

A Strange Adventure
By Mary Grace Halpine

At the close of a dull day in November, Father Jose reached his snug, though humble apartments in the Rue St. Gaspard, which forms a part of the gay city of Paris.

By his own choice, he exercised his holy office chiefly among the poor and lowly; to which work he brought a kind heart and a more than ordinary amount of shrewdness and courage.

He had had a more than usually fatiguing day; the number of marriages, christenings, and funerals he had attended, in addition to his ordinary duties, was almost incredible, so it was with a pardonable feeling of reluctance that he received notice that he must quit his comfortable shelter for the chill night air that was heavy with an approaching storm.

“For what purpose?” he inquired of the messenger, whose features he could but dimly discern by the flickering light of the candle, but whose complexion seemed to him to be as dark as a mulatto’s.

“To give absolution to a dying woman,” was the reply. “Make haste, *Monsieur le cure*; the carriage is waiting, and there is no time to lose.”

This was an appeal from which Father Jose never turned away, and, drawing on his boots and wrapping himself in a thick overcoat, he followed his guide to the cabriolet that was waiting for him.

The man opened the door with ceremonious politeness, but closed it with a sudden snap that jarred harshly on the nerves of its occupant; then, springing to the top, gave his orders to the driver, but in a slow voice as to render it impossible for Father Jose to distinguish the words, though he listened for that purpose.

The carriage, though otherwise comfortable, was so close as to give him a feeling of suffocation; and he placed his hand upon the window with the intention of throwing it open, but found, to his surprise, that it was immovable, and covered with heavy shutters that effectively excluded every ray of light. Startled by this discovery, he tried the door; that, too, was fastened.

The carriage was rolling rapidly over the pavement, and his first impulse was to cry for assistance; but this idea he quickly abandoned. He possessed a cool, wary head, combined with no little courage and presence of mind. Whatever might be the object of these mysterious proceedings, it could not be robbery, for his poverty was well known; neither could it be assassination, for he had not an enemy in the world; his whole time being devoted to works of love and charity.

Fortifying his mind by these reflections, Father Jose determined to wait quietly and in silence the progress of events. For some time the carriage rattled over the rough pavement, and then evidently emerged into the open country. After a ride of nearly three hours, it suddenly stopped. The door was opened by the same man he had seen before, and who now entered the carriage.

“I regret the seeming discourtesy,” he said, in the same quiet, gentlemanly tone that had distinguished every word he had spoken; “but it is absolutely necessary that your eyes should be blinded for a short time. Have no fears; I pledge you my word that no harm is intended you.”

Being determined to see this adventure through, the *cure* passively submitted; and, after making sure his eyes were securely covered, his mysterious guide led him from the carriage. After traversing a short intervening space, they descended four or five stone steps into a damp, chilly atmosphere, which gave forth a musty, earthy odor, moving cautiously along through a low, narrow passage, which appeared to have numberless crooks and turnings, and which gradually ascended, by means of two stone steps, placed at irregular intervals.

The *cure*'s sense of smell and feeling were singularly acute, and he had little doubt that he was traversing one of those subterranean passages attached to some of the most ancient chateaux of France, constructed in feudal times for the purpose of affording its inmates means of escape in case of danger. He was convinced of this when his guide suddenly paused, and placing his hand upon the wall, thrust back a sliding panel, creating an aperture sufficiently large for one person to pass in a slightly stooping posture.

Passing through this, father Jose stepped upon a floor of polished oak, so often seen in the ancient houses of France and Brittany, and found himself in an atmosphere whose warmth and fragrance were in very agreeable contrast to the one from which he had just emerged. Slipping the panel back into its place, his guide unlocked the door of an inner room, carefully fastening it as soon as they had entered. The bandage was then removed, and as soon as his eyes recovered from the sudden transition from darkness to light, he saw that he was in a lofty and spacious apartment, to which its dark tapestry and black oak furniture gave a somber and gloomy aspect.

On a bed, in one corner of the room, lay a woman, as the outlines of her form indicated, her face being closely masked. He discovered, also, for the first time, that the features of his guide were concealed by the same means.

“There lies your penitent,” said the latter, pointing to the couch. “I will leave you alone with her half an hour, in order that you may prepare her for the world she is about to enter. I warn you to waste no time in irrelevant conversation.

“As for you,” he said, addressing the woman, “*remember your oath!* Forget not what I have risked in order that the life that is to come may not be so utterly thrown away as that is that was yours, but is no longer!”

As soon as they were left alone, father Jose scrutinized closely the form before him. The outlines of the neck, shoulders and bust were clearly visible, and were rounded, not only into an appearance of exquisite symmetry, but that of perfect health. The arm that lay partially exposed upon the counterpane, though small and white, was not wasted by sickness. He placed his finger upon the wrist; the pulse was strong and full, and though its quickened actions denoted some mental disquietude, it gave no tokens of physical disease.

