, 'tis good news then?" she asked with cheerful optimism, whilst a benevolent smile shone all over her round face, red as an Eydam cheese and quite as shiny and greasy, for Madame had been cooking and she was mightily hot.

"The best, Maman," came in hilarious accents from her husband; "our daughter shall be installed in her English castle before many moons are over. The Holy Father himself will interfere, and this—this—milor Stowmaries will have to obey at once—failing which 'twill be excommunication and nothing less than that."

M. Legros had thrown himself into the tall-backed chair, black with age and the smoke from many a previous stewpot, and had stretched out his legs before him, in order that his dutiful daughter Rose Marie might the more easily divest him of his high out-door boots.

Kneeling before her father, she performed this little service for him with all the grace of loving girlhood, and he cocked his cropped head on one side and looked down at her with eyes in which merriment struggled with happy tears.

She was so good to look at as she knelt thus on one knee, her fair hair—touched with the gold of the sun of her native Provence—falling in thick ringlets round her young face. She was so girlish and so pure, fresh as the hawthorn in May, and withal luscious to behold like a ripening fruit in June.

"Nay! nay!" said M. Legros with mock gravity, as he put his now stockinged feet to the ground and rose with a great show of ceremony; "this is no place for Madame la Comtesse of Stowmaries. She must not kneel at any man's feet, not even at those of her fond old father. Come to my arms, my girl," he added, once more resuming his seat, his voice breaking in the vain endeavour to seem flippant; "sit here on my knee. Maman, for the Lord's sake put down that spoon, and sit down like a Christian and I'll tell you both all that Monseigneur said to me."

With a happy little sigh Rose Marie jumped to her feet. Obviously her young heart was still too full for speech. She had said nothing, practically, since her first greeting to her father, since she had heard from him the good news—the confirmation of her hopes.

Her cheeks were glowing until they quite ached with the throbbing of the veins beneath the delicate skin, and the palms of her hands felt cold and damp with suppressed nervousness and excitement.

Obedient to her father's call, she came close to him and perched herself on his knee, whilst his arm sought her slender waist and

clung to it with all the gentle firmness born of his fond paternal love, of his pride in the beauty and grace of his child.

Mme. Legros—somewhat reluctantly—had pulled the stewpot further away from the fire, and put her wooden spoon aside. Then she sat down opposite her lord and her daughter and said blandly:

"I am listening."

"Monseigneur was most affable," now began M. Legros, speaking with some pride at the recollection of his late reception in the Archbishop's palace, "but from the first he bade me to be brief, so as I had rehearsed the whole scene in my mind over and over again, and knew exactly what I wished to say to His Greatness, I was able to put our case before him in the most direct, most straightforward way possible. Now if you will listen very attentively and not interrupt me I will tell you word for word just what passed between Monseigneur and myself."

"Go on, Armand," said Madame; "I am burning with impatience and I'll promise not to interrupt."

As for Rose Marie, she said nothing, but from the expression in her eyes, it was obvious that she would listen attentively.

"Monseigneur sat at his desk and he was pleased to tell me to be seated. Then he said: 'Commence, my son; I am all attention.' He fixed his eyes upon me and I then began my narrative. 'My wife had a distant relative,' I said, 'married to an officer in the army of the English king. At a time of great pecuniary distress this fashionable lady bethought herself of her connection with the humble tailor of Paris and wrote to him an amiable letter

suggesting a visit to his modest home.' That was so, was it not, Maman?" he asked, turning for confirmation to his buxom wife.

"Exactly so, Armand," she replied in assent; "except that the fashionable lady was at pains not to tell us that her husband was in prison for debt over in England and that she herself was almost destitute—and to think that I was such a simpleton as not to guess at the truth when she arrived with her little boy, and he with his shoes all in holes and—"

"Easy—easy, Mélanie," rejoined M. Legros tartly. "Am I telling you my adventures of this afternoon, or am I not?"

"But of a truth thou art telling us, Armand," replied fat Mme. Legros blandly.

"Then I pray you to remember that I said I would not be interrupted, else I shall lose the thread of my narration."

"But thou didst ask me a question, Armand, and I did answer."

