

GLADIATOR

BY

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She did not notice the lashing rain; the dripping trees or the wet, winding road. But her hands moved the steering wheel, and the Mercedes sports car carried her through the night, away from a final nightmare.

With every movement, she could feel the pain: Her swollen cheekbone, where his fist had hammered; her ribs and stomach, where his feet had thudded into her as she tried to roll away, screaming for help.

There had been no help. There never was. The nearest living creature was her horse Gladiator. Even through the pain and his spitting curses, and the rolling sound of the storm, she could hear Gladiator neighing in rage. As always, instinct, and maybe the sounds of her distant screams, had told him what was happening.

But Gladiator was locked in his stables across the courtyard. She could expect no help.

Finally, it had stopped. She lay in a corner, curled up with her arms clasped around her knees.

He had stood over her, breathing deeply. She could smell the whiskey, and was almost grateful for it.

He had beaten her when he was sober and when he was drunk, and sober was the worst, because he planned it more carefully... and she could see the cold sadism in his eyes.

The headlights of a car swept towards and then past her. She glanced at the clock on the dashboard. It was just after nine o'clock. The rain was easing. She had no idea where she was going. She was driving through a forest, and the black trees seemed to envelop her in anonymity.

His final words had been the cruelest. As he stood over her, he said gloatingly:

“Now I go and take the whip to that bastard horse of yours. He will scream like you, but louder.”

She had heard the slam of the door, and the sound had unlocked a resolve. After two years of hell and pain, she would go. She would run, no matter the consequences.

She had stumbled to the bedroom, pulled out a bag and stuffed clothes into it. From a drawer, she took a few pieces of jewellery. All the valuable pieces were locked away in his safe. As she crossed the courtyard, her heart had almost broken as she heard the lash of the whip and the roars of pain from Gladiator. She knew that he meant to make her suffer even the pain of her beloved horse. She felt totally helpless. Minutes later, she was driving and watching the metronomic swish of the windscreen wiper. Its rhythm seemed to match the beating of her heart.

Maybe it was that hypnotic rhythm, or maybe the bend in the road was sharper than she thought. Although the rain had stopped, the road was still wet. She saw the trees looming up to her left; and hit the brake. A second later she felt the back end of the car sliding. Instinct made her cover her face with one arm and close her eyes.

She was lucky. The car slid between two trees, was slowed by a clump of bushes, and hit a tree with its left forward wing.

She was in pain, but knew it was not caused by the accident. Her door opened easily. She unclipped her safety belt and climbed out. The storm had swept past leaving a clear sky with an almost full moon.

She took off her high-heeled shoes and scrambled round to look at the damage. She knew nothing about cars, but could see that the wing had been bent in against the wheel and was embedded in the tyre. She could hear the sound of escaping air, and knew that this car was going nowhere.

She scrambled back to the road, with her shoes dangling from one hand. She was only wearing a dress and a light cardigan, and she shivered in the cold. Fear crept in on her again. She had no idea where she was. She may have been driving for an hour or even two. This part of France was sparsely populated. She had no idea how far it was to the nearest town or village or farmhouse. She reminded herself that she had only seen one car during the last half-hour. She could not decide whether to walk or to wait.

The decision was made for her. Lights swept round the bend and momentarily blinded her. There was a squeal of brakes and she opened her eyes to see a large vehicle in front of her.

The door opened and a man jumped down. She looked up at his face in the moonlight, and her body froze. She swayed on her feet and blinked a few times and looked again.

He had a square face with narrow, heavy-lidded eyes. His hair was metal-grey and close-cropped. He had a scar down one cheek from his ear to his jaw and another across his forehead.

It was not the face that any lone, beaten, frightened, bruised young woman should suddenly have to look at. He must have sensed that, or maybe her eyes sent that message.

He stepped back and raised both his hands, palms facing her. He started to speak in a low, measured voice; and with every word her fear subsided. He spoke perfect French, but with a faint accent.

“You are safe. I will not harm you. Nobody will harm you. I can see you have had an accident and hurt your face. Do you have any other injuries?”

She shook her head and then started to cry. He did not move towards her. He continued to talk quietly.

“I think you’re in a state of shock. That’s usual after a crash. It’s not good to be cold. I’m going to look at your car. Why not get into my jeep to be warm.” He hesitated and then, raising his voice slightly, went on, “the keys are in the ignition. If you are frightened of me, you can take the jeep and drive it to Valnere.” He gestured, “it’s a village about four kilometres down there. Leave it at the railway station.”