Death, indeed, might come for her, *but he would not come unsummoned!*

Fearing to give expression to the horrible suspicion that had taken possession of his mind, he said, in a tone of assumed cheerfulness:

“Daughter, you are laboring under some strange hallucination. You are in perfect health, and bid fair to live many years.”

“Delude not yourself, deceive not me by any such vain hope, Holy Father,” said the person addressed, in a voice of singular sweetness and compass. “*I am a dying woman!* Before the rising of another sun, I shall cease to be! And I am very glad that it is so. Waste no time, I beseech you, in idle arguments, but prepare me quickly for the important change that awaits me, for the time is brief.”

Awed by the solemnity of this appeal, father Jose made no further objections, hoping that under the seal of the confessional she would let fall something that would give him the key to this strange mystery. But nothing escaped her lips that could afford him the slightest clue. The sins she confessed were few and venial, such as a thoughtless girl might have committed, for she seemed scarcely more; though she dwelt particularly upon one, that of placing the creature before the creator, for which she expressed deep contrition.

After the *cure* had given her absolution and administered the sacrament, she joined with him in the prayers for the dying with a fervor and earnestness, which showed that to her it was a solemn reality.

But during this time his thoughts had not been idle. The mask worn rendered recognition of the features impossible, but in fastening it, one tress of the soft, fair hair had become detached from the rest and floated down upon the pillow. A sudden idea darted into his mind as he remarked it.

“Daughter,” he said, as the last rite was over, “I have submitted to a very unpleasant ordeal to bestow upon you the consolations of the church, grant me in return this simple tress of hair; it strangely resembles those worn by the loved and lost of my early years.”

This was a rather singular request, and, for a moment, the young girl hesitated, and then she complied, saying, “that she could not refuse a favor so easily granted.”

As she raised her hands to her head he noticed upon one of them what was probably a birth-mark, in the shape of a small but perfectly formed strawberry, the ruby-red of which contrasted vividly with the extreme whiteness of the skin.

She handed him the severed tress, and he had just time to conceal it when the man who conducted him hither re-entered. His eyes were again bandaged, and he was taken by the same way back to the carriage that was waiting for them.

The gray dawn was breaking when father Jose was landed on the steps of his lodgings in the Rue St. Gaspard. A purse heavy with gold was thrust into his hand, and then he heard, as in a dream, the sound of rapidly retreating wheels.

Too weary and exhausted even to ponder on the strange scene through which he had passed he immediately retired, and did not wake until long past his usual hour for rising. As he arose, he would have supposed his last night's adventure to be a dream had it not been for the purse and the tress of hair lying upon the table. The former he laid aside for distribution among the poor of his flock, and then taking up the latter, carefully examined it. It was of paly gold, and soft and lustrous as silk—very like, indeed, to those which had adorned the dear head above which the grass had been growing for many a year. But this was not the motive which prompted him to secure it; it was the vague hope that it might lead to the detection of the perpetrators of what he felt impressed was some terrible crime. But reflection taught him its futility. Among the multitude of fair-haired women how was he to know from whose head this lock was severed? He found it impossible even to determine in what direction he had been taken. So he laid it away, with a sigh over the hopeless fate of the fair girl of whose head it had been the ornament and glory.

The following day he was summoned by his ecclesiastical superior, Bishop Perrin, to assist him in officiating in the funeral rites of a member of one of the noblest families of France. This venerable prelate was quite infirm in body, though still vigorous in intellect; and it was his custom, of late, to have one or more of his *cures* with him on such occasions.

Their place of destination was an ancient chateau, a few miles from Paris. During their ride thither the bishop was quite communicative in regard to the history of the family of its noble proprietor, the Marquis de Rassinny. The death that had occurred was that of the youngest and sole surviving daughter of the house, in whom he had taken a deep interest, on account of the strong friendship he had borne her father, the old marquis. He had died when Viola, his daughter, was only thirteen, leaving her to the guardianship of her half brother, Jacques, the present marquis, a reserved and haughty man, of twice her years, and whose idea of the dignity and importance of his family amounted almost to a mania. This guardianship consisted in simply seeing that his young sister was surrounded by all the state and elegance that befitted a daughter of the house of Rassinny, and there it ended; so far as brotherly love and sympathy were concerned, he ignored her very existence.

Among all the tutors appointed her, the conventionalities that surrounded her, Lady Viola's heart was left to its own unguarded impulses. Thus she arrived at the susceptible period of womanhood; lonely amid all the splendor in which she moved, stifling, as best she could, the restless cravings of her heart for love and sympathy. The accident threw her in the way of a young officer, her equal in everything but rank, that was far below her own, he being, in fact, of plebian extraction, having won his rank as lieutenant in the emperor's service by the sheer force of merit. For him she formed a strong and fatal attachment, which he returned with equal fervor.

For a while everything went along smoothly; the lovers met at the house of a mutual friend, and, it was rumored, were secretly married. If so, it was a tie easily sundered, as the laws of France made the marriage of minors void, unless sanctioned by their guardians.

