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Magdaleine de Scudéri, so famous for her charming poetical and other writings, lived in a small mansion in the Rue St. Honoré, by favour of Louis the XIVth and Madame de Maintenon.

Late one night--about midnight--in the autumn of the year 1680, there came a knocking at the door of this house, so loud and violent that it shook the very ground. Baptiste, who filled the offices of cook, butler and doorkeeper in the lady's modest establishment, had gone, by her leave, to the country to his sister's wedding, so that La Martinière, the femme de chambre, was the only person still awake in the house. She heard this knocking, which went on without ceasing almost, and she remembered that, as Baptiste was away, she and her mistress were alone and unprotected. She thought of the housebreakings, robberies and murders which were so frequent in Paris at that time, and felt convinced that some of the numerous bands of malefactors, knowing the defenceless state of the house that night, were raising this alarm at the door, and would commit some outrage if it were opened; so she remained in her room, trembling and terrified, anathematising Baptiste, and his sister's marriage into the bargain.

Meantime the thundering knocking went on at the door, and she thought she heard a voice calling in the intervals, "Open, for the love of Christ Open!--open!" At last, her alarm increasing, she took her candle and ran out on to the landing, where she distinctly heard the voice crying, "Open the door, for the love of Christ!"

"After all," she said to herself, "one knows that a robber would not be crying out in that way. Perhaps it is somebody who is being pursued and is come to my lady for refuge. She is known to be always ready to do a kind action--but we must be very careful!"

She opened a window and called down into the street, asking who it was who was making such a tremendous thundering at the door at that time of the night, rousing everybody from their sleep. This she did in a voice which she tried to make as like a man's as she could. By the glimmer of the moon, which was beginning to break through dark clouds, she could make out a tall figure in a long grey cloak, with a broad hat drawn down over his forehead.

Then she cried, in a loud voice, so that this person in the street should hear, "Baptiste! Claude! Pierre! Get up, and see who this rascal is who is trying to get in at this time of night."

But a gentle, entreating voice spoke from beneath, saying, "Ah, La Martinière, I know it is you, you kind soul, though you are trying to alter your voice; and I know well enough that Baptiste is away in the country, and that there is nobody in the house but your mistress and yourself. Let me in. I must speak with your lady this instant."

"Do you imagine," asked La Martinière, "that my lady is going to speak to you in the middle of the night? Can't you understand that she has been in bed ever so long, and that it is as much as my place is worth to awaken her out of her first sweet sleep, which is so precious to a person at her time of life?"

"I know," answered the person beneath, "that she has just this moment put away the manuscript of the novel Clelia, at which she is working so hard, and is writing some verses which she means to read tomorrow at Madame de Maintenon's. I implore you, Madame La Martinière, be so compassionate as to open the door. Upon your doing so depends the escape of an unfortunate creature from destruction. Nay, honour, freedom, a human life, depend on this moment in which I must speak with your lady. Remember, her anger will rest upon you for ever when she comes to know that it was you who cruelly drove away from her door the unfortunate wretch who came to beg for her help."

"But why should you come for her help at such an extraordinary time of the night?" asked La Martinière. "Come back in the morning at a reasonable hour." But the reply came up, "Does destiny, when it strikes like the destroying lightning, consider hours and times? When there is but one moment when rescue is possible, is help to be put off? Open the door to me. Have no fear of a wretched being who is without defence, hunted, hard pressed by a terrible fate, and flies to your lady for succour from the most imminent peril."

La Martinière heard the stranger moaning and groaning as he uttered those words in the deepest sorrow. The tone of his voice was that of a youth, soft and gentle, and most touching to the heart; and so, deeply moved. she went without much more hesitation and fetched the key.

As soon as she opened the door, the form shrouded in the mantle burst violently in and, passing La Martinière,

cried in a wild voice, "Take me to your lady!" La Martinière held up the light which she was carrying, and the glimmer fell on the face of a very young man, distorted and frightfully drawn, and as pale as death. She almost fell down on the landing for terror when he opened his cloak and showed the glittering hilt of a stiletto sticking out of his doublet. He flashed his gleaming eyes at her, and cried, more wildly than before, "Take me to your lady, I tell you."

La Martinière saw that her mistress was in the utmost danger. All her affection for her, who was to her as the kindest of mothers, flamed up and created a courage which she herself would scarcely have thought herself capable of. She quickly closed the door of her room, moved rapidly in front of it, and said in a brave, firm voice, "Your furious behaviour, now that you have got into the house, is very different from what I should have expected from the way you spoke down in the street. I see now that I had pity on you a little too easily. You shall not see or speak with my lady at this hour. If you have no bad designs, and are not afraid to show yourself in daylight, come and tell her your business tomorrow; but take yourself off out of this house now."

He heaved a hollow sigh, glared at La Martinière with a terrible expression, and grasped his dagger. She silently commended her soul to God, but stood firm and looked him straight in the face, pressing herself more firmly against the door through which he would have to pass in order to reach her mistress.

"Let me get to your lady, I tell you!" he cried once more.

"Do what you will," said La Martinière, "I shall not move from this spot. Complete the crime which you have begun. A shameful death on the Place de la Grève will overtake you, as it has your accursed comrades in wickedness."

"Ha! you are right, La Martinière," he cried. "I am armed, and I look as if I were an accursed robber and murderer. But my comrades are not executed--are not executed," and he drew his dagger, advancing with poisonous looks towards the terrified woman.

"Jesus!" she cried, expecting her death-wound; but at that moment there came up from the street below the clatter and the ring of arms, and the hoof-tread of horses.

"La Marechausée! La Marechausée! Help! help!" she cried.

"Wretched woman, you will be my destruction," