

Literature, &c.

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GASPARD DE BESSE.

BY MISS LOUISA STUART COSTELLO.

ABOUT the commencement of the eighteenth century, there existed in Provence one of those remarkable characters who from time to time appear in a country, amaze and affright its inhabitants by their actions, become its hero, and leave behind them a name illustrious in popular tradition. Such was Robin Hood in England; Fra Diavolo in Italy; Rob Roy in Scotland; Jose in Andalusia; and, no less renowned in Provence was Gaspard de Besse. The sandy shores of the Durance, and verdant mountains of the Var, were alike the scenes of his exploits: sometimes he was spoken of as engaged in daring adventures in the environs of Aix, and in the Vauvassin: the possessions of the Holy Father were placed under contributions by him, as well as those under the jurisdiction of the Duke de Villars, then governor of Provence. He contrived to elude all pursuit; to escape all ambuscades; and while he was sought in the deep gorges of Ollioules, he was deep in his depredations in the woods of Esterel.

He is said to have carried his audacity so far as to venture even into the lion's mouth; and has been known to sign with his own hand, descriptions of his person, which the local authorities had caused to be placarded on the inn doors, and other places of public resort.

There was no want of superstitious dread attached to his name—which circumstance, doubtless, was mainly instrumental in assisting his views; that he bore a charmed life, and, also, that he was capable of rendering himself invisible, were facts uncontested by most of the country people, to whom his deeds were familiar.

Often the peasant's family crowded round the hearth at night, wondrous tales were circulated of the famous robber, accompanied with all the exaggeration which fear suggested. Nevertheless, there mingled with the awe he inspired but little detestation; it was true that he attacked and despoiled castles; but then the cottage was safe from his ravages; and, though he exacted heavy payments from the carriages of rich travellers passing through his territories, he permitted the humble cart or waggon of the poor farmer to pass unmolested. Gaspard de Besse was never known to shed blood except in self defence; no assassination had ever been charged against him; and frequently he abandoned an enterprise rather than become conqueror at the expense of human life.

The ladies of the higher classes of Aix were very far from looking upon this bold marauder with eyes of dislike or severity: not a few amongst them were content to pardon his thefts in consideration of his elegant manners, for

'He would talk—ye Gods! how he would talk!

Ask with such softness—steal with such grace, That 't was a pleasure to be robb'd by him!

He never failed in the most gallant and complimentary manner to restore or leave some jewel when he took possession of a casket; and he pleaded with so much considerate forbearance that those fair creatures whom his sudden appearance might have alarmed, would not oblige him to use force to open the cabinets in which their treasures were concealed, that they never failed to present him with the keys.

When it is further added that he had the largest, softest, and most expressive blue eyes in the world, hair waving in the richest ringlets, and the whitest hands that ever were seen, the indulgence shown towards him will not appear so extraordinary. One lady, remarkable for her beauty, related an anecdote of Gaspard, which was frequently repeated: 'He seemed,' she said, 'infinitely more gratified in having an opportunity of kissing her beautiful hand than in taking the valuable rings from her fingers; and, on her entreating him to permit her to keep a favorite one, he had exclaimed, 'Keep it by all means—another recollection will be attached to the jewel in future!'

It was the middle of the month of July when Madame de Servaine was on her way to a chateau which she possessed on the banks of the Durance. At that time of year in Provence the heat is so violent, that except in cases of absolute necessity, no one thinks of following the great roads during the day. Madame de Servaine had, consequently, quitted Aix in the evening, and night surprised her carriage on the narrow and secluded cross road which led to the small village of Sainte Marie de Reparade. Aware that

she could not arrive at her destination by daylight, and having some fears on account of the current reports respecting Gaspard de Besse, who was suspected to be hovering with his band in the vicinity of Aix, the Marquise had ordered her people to take every precaution. The four horses were urged forward with all the speed that the road permitted by postillions armed with pistols, and the two accompanying domestics kept their place on the box, each similarly provided in case of need.—Their beautiful mistress, meantime, was languidly reposing within, nearly lulled to sleep by the monotonous sound of the wheels, and the soft and perfumed air which breathed upon her; while at a distance she already beheld the bright waters of the Durance dancing in the rays of the moon. Roused by this welcome sight, she looked forth, and began to trace the windings of the sparkling river, when a woody eminence suddenly concealed it from her, and at the same moment her carriage stopped abruptly, and she found herself surrounded by a band of brigands, armed to the teeth, and presenting a most formidable appearance. It was easy to judge that resistance was useless; her servants therefore, on seeing several carabines presented at their heads came to the conclusion that submission was the best policy. The terrified beauty, trembling with agitation, lost no time in taking off her bracelets, rings, and other ornaments, and drawing her veil over her face, she extended her hand, filled with trinkets, to the intruders.