At last rumors of this *mesalliance* reached the ears of the marquis, whose rage knew no bounds. He immediately sent Lady Viola into the country, and contrived, by a series of galling and

intolerable insults, to provoke a hostile meeting with Lieutenant C—, in which the latter was mortally wounded.

“I have not seen Lady Viola since that sad event,” said the bishop, in conclusion, “which created great talk and scandal, for the marquis kept her secluded from every eye, but the poor child must have felt it very keenly, as she died a few week after.

The chateau de Rassinny was an ancient structure, having a gloomy and desolate air, in spite of its evidences of past grandeur. It was the pride of its successive proprietors, whose boast was that they descended in a direct line from Charlemagne, to keep up, as far as possible, its appearance of feudal state, and to prevent the creeping in of any modern innovations, calculated to render it more cheerful and pleasant. The moat still surrounded it, though the drawbridge was discarded, and something more modern and convenient substituted in its place.

A dark shadow seemed to fall across the heart of Father Jose as they entered the court-yard. The bishop seemed perfectly familiar with the place, having visited it often in the lifetime of the old marquis.

He was well known to the gray-headed *serviteur*, who stepped forward to greet him as they entered the wide hall, and who informed him that his master had left the chateau, but was expected back every moment. Then, at the bishop’s request, he ushered them into the room, draped in black, where all that was mortal of Lady Viola de Rassinny lay in state, surrounded by all the pomp of rank and the insignia of woe.

The bishop stood but a moment beside the pale sleeper, when he was summoned into the presence of the marquis, who had returned. But the *cure* still lingered beside the dead; there was something in the history of Lady Viola that had strangely interested him. The face, in life, must have been one of unusual loveliness; even Death could not rob it of its rare beauty of outline. There were traces of pain across the forehead, but it was a sorrow that was past, its prevailing expression was of perfect peace and purity.

The pale, cold hands were folded quietly above the heart that would thrill no more to the touch of joy or sorrow. As his eyes fell upon them, he started. On one of them was the same mark that he had observed upon the hand of his mysterious penitent. With trembling fingers he parted the shining hair upon the forehead. *A lock of it had evidently been severed near the right temple!*

Hearing the sound of approaching footsteps, he had just time to smooth back the hair, and assume a position and look of unconcern, when the bishop re-entered accompanied by the marquis.

The start that the later gave as his eyes rested upon his countenance, strengthened into certainty the horrible suspicion that had entered his mind; but the air of indifference with which his greeting was returned seemed completely to reassure him.

As soon as the *cure* could do so unobserved, he scrutinized closely the person of his host, mentally comparing notes. The height, step and voice were identical with those of the mysterious stranger! Was not the hand of Providence in this?

The *cure* took part in the imposing funeral service, at which the object of his suspicions appeared as chief mourner, giving not the slightest token of them in his words or manner. Quite a number of the surrounding gentry were present, among whom he could detect a smothered feeling of indignation at the harshness and cruelty, which were currently believed to have been the indirect cause of Lady Viola's death; but it was evident that they entertained no suspicions of anything further.

They started for Paris early the next morning. As soon as father Jose found himself alone in the carriage with the bishop, he revealed his suspicions to him, and the evidence on which they were based; which made such a strong impression on the mind of the prelate that he advised him to lay them at once before the chief of police.

This the *cure* did as soon as he reached Paris.

The chief of police listened attentively to this strange communication, asked a few brief questions, and then ordered the remains of Lady Viola to be exhumed for examination.

The appearance of the body corroborated the testimony of the *cure*. He swore positively to the mark upon the hand, and in comparing the lock of hair he produced with that upon the head of the deceased, it was found to be precisely similar in length, color, and texture.

A post mortem examination was decided upon; which revealed not only the fact that the death of the hapless young creature was caused by the action of some subtle poison, but that she was soon to be a mother.

A warrant was immediately issued for the arrest of the Marquis de Rassinny, who vainly attempted to elude it by flight.

At his trial, the accused, by the advice of his counsel, did not attempt to refute the overwhelming array of evidence brought forward to prove his complicity with, and connivance at, his sister's death; but boldly justified his conduct; asserted that it was Lady Viola's voluntary act, as the only means by which she could atone for, and conceal the disgrace she had brought upon her family.

But this plea did not avail him; for, though it was evident that the unhappy lady had consented to her death, it was, also, as clear that this consent was the result of her unnatural brother's representations, together with the harshness and severity with which he had treated her, acting upon a mind depressed and borne down by recent bereavement.

The prisoner was, therefore, convicted of deliberate and willful murder, and sentenced to the *guillotine*.

Through the efforts of influential friends, this sentence was afterwards commuted to confiscation and perpetual exile.

Severely as this punishment was felt by the haughty descendant of kings, it was considered by the community, whose feelings he had outraged, to be far too light for the enormity of his crime, and he was obliged to leave the country secretly to escape the popular fury.

The New York Ledger, June 4, 1864