Without waiting for an answer he moved away to his right and then into the trees, not passing close to her.

She turned and watched him. A tall, bulky figure wearing black denim jeans and a brown leather jacket. She sniffed and wiped an arm across her face and moved towards the jeep.

It was a Range Rover with leather seats. The engine was running. The radio was tuned into an FM station that played old classics. Edith Piaf was singing about love and tragedy. It was warm. Despite the running engine and the warmth, she

glanced at the dashboard, looking for the keys. They were dangling from the ignition on a silver key ring. She looked at them for a long time, then lifted her head and peered into the forest.

He was coming back, moving slowly. Her emotions were a mixture of apprehension and strange relief.

He opened the driver's door, but did not get in. The overhead lights shone onto his face, highlighting the scars. She noticed the wide, cleft chin and the broad mouth. He said:

"The engine 's fine but you can't drive the car. The left wheel is blocked and the tyre 's ripped and flat. It's not a big job to fix it. Where were you heading?"

She felt a panic of confusion, and turned her face away, trying to think. He kept silent. Finally she said:

"I was heading south to the Riviera." As she said it, she realised she was almost certainly on the wrong road. She muttered:

"I hate motorways, specially at night and in the rain."

For the first time he smiled. It was not really a smile: Just a softening of his features and a brief movement of his mouth. He said:

"So do I. Where were you planning to stay tonight?"

Again confusion... Her life contained no plans. She tried to concentrate, then said:

"I was going to find somewhere on the road. I have a Michelin Guide in the glove box. But I suppose now I have to find somewhere nearby."

He nodded and, in an offhand way said:

"There's a small hotel just past Valnere. It's probably not in the Michelin Guide or any other guide. But it's comfortable and the food is good. The owner could arrange for your car to be collected in the morning and repaired. I'm staying there myself."

She rubbed a hand across her forehead, trying to think. Finally she nodded and said:

"Yes. Thank you. You're very kind. I have a bag in my car."

"I'll fetch it." His voice dropped a little. "I'm also going to conceal your car in case the wrong kind of people pass by in the night. It means I have to take a small axe from the back of the jeep. Please don't be alarmed."

In fact her fear had disappeared. She was in the middle of nowhere with a man who looked like he had just returned from hell; and she felt no fear. Abruptly she realised that it had been more than two years since she had not felt a pervasive fear from morning till night. Two years since she had slept without nightmares. Suddenly she smiled and then just as quickly the tears came. He said:

“It won’t take long.”

She heard the door close and pulled a handkerchief from her cardigan pocket and wiped her eyes.

She watched as he went to her car and took out her bag. He went further into the forest and started cutting down bushes. Ten minutes later the Mercedes was part of the forest. Then he walked about fifty metres down the road and cut a wedge out of the trunk of a tree. She realised it was to guide the mechanic in the morning.

A few minutes later they were driving south. He left the music on. She felt wrapped in a warm cocoon. There was no need for words.

They swept through the small village of Valnere. It was almost deserted. Two kilometres further on, he slowed the Range Rover and turned in between two stone pillars. On one of them was an engraved sign:

“LEGIO PATRIA NOSTRA”

They drove through trees and then the building was in front of them. It was a welcoming sight. Not exactly a chateau, but a large country-house which looked as if it had been extended over many generations. Large windows gave out a soft light.

As they pulled up in the gravel courtyard, she saw the discreet sign over the main door: ‘HOTEL CAMERONE HACIENDA’.

She thought it sounded strange, and then another thought struck her. Under French law, anyone checking into a hotel must deposit their identification card or passport. These are checked every day by the Gendarmerie. She did not want her identity known. She said:

“I’m sorry. I don’t have any identification with me... But I have cash to pay for the hotel.”

He turned to look at her face, then lowered his gaze to the handbag she was clutching on her lap. He said:

“It’s not a problem. The owner is a friend. Wait here. I’ll make sure he has a room.”

He climbed out and walked towards the entrance. She watched. He had a curious walk. In spite of his bulk, it was light. The outsides of his feet seemed to touch the ground first.

He returned five minutes later, gave her a nod and fetched her bag from the back.