"Then do not answer at such lengths, Mélanie," quoth the tailor sententiously, "or I shall be an hour getting through my tale, and that savoury stew yonder will be completely spoilt."

Harmony being thus restored under threat of so terrible a contingency, M. Legros now resumed his narrative.

"I did tell Monseigneur," he said with reproachful emphasis, "that at the time that Mistress Angélique Kestyon came on a visit to us in company with her small son, then aged six and a half years, but without nurse, serving or tiring woman of any kind, we were quite unaware of the distressful position in which she was, and in which she had left her lord and master over in England. I then explained

to Monseigneur how Mistress Kestyon seemed over-pleased with the grace and beauty of our own child Rose Marie, who had just passed through her first birthday. She would insist on calling the wench Rosemary, pronouncing the name in an outlandish fashion, and saying that in England it stood for remembrance. A pretty conceit enough, seeing that our Rose Marie once seen would surely never be forgotten."

And a vigorous pressure on Rose Marie's waist brought an additional glow to the girl's bright eyes.

"At this point," continued M. Legros, "it pleased Monseigneur to show such marked interest in my story, that he appeared quite impatient and said with a show of irritation—which could but be flattering to me:—'Yes! yes! my son, but there is no need to give me all these trifling details. I understand that you are rich, are of somewhat humble calling, and have a daughter, and that the English lady was poor, if high-born, and had a son. Ergo! the children were betrothed.' Which, methinks showed vast penetration on the part of Monseigneur," added the worthy bonhomme naïvely, "and gracious interest in my affairs. Whereupon, warming to my narrative, I exclaimed: 'Not only betrothed, Monseigneur, but married with the full rites and ceremonials of our Holy Church as by law prescribed. My wife and I—so please Your Greatness—thought of the child's future. It has pleased God to bless my work and to endow me with vast wealth which in the course of time will all pass to our Rose Marie. But here in France, the great gentlemen would always look askance at the daughter of the man who made their coats and breeches; not so in England where trade, they say, is held in high esteem, and in order that our child should one day be as great a lady as any one in the land and as noble as she is beautiful, we wedded her to a high and mighty well-born English

gentleman, who was own great nephew to one of the most illustrious noblemen in that fog-ridden country—the Earl of Stowmaries, so he is called over there, Monseigneur!' and you may be sure," continued M. Legros, "that I mentioned this fact with no small measure of pride."

"Well, and what did His Greatness say to that?" queried Mme. Legros, who would not curb her impatience, even for those few seconds whilst her man paused in order to take breath.

"Monseigneur did not seem over-pleased at seeing me display quite so much pride in empty titles and meaningless earthly dignities," rejoined M. Legros lightly. "His Greatness was pleased to rebuke me and to inform me that he himself was well acquainted with the distinguished English family who bears the name of Kestyon of Stowmaries. The Kestyons are all good Catholics and Monseigneur thought that this fact was of far greater importance than their worldly honours and their ancient lineage, and should have weighed much more heavily with us, Maman, when we chose a husband for our daughter."

"We should not have given Rose Marie to a Protestant, Armand; you should have told that to Monseigneur. No, not if he had been the King of England himself," retorted Mme. Legros indignantly.

"The King of England is as good a Catholic as any of us, so 'tis said," commented M. Legros, "but this is a digression, and I pray you, Mélanie, not to interrupt me again. I felt that His Greatness had lapsed into a somewhat irritable mood against me, which no doubt I fully deserved, more especially as Monseigneur did not then know—but 'tis I am digressing now," resumed the good man after a slight hesitation. "In less time than I can repeat it all, I had

told Monseigneur how directly after the marriage ceremony had been performed, we found out how grossly we had been deceived, that le Capitaine Kestyon, the husband of Mistress Angélique, had been in a debtor's prison in London all the time that his wife was bragging to us about his high position and his aristocratic connections; we heard that the great Earl of Stowmaries not only refused to have anything to do with his nephew, who was a noted rogue and evil-doer, but that he had a son and three grandsons of his own, so that there were a goodly number of direct inheritors to his great title and vast estates. All this and more we heard after our darling child had been indissolubly tied to the son of the best-known scoundrel in the whole of England, and who moreover was penniless, deeply in debt, and spent the next ten years in extracting our hard-earned money from out our pockets."