At this instant several pistol shots were heard; and with the rapidity of lightning two mounted cavaliers rushed among the band of robbers, and began a furious attack with their sabres. Madame de Servaine uttered a cry of joy, not unmingled with alarm, and threw herself back in her carriage, covering her head with the cushions. How long she remained in this position she could not tell, but was restored to her senses by a soft voice close to her ear, which in the most re-assuring accents entreated her to dismiss her fears, for that the band of Gaspard de Besse was dispersed, and she could pursue her way in safety.

Summoning courage, she ventured to look around her, and became aware that the broad moonlight fell only on the forms of the two friendly cavaliers, who were stationed at her carriage door, their hats in their hands, and each in the attitude of the greatest respect. Madame de Servaine then learned that one of the gentlemen was Monsieur de Prieure, a person of condition of Avignon, who, accompanied by his servant, was on his way to a small country house, which he had lately bought, not far from Saint Marie de Reparade. Monsieur de Prieure escorted the beautiful Marquise to the gates of the chateau of Arjanon, and did not leave her till he had obtained permission to wait on her the following day.

When the morrow arrived, the Marquise, still agitated and nervous from her recent terror, but lovely in her paleness, received with every mark of grateful acknowledgment the generous man who had thrown himself into so much danger on her account, and had rendered her so important a service. She now observed that Monsieur de Prieure, added to a remarkable handsome exterior, infinite grace and refinement of manners, much elegance of discourse, and an air of good breeding, which at once told his position in society. There was a peculiar dignity amounting almost to pride, in his demeanor, and a scar on his forehead, the faint line of which was lost amidst the profusion of his hair, proved that his courage had been put to more than one proof.

An acquaintance began under such romantic circumstances was likely to become intimate. Monsieur de Prieure's country house was but a short distance from that of Madame de Servaine; at least, two leagues to a cavalier accustomed to hunting, was but an insignificant ride: his presence, therefore, at the chateau was continual; no day passed without his visit; and the fair Marquise would have felt extremely disappointed if his usual hour had arrived without bringing her new and agreeable companion, whose anecdotes of the gay world, and of the best society of Aix, amused her infinitely. But, though it was evident he spoke of that which was familiar to him, he acknowledged that in his present mood, society was distasteful to him and that it was with the purpose of avoiding it that he had retired to that neighbourhood to bury himself in woods, and roam undisturbed amongst the scenes of nature. Whenever, therefore, any of her friends happened to arrive, Monsieur de Prieure invariably took his leave, with entreaties for her excuse of his misanthropy.

Meantime the adventurer had made a great noise in the district, and it was

whispered that the pretty widow was far from insensible to the good qualities of her deliverer. What gave some color to this rumor was, that instead of a sojourn of a few days, according to her original intention, Madame de Servaine had allowed several weeks to elapse without announcing her purpose to return to Aix. Monsieur de Prieure appeared equally contented in his sylvan retreat; they met daily, and all day long; both were young both attractive, and both free to choose; what, therefore, could be more likely than that a marriage should complete the romance.

It so happened that a party of friends, who no doubt were not without a certain degree of curiosity on the subject, arrived one morning early at the chateau of Arjanon. Monsieur de Prieure, who was ignorant of this circumstance, was surprised on paying his visit at the usual time to find so much company: though evidently rather annoyed, he was too well bred to allow his feelings to interfere with the cheerfulness of the party whom he joined: he entered gaily into conversation, partook of the *dejeuner*, and took several turns in the gardens with the young Marquise and her guests. All this time a gentleman, Monsieur le Comte de Fontenay, kept his regards constantly fixed on Monsieur de Prieure, who on his side appeared disturbed by his observation. Scarcely had he entered the *salon*, when he started in evident astonishment; and, speaking a few words in a low voice to his chasseur, the latter immediately departed in some haste. Monsieur de Prieure soon appeared to recover the embarrassment of finding himself in so marked a manner the object of a stranger's scrutiny, and was seated in one of the arbors of the garden, discoursing with much animation, when his servant—the same who had assisted him in the rescue of Madame de Servaine, approached, and whispered a few words in his ear. He rose, and, turning to the Marquise, begged her to excuse his departure, as an affair of some moment called him hence.

'Hold!' suddenly exclaimed Monsieur de Fontenay; 'further concealment is useless.'

'What do you mean, Count?' was the general question.

'Stop! wretch and deceiver!' cried Monsieur de Fontenay. 'Assist me, friends! Secure the impostor! Is it possible that you do not recognize Gaspard de Besse.'

'If such be the case, this is somewhat a bold proceeding on your part, Count,' coolly remarked the accused, snatching a pistol offered him by his servant; and, opening a passage for himself and attendant through the astonished group, whom the terror of his name had petrified with alarm, and who stood, unable to offer any impediment to his flight. They reached the garden gate, where two powerful horses were in waiting, and each mounting, they rode off at full speed, waving their hands to a body of armed police, who, led by the chasseur of Monsieur de Fontenay had at the moment arrived from a considerable distance, already exhausted with their speed.