As she walked into the hotel she sensed that it was different, but she had no idea why.

It had the usual small reception counter; the usual stuffed chairs in the foyer and, to her left, what looked to be the usual kind of check-table-clothed restaurant found in most small provincial hotels. Balustraded stairs led up to the bedrooms. Everything was normal. But it felt different.

A door beside the reception opened and a big old man came out. He was wearing a smile, which was just as well because his face also looked as though it had done battle with a brick wall many times. He was missing a right arm.

But his suit was elegant and his manners impeccable. He bowed slightly, reached forward and took her hand in his, noted the wedding ring, and said:

“Welcome to my hotel Madame. Raul Pechard at your service.” He kissed the back of her hand, released it, gestured at the stairs and said:

“You are in room seven, Madame. The key is in the door. Our kitchen is still open.”

He bowed again and went back to his office. He had also spoken perfect French, but with an accent.

The man beside her led the way up the stairs. At the door of her room he put her bag down and said:

“They’ll send food up to the room if you wish.”

She looked up at his face and asked:

“What about you?”

“I’ll eat in the restaurant.”

She looked at the key in the door and then at the carpet. She could not find words.

He said:

“You are welcome to join me.”

She looked up at his face again, into the narrow eyes. They were mirrors, reflecting away any intrusion into his mind. She said:

“Thank you. I will. But first I need a hot bath. Will twenty minutes be too late?”

“No. I’ll be in the dining room.”

Of course, she was a little late. He looked up from his newspaper as she entered. She was wearing a straight, black skirt and a pale blue, silk blouse. A string of small pearls adorned her slender neck and her deep brown hair was piled high on her head. Skilful use of makeup had minimised the bruise on her cheek. He guessed that she was about thirty years old. He needed no guesswork to know that she was exquisitely beautiful.

He stood up and pulled a chair out for her. As she sat down, she murmured slightly in pain. He said nothing. A waitress came and took their orders. They both asked for the Duck Terrine and the chef’s special: Coq au Vin. He asked the waitress to bring them a carafe of the hotel’s red wine. After the waitress left, he explained that the patron had his own small vineyard in the grounds. He only grew Cabernet Sauvignon vines and the claret was never drunk until it was seven years old.

She looked around the restaurant. At this late hour it was almost empty. There were two elderly couples at one table and three young men at another. She turned back to her companion. He was wearing a knitted black polo neck shirt, a beige wool jacket and black slacks. On his left wrist he wore a very thin gold watch. She said quietly:

“I have to thank you so much. I will always remember your kindness... I don’t even know your name.”

He gave her that small smile.

“And I don’t know yours. But I think you wish for anonymity at this time. So let us both keep it that way. I have to leave for Brussels very early in the morning. My friend Raul has already arranged for your car to be collected and repaired in the morning. By lunchtime you can be on the road to the Riviera.”

The waitress arrived with the wine. She did not pour a sample to taste. The chef had already done that in the kitchen. It was that kind of place. She filled their glasses and left.

The woman knew about wine. She had often enjoyed the greatest Grand Cru's of France. She took a sip and, moments later, was nodding in appreciation.

As she put her glass down she winced slightly from the movement. Very quietly he said:

"I have experience in certain things. For sure the bruise on your face was not from the accident. It was caused some hours before. From the way you move I assume that you have other bruises and contusions on your body. They are recent. I have no wish to intrude, but Raul can arrange to have a doctor come and examine you. He will be completely discreet."

She smiled and said:

"Thank you, but I'm fine. It's true about the bruises. I fell off my horse this afternoon. It was very stupid."

"Your horse?"

"Yes. He's called 'Gladiator'. I do some show jumping. We were practising today and I got a bit ambitious."

She noted the sudden interest in his eyes. He asked:

"What is he?"

"Oh, a big grey. Nothing special, he has a bit of Arab in him. That probably gives him his temper. Are you interested in horses!"

He shrugged.

"As a boy I worked with horses. In Kentucky."

"You're American?"

"I was. Now I'm French. I grew up on a small farm. Our neighbour raised horses. I wasn't much good in school; I used to sneak off and help the neighbour with his herd. He used to break wild horses. I kind of had a way with them. How big is this Gladiator?"

"Sixteen hands." Abruptly she stopped. In her ears she could hear Gladiator's roars of pain as he was being whipped. She felt a stabbing guilt. She had run away... left him to his fate.