The recollection of those same ten years seemed to have even now a terrible effect on the temper of M. Legros. Indignation at the memories his own last words evoked seemed momentarily to choke him. He pulled a voluminous and highly-coloured handkerchief from the pocket of his surcoat and moped his perspiring forehead, for choler had made him warm.

Mme. Legros—equally indignant in retrospect but impatient to hear Monseigneur's final pronouncement on the great subject—was nervously rapping a devil's tattoo on the table. Rose Marie's fair head had fallen forward on her breast. She had said nothing all along, but sat on her father's knee, listening with all her ears, for was not he talking about the people who would be her people henceforth, the land which would be her land, the man who of a truth was her lord and husband? But when Legros, with just indignation, recalled the deceits, the shifts, the mean, mercenary actions of those whose name she would bear through life, then the

blush of excitement seemed to turn into one of shame, and two heavy tears fell from her eyes onto her tightly clasped hands.

"Father, Father!" cried fat Mme. Legros in horror, "cannot you see that you have made the child cry?"

"Then heaven punish me for a blundering ass," exclaimed Legros, with renewed cheerfulness. "Nay! nay! my little cabbage, there's naught to cry for now; have I not said that all is well? Those ten years are past and done with and eight more lie on the top of them—and if Monseigneur showed some impatience both at my pride and at my subsequent indignation, he was vastly interested, I can tell you that, when he heard that the son and three grandsons of the great English nobleman were by the will of God wrecked while pleasure-cruising together off the coast of Spain and all four of them drowned, and that the old lord himself did not long survive the terrible catastrophe, which had swept four direct inheritors of his vast wealth and ancient name off the face of the earth and into the sea. His Greatness became quite excited—and vastly amiable to me: 'Ah!' he said, 'then surely—you cannot mean—?' You see Monseigneur was so interested he scarce could find his words. 'Yes, so please Your Greatness,' quoth I with becoming dignity, 'the husband of our Rose Marie, the son of the capitaine who in life had been nought but a rogue, has inherited the title and the wealth of his great-uncle. He is now styled by the English the Earl of Stowmaries and Rivaulx, Baron of Edbrooke and of Saumaresque, and he has many other titles besides, and one of the richest men in the whole of England!' 'Mais, comment donc!' exclaims Monseigneur, most affably, and you'll both believe me, an you will, but I give you my word that His Greatness took my hand and shook it, so pleased did he seem with what I had told him. 'We must see the lovely Comtesse of Stowmaries!—Eighteen years ago,

did you say, my son? and she was a baby then! The decrees of God are marvellous, of a truth!—And your Rose Marie a great English lady now, eh?—with a quantity of money and a great love for the Church!—By the Mass, my son, we must arrange for a solemn Te Deum to be sung at St. Etienne, before the beautiful comtesse leaves the sunny shores of France for her fog-wrapped home across the sea!' Nay! but His Greatness said much more than that. He spoke of the various forms which our thank-offering might take, the donations which would be most acceptable to God on this occasion; he mentioned the amount of money which would most adequately express the full meed of our gratitude to Providence, by being given to the Church, and I most solemnly assure you that he simply laughed at the very thought of the Earl of Stowmaries contemplating the non-fulfilment of his marriage vows. I pointed out to His Greatness that the young man seemed inclined to repudiate the sacred bond. We had not seen him since the ceremony eighteen years ago, and after our final refusal to further help his parents with money or substance, we had even ceased to correspond. His parents had gone to live in some far, very far-off land across the ocean, where I believe cannibals and such like folk do dwell. They had taken the boy with them, of course. We thought the young man dead, or if alive then as great a rogue as his father, and mourned that our only child was either a girl-widow, or the wife of a reprobate. "Tis eighteen years,' I said, 'since those marriage vows were spoken.' 'Were they fifty,' retorted His Greatness, 'they would still be sacred. The Catholic Church would scorn to tie a tie which caprice of man could tear asunder. Nay! nay!' he added with sublime eloquence, 'have no fear on this matter, my son. Unless the Earl of Stowmaries chooses to abjure the faith of his fathers, and thereby cause his own eternal damnation, he cannot undo the knot which by the will of his parents—he being a