What were the feelings of the beautiful widow when she discovered the real danger to which she had been exposed, when by degrees the whole truth became apparent to her mind, and she saw how strangely she had been made the dupe of this singular and fascinating person. Although she thanked Monsieur de Fontenay very sincerely for his timely interference, she could not altogether smother a latent regret that so accomplished, so refined, so delicate, and so respectful a lover, so generous as he was bold, should be so utterly unworthy of her regards.

The next morning two letters were found, one in the boudoir of the Marquise the other on the chimney-piece in the dining room, addressed to the Count de Fontenay. The latter was brief, and was thus expressed:

'We shall meet again. Gaspard de Besse neither forgets nor forgives. When the hour of vengeance is arrived, you will not escape it.'

The other letter ran thus:

'The secret which I have never cared openly to confess, in spite of the many opportunities which your confiding sweetness gave, but which my very look and word must have revealed to you, I am now bold enough to declare. Yes, too lovely woman! I address you, and am forced to tell my passion, not with a hope of mitigating your scorn, not with a thought of being heard with indulgence, alas! I tell it only as an excuse! Forgive the extravagance, the delirium of a passion which could make an outcast forget his position—which could encourage one so unworthy of you to cling to hope even to the last, and nourish in his heart the fatal tenderness which could never meet with

return. To be near you daily, to hear your voice, and meet the soft glances of your eyes, unconscious as you were of who he was who lived but in your presence—this has been my happiness too long—it has been my crime!—but the temptation was too great, and I yielded! I am a robber—an outlaw. I am guilty of all that your friends and my enemies may charge me with; but you were sacred in my eyes. Except by my presumptuous love, which I concealed, have I deserved your reproaches? No: you were always in my power, and I took no advantage of it. A short existence of purity and happiness has dawned upon me; and, now that it is past, I can look back to the time without remorse, and with ever-springing delight, though the object of my wild imaginings is never to be mine. Receive my blessing—my sojourn near you has made me worthy to bless you—and adieu!

GASPARD DE BESSE.'

There had been a long interregnum of hostilities on the part of the celebrated chief, and the country residents round were enjoying their security, when immediately after the discovery at Madame de Servaine's, the depredations of Gaspard and his band became more tremendous than ever. Chateaux were pillaged and robberies innumerable committed; but every thing in the possession of Madame de Servaine was respected—not a grape from one of her vines was taken, and she felt secure in the midst of confusion. Whatever were her secret feelings on the subject of the romantic bandit, her pride forbade all indulgence in regret or at least all appearance but indignation; and, whether from pique or vanity, it is difficult to decide, she was induced to accept the addresses of M. de Fontenay, who had been a suitor for her hand during the greater part of her two years' widowhood.

The Count, who since the event which had banished the strange lover of the Marquise, had lived constantly as a guest at the chateau, was in the habit of spending some hours every morning in the chase in the neighbouring woods. The security which reigned in every part of Madame de Servaine's domains, and the reports of the police that Gaspard was engaged in his pursuits in Upper Provence, had lulled suspicion, and M. de Fontenay, without any arms but the sword he usually wore, amused himself in his ordinary manner.

The middle of September had arrived, and one morning the young huntsman was pursuing his devious way through the middle of a wooded valley entirely solitary, when two cavaliers on a sudden darted out of a thick copse, and stood before him. He had no difficulty in recognizing Gaspard and his attendant. Flight was out of the question. The horse of the bandit had a reputation for swiftness, to which he had often proved his just claim; besides, the natural bravery of the young man made him unwilling to withdraw from the conflict however unequal. He drew his sword, therefore, and resolved to sell his life dearly.

'I promised you this, Count,' said Gaspard. 'I keep my word. You are now in my power, and you will not easily escape me.'

'Have I attempted it?' coldly replied the Count. 'But if you seek my life, it will not be yours without a struggle.'

'If I desired to kill you,' answered Gaspard, contemptuously, it would have cost me little trouble.' At the same time he showed the pistols in his belt. 'But I am no assassin; it is a duel that I require.'

'You jest,' exclaimed de Fontenay. 'How long is it since men of family have been in the habit of fighting duels with robbers of the highway?'

'If noble blood is necessary on this occasion,' said Gaspard, with a smile, 'I can satisfy your punctilious feelings.'

As he spoke, he advanced close to the Count, and seizing his arm before he was aware, bent down towards him, and rapidly pronounced a few words. The Count started.

'Is this true?' he exclaimed. 'It is very strange!'

'I attest its truth by the soul of my mother, whose tomb, covered with memorial bearings, is to be seen in the cathedral of Aix.'

'I am at your service,' said Monsieur de Fontenay, dismounting from his horse at the same moment as Gaspard; and the combat began. At the third pass Monsieur de Fontenay, wounded in the shoulder, lay extended on the grass, disarmed, and his sword broken.

The countenance of Gaspard was horribly pale; strong emotions seemed struggling in his bosom. He bent over his fallen adversary, and had raised his arm to strike the last blow, when draw-