The waitress was at the table with the first course. She refilled the glasses and left. The man may have noted and misunderstood her sadness. Or maybe he was a mind reader. He said:

“When you have an animal for a friend it’s hard to leave them because they don’t understand why you’re going.”

She tasted the Terrine. It was delicious. She expected to have no appetite, but she finished it, and then the Coq au Vin. For a long time they did not speak a word. She looked around the room. The two elderly couples were drinking coffee. She noticed that the men had a military bearing. She could recognise it. Her father had been a Colonel in the army and as a child she had often been amidst military people.

These two old men had short haircuts and they sat with straight backs. Their suits were conservative and well cut. She looked next at the three young men and immediately had the same impression. Their posture, their bearing proclaimed them as soldiers. They were talking animatedly. The sounds drifted across to her table. They were not French. She thought they were maybe talking Dutch, but a strange kind of Dutch.

Then she noticed something very curious. They kept glancing towards her table. That was not unusual. She understood her beauty and attraction. She was used to being watched. But these young men were not looking at, or talking about, her. They were glancing at the man in front of her. She was disconcerted. It had never happened before. A few minutes later the young men stood up to leave. As they passed the table, they stopped and turned and drew themselves up and bowed their heads slightly at the man. She heard the faint clicking of heels; then they turned and walked out of the restaurant. She was puzzled and intrigued. She asked:

“Do you know them?”

“Not personally.”

“But obviously they know you.”

She looked at his face; at his eyes, and saw the mirrors again.

He merely shrugged and made a gesture at the waitress. A few minutes later she brought a fresh carafe of wine and some cheese, which she explained was made on the estate.

The woman realised that she had drunk most of the first carafe. The man had sipped sparingly. She commented on it. He said:

“I have to be up very early. You can sleep late. The wine will do you no harm. In fact the opposite. I suggest you have no coffee. Then for sure you will sleep like a child.”

She smiled at the thought.

“It has been a long time... almost a lifetime since I slept in peace.”

Then he said something, which again reached into her mind.

“The past is gone. The future beckons. A mistake made yesterday belongs to yesterday.”

She smiled ruefully.

“I wish I could believe that.”

The conversation had served to illustrate the utter despair of her life. She felt enclosed in a black room with no doors and windows. She emptied her glass and said:

“I shall go to bed. Thank you again for everything. I hope you have a good journey to Brussels.”

They both stood up. He said:

“And you to the Riviera. I envy you the sunshine.”

They walked up the stairs together, and paused in front of her door. He gestured down the corridor:

“I’m in room ten. If you need anything...”

“Thank you. Good night.”

“Good night.”

He walked down the corridor. She took the key from her bag and inserted it. Then she turned and looked at him. He had reached his door. She saw him take the key from his pocket. All of his actions were calm and measured. She felt a little dizzy and leaned against the door. Maybe it was the wine, maybe the trauma.

She focused her eyes. He was still at his door watching her. He was indistinct in the dim light, almost like a dark mirage. Something, some place, someone of refuge.

She felt the tears welling up and her shoulders began to shake. Her one emotion was utter loneliness. He walked towards her very slowly.

When he was in front of her she held up one hand. She could not see through her tears.

He took the hand and gently eased her against his chest. His arms came around her like velvet steel. She sobbed the words against his neck.

“I don’t want to be alone tonight... But I don’t want...”

He stroked her hair and her back as though calming a distraught child. He said quietly:

“I know what you don’t want.”

She saw the scars on his body; and he saw the bruises on hers. He was the more concerned because his scars were old, but her bruises were new.

They lay on the wide bed. Light came from the open bathroom door and a moonbeam through the window.

He had his left arm around her. The fingers of his right hand felt their way down her ribs. She gasped slightly in pain. He said:

“They are bruised, not broken. He turned her slightly and felt her left thigh and upper leg. The bruises were turning brown and purple. He asked:

“How long ago?”

“About seven o’clock this evening.”

He stroked her face and said:

“You will sleep alright tonight. In the morning you will be sore and stiff... maybe walk with a limp for a few days. Soak in a hot bath when you wake up. It helps.” She was looking into his eyes. He said:

“Who did this to you?”

She turned her head away. He picked up her hand and looked at the diamond engagement and wedding rings. He said:

“Many years ago I was in a rough bar in Marseilles. A guy was drunk and started beating up his wife. I stepped in and hit the guy. His wife then hit me over the head with a metal bar stool and almost killed me. Since then I never interfered. Figured out that some women like it that way. Otherwise why not walk away?”

She turned her head back. Her eyes were wet, her voice just a tremble.

“It’s not like that.”

“How then?”

“You’re American. You would not understand.”

He answered:

“I left America when I was eighteen years old. I’ve been around the world a few times since. So try me.”

She closed her eyes for a few seconds and then said wearily:

“It’s about family tradition and pride.”

He touched her cheek.

“These bruises come from tradition and pride?”

There was a long silence then she appeared to make up her mind. She took a deep breath and said:

“My husband is the Marquis Etienne Dubarry. He has a large estate north of Langres. He also has many business interests and industrial holdings... a very wealthy man. My father, who died two years ago, was a count. Our heritage goes back four centuries. But there is no money. My father was a bad businessman. Always the optimist, always cheerful.”

She smiled for a brief moment. Then said wistfully:

“He was a good man: Kind and understanding. He lived with my mother in a small villa outside Cannes. It had been in my family from before Napoleon. My mother lives there now. When my father died the villa had to be sold to pay his debts. At the time I had just become engaged to Etienne Dubarry. It had nothing to do with money. I loved him.” This time her brief smile was bitter at the memory. “He bought the villa and maintains it and pays my mother a monthly allowance so she can live in the manner to which she is accustomed.”

He began to see the picture. And said:

“You take the pain and indignity so your mother can live in style. Is that tradition and pride?”

She closed her eyes and shook her head.

“My mother has cancer. The doctors give her less than a year. It would break her heart if she were thrown out. She was born in that villa, as was her mother. I could not do it.”

He asked gently:

“How long has this been going on?”

“About two years. The marriage was good, but Etienne wanted... needed a son. He is the last in line and has no family. Eventually we went to a clinic in Paris

and after a check-up they discovered he could never sire a child. He became bitter and violent... would not consider that I had a child by donor... pride again.”

He looked up at the ceiling and, as though talking to himself, said:

“What a triangle: Pain; the good name of a family; the pride of a selfish man.”

“I could take it,” she said, “because I knew it would end with my mother’s death. I could see the horizon. In a way it was hateful. I love my mother, but only her death would bring my release.”

He thought about that, then asked:

“So why are you here?”

“Because I love my horse Gladiator.”

“So?”

“My husband whipped him, to give me even more pain.”

A long silence, then the man turned his head to look at her. She had her eyes closed against the tears but he could see the misery etched on her lovely face.

If she had looked into his eyes, she would not have seen mirrors.

She sniffed and said:

“That was the end for me. I can’t take any more. Tomorrow I’ll go and tell my mother. She’ll be devastated.”

“Maybe not,” he said. “If she loves you as you love her, she will understand; and pride be damned... Now try to sleep.”

She was holding one of his hands looking at the mottled scars on the back of it. She turned her head and asked:

“What happened to your hands.” Abruptly she felt guilty. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to pry.”

He said flatly:

“A man once asked me questions. He smoked a lot. There was no ashtray.”

She absorbed the meaning of his words, then said:

“I understand. I found myself with a man who wanted to hurt people... and I was the only punch bag around.”

He squeezed her hand.

“That’s finished. Now close your eyes and sleep.”

She thought it would be impossible, but she was wrong. Maybe it was the wine or emotional exhaustion, but she drifted away.

At first it was a light sleep and her limbs twitched and she murmured sounds in her throat. But he stroked her limbs and held her close and slowly, her body and mind relaxed and she had the sleep as of a young child exhausted from a day of play and excitement.

For several hours he held her, then with infinite care he slid his arm from under her neck, replacing it with a pillow.

He sat at the edge of the bed for a long time looking down at her face. He saw the world in that face: The bruises and the beauty. He had seen much of both. He also saw a dream, maybe a future, maybe happiness. He looked for a long time, then stood up and turned away, knowing that such things, such faces, such love, was not for a man like him.

He dressed and then went to the chair where she had draped her clothes. He picked something up.

At the door he turned for one last look. His square face was a mask of sadness, chiselled by a long road of sporadic loneliness. As he left and quietly closed the door, he knew the road stretched out before him, only interrupted by the occasional softness of a passing encounter.

The sun was streaming through the window when she woke. It was as though she had slept forever, but, as she moved to turn over, her beaten body brought her straight back to reality. She ached from head to toe.

Without looking, she knew he was gone. The room lacked his presence. She lifted her arm and looked at her Cartier watch. It was eleven o'clock. She had never slept so late in her life. By now he would be in Brussels. But she would follow his advice. With difficulty, she climbed out of bed, hobbled to the bathroom and filled the big old bath with the hottest water she could bear.

She climbed out fifteen minutes later feeling almost human, and as red as a lobster.

She dried herself and went back into the bedroom to her clothes. Then she noticed that her silk blouse was missing.

She looked around the room. It was gone and only one person could have taken it... But why?

Maybe he took it as a memento of her, and the strange night they had spent together.

She took another blouse from her bag and, as she put it on, realised that the time had come to phone her mother. She decided to tell her nothing. Just that she was on her way to Cannes for a short break.

She sat on the bed, picked up the phone and dialled the number. The moment her mother heard her voice she went into a barely intelligible hysteria. Finally Simone screamed down the line:

“Mama! Stop! Take a few deep breaths and calm yourself.”

It took several minutes before her mother was coherent. Then the story came out. She had received a phone call early in the morning from Inspector Lazzard of the Langers police. Apparently the housekeeper and gardener had arrived at the chateau at seven o'clock as usual. The gardener had found Etienne dead in the stables and immediately called the police. It appeared that he had been kicked in the head by Gladiator. Would Simone please call Inspector Lazzard immediately at the central police station? Then the old woman became hysterical again, asking her daughter where she had been and what was all this going to mean.

Again Simone calmed her, and told her she would call as soon as she reached the chateau.

Simone found herself to be remarkably relaxed. It was as if she was outside of her own skin; and not really part of this drama. She sat on the bed for several minutes, visualising the scene. She felt no horror, only a strange curiosity. She wanted to know more, wanted to know the exact details.

She phoned Inspector Lazzard, who had a languid, cynical tone of voice.

Naturally, he started with the usual condolences. She listened for only a moment. Then thanked him, explained that she had been on the way to visit her mother and asked exactly what had happened.

It had been a single massive kick from Gladiator's back right leg. The iron horseshoe had connected with the Marquis' upper face and smashed his skull. Death must have been immediate. The police had called the local vet and blacksmith. The

horse was agitated, so the vet had injected a tranquilliser, and the blacksmith had carefully removed the horseshoe. It was covered in blood, hair and brain tissue. It was already on its way to the forensic laboratory in Paris, but the circumstances were conclusive.

She asked:

“How is Gladiator?”

For once the languid voice was disconcerted.

“What?”

“Gladiator, my horse. How is he?”

“Oh. All right. Of course, in such cases a dangerous animal is destroyed, but the vet said there were signs that the horse had been beaten. We will have to wait your return. Where are you Marchioness?”

She explained where she was and he offered to send a car for her, but she declined. Through the window she could see her white sports car, parked in the courtyard.

Apologetically, he asked her to go straight to the morgue. As next-of-kin, she had the unpleasant duty of formally identifying the body.

Two hours later she looked down at the face of Etienne Marquis Dubarry. He was on a marble slab in a cold room. She shivered slightly, but only from the cold. The pathologist said consolingly:

“It must have been immediate, Marchioness. He would have felt no pain.”

She looked at what was left of the face. The pattern of the horseshoe was obvious. It looped from his hairline down across the hole that had been his nose, and up the other side. Across from the slab, Inspector Lazzard coughed discreetly and handed her the clipboard and pen. She signed the identification and turned away.

Outside, in the foyer, they were waiting: Her late husband’s lawyer and personal accountant. They both carried briefcases. They both bowed deferentially. The lawyer said:

“Marchioness, a thousand condolences. We are distraught. The Marquis was of course...”

She cut him off.

“Thank you. What do you need of me?”

He glanced at the accountant, then said:

“Marchioness, your husband had extensive business interests. They operate on a daily basis. As his sole heir, we need your signature on several documents...”

She said:

“Of course. Come to the chateau tomorrow afternoon at three o’clock and please bring with you all documentation on all matters. Prepare yourselves for a long meeting.”

They bowed again and withdrew.

She only saw Gladiator briefly on her return to the chateau. She had stroked his neck while he butted her playfully in the stomach. She could see the wheals on his flanks.

The next few days passed in a whirl of activity: Meetings with bankers, lawyers and accountants; arrangements for the funeral, and coping with her mother who had arrived from Cannes.

It was on the fourth day that the gardener came to inform her that the blacksmith had arrived, to replace Gladiator’s horseshoe.

She went to the stables. The horse liked the blacksmith, but it was better that she be there.

The old man greeted her warmly. He made no mention of the Marquis.

Gladiator was loosely tethered to a metal ring in the wall. She went to his head and stroked his muzzle. He winned gently with pleasure. The blacksmith was called Louis. He was approaching seventy and should have retired, but there was no one in the nearby village to take over, and anyway, he enjoyed working.

He had an old wooden box, which contained all his ancient tools. There were spare horseshoes on a wooden peg on the wall. As he bustled about getting ready, she noticed he was very quiet. She was puzzled. Normally, like many old men, he was garrulous.

She saw him looking at the fading wheals on the horse and said:

“Nobody could blame an animal for fighting back against such cruelty.”

He looked up at her, his eyes full of sympathy and understanding. And then he said something very strange.

“Or a lovely, young lady doing the same.”

She touched the fading bruise on her cheek. He said:

“The village is so close, your ladyship. We all know what went on. There will be no tears shed for that man.”

He went to the wooden peg, took down a horseshoe, and went on:

“Don’t you worry your ladyship. I’ll never say a word to a living soul.” He looked up at her again. “I’ll take your secret to the grave with me, and lord knows that will be soon enough.”

She came around from the front of Gladiator and asked:

“Louis, what on earth are you talking about?”

The old man could see the genuine puzzlement on her face. He hesitated, then gestured and said:

“It was not Gladiator who killed the Marquis.”

“What are you talking about? The Inspector phoned this morning. It’s confirmed that the blood and hair and tissue on that horseshoe were Etienne’s.”

“Oh, yes. It’s sure they were, your Ladyship, but Gladiator was not wearing that horseshoe at the time.”

She took a deep breath. He held up a hand.

“Your ladyship, I re-shod Gladiator a week before it happened. When they called me to take that shoe off, I took one look at it and knew I had never put it on.”

“How?”

He shrugged.

“A blacksmith can always recognise his own work.” He picked up a rasp from his box. “The way the hoof has been prepared.” He showed her the hammer. “The way the shoe is set into the hoof. It’s like a fingerprint. Someone took that horseshoe off, and smashed it into the Marquis’ head. He must have been a very powerful man. Then he put the shoe back onto Gladiator’s hoof. He knew his work and he knew horses... But you must have been here, your ladyship.”

She was looking at him and through him as though her mind was far away. Then his words penetrated.

“Why must I have been here?”

The blacksmith shrugged.

“Gladiator would have been in pain and very agitated. He’s a one-woman horse. Nobody could have taken that shoe off and then put it on again without your being here. Even I would not try it. But it’s all right your ladyship. The secret is safe with me.”

The Marchioness and the blacksmith looked at each other for a long time, then she repeated firmly:

“I was not here Louis... Is there no other way it could have been done?”

He heard the sincerity in her voice and believed her. He thought carefully. Then he remembered:

“There was something we used to do a long time ago, if a horse was nervous and the owner couldn’t be there, we would borrow a garment from the owner. Something worn against the skin and not washed. It would be draped over the horses head blinding it, and at the same time be against its nostrils so it could smell its owner. That would calm them.”

“Something like a blouse?” she asked.

“Yes. A blouse would do it.”

Two years passed. The Marchioness Dubarry fell in love. He was ten years older than she was, but still young to be a Professor of Modern History at Paris University. He was called Eric Collard. They became engaged and he would often spend weekends at the chateau. One Saturday morning she picked him up from the station and, as he tossed his bag onto the back seat of her sports car, he announced:

“We are going for lunch to a special place about a hundred kilometres from here. I will give you directions.”

She laughed. It was what she loved about him: exuberance, spontaneity and optimism.

As they drove through the summer sunshine, she asked what was special about where they were going. He answered:

“You know I’m writing a book about the French Army from Napoleon to the present day.”

“Of course.”

“Well, I’m doing a chapter on the Foreign Legion. I’ve been researching it for two months. It’s fascinating. I discovered that a retired Legionnaire owns a small hotel not far from here. It has an estate and he produces his own wine and cheese. Everyone who works there is, or was, connected to the Legion in some way. The waitresses or maids are daughters of serving or retired Legionnaires. The people who work the fields and vines are retired Legionnaires. Many of the guests are connected with the Legion. The hotel does not advertise or promote itself. It appears in no guidebooks. I heard about it by accident.”

It was when they passed through the little village that she suspected where they were going. It was confirmed when she saw the words on the stone pillar at the entrance:

LEGIO PATRIA NOSTRA

He pointed and said:

“‘The Legion is my father’, an old motto that sums up the feeling of all Legionnaires.”

When they reached the courtyard, he pointed to the sign over the front door: ‘HOTEL CAMERONE HACIENDA’.

“That hacienda was in Mexico: The scene of the greatest battle in the Legion’s history. 65 Legionnaires fought 2000 Mexican soldiers. At the end of the day, the five Legionnaires still alive, fixed bayonets and charged.”

She said nothing. Her mind was confused by memories and emotions.

As they entered the hotel, she saw the patron, Raul Pechard, behind reception. He glanced up at her and then at her fiancé. His eyes showed no recognition.

Eric said:

“Good morning. I booked a table for lunch. The name is Collard.”

The patron gestured towards the restaurant. It was the same waitress. She smiled politely. As soon as they had ordered, Simone leaned forward and said:

“Eric, remember I told you about the night Etienne was killed. I spent that night in a small hotel.”

“Yes.”

“It was this hotel.”

His eyes glittered with excitement.

“That man brought you here? The one you slept with... and only slept with.”

“Yes,” she answered, relieved that she told him about that night. But only that. The other secret was still just between herself and Louis, the blacksmith.

“So maybe he was a Legionnaire,” Eric said. “Or retired from the Legion. How old was he?”

She thought about it.

“Not young, of course, but then, not old. He seemed ageless. As though he had lived forever.”

“And you never knew his name?”

“No.”

“Or where he came from?”

She remembered:

“Yes. He was originally from America... Kentucky. He left when he was eighteen.”

Eric shook his head.

“There were very few Americans in the Legion. You could count them on the fingers of one hand.”

“He was very scarred,” she said. “On his face and body. He must have been in many wars. Even his hands were scarred.”

“His hands?!”

“Yes. He had been tortured. He said a man asked him many questions. He smoked a lot. There was no ashtray.”

Abruptly Eric was leaning forward. His voice urgent:

“The scars were on the backs of his hands?”

“Yes.”

“Did he have a scar across his forehead; and another right down his cheek?”

“Yes... Do you know him?”

Eric had sat back in his chair. There was a smile on his lips. He said:

“Oh no. If it's the man I think it may be, few people meet him or see him. He spent twelve years in the Legion then left to become another kind of soldier. Freelance, you might say. There are many rumours. They say he was killed by the Mafia in Sicily, by the Khmer Rouge in Cambodia, the Triads in Hong Kong or drug dealers in Marseilles. Other people claim to have seen him in different parts of the

world. If it was him, you spent the night with a legend. He's been described as 'Death on a Cold Night'."

She remembered the man's eyes and she remembered the hardness of him... the softness when he caressed her to sleep.

"His name?" she asked.

"He is known only as 'Creasy'."

As they were leaving, she said:

"Eric, give me a moment. I'll see you at the car."

He went through the door and she walked up to the patron at reception.

"Good Day Paul Pechard."

He beamed with pleasure.

"Good day Marchioness Dubarry."

He reached below to a shelf and pulled out a small package wrapped in green paper, and passed it to her saying:

"You left this in your room on your last visit. The maid found it under the chair. At the time we had no forwarding address."

She took the soft package and, before turning away, said quietly:

"If you see Creasy, please pass on my thanks and warm wishes."

For a split second she saw something in the veiled eyes; and he did, ever so slightly, incline his head in what may have been an acknowledgement.

Eric drove home. As they swept out of the driveway, she opened the package.

Inside was a pale blue, silk blouse.

The End

The author has requested that if you enjoyed this story, please consider making a donation to the Vhananyana Mountain School charity. You should be able to find details of the charity by searching for "Vhananyana Mountain School" in a search engine such as Google or MSN. Thank you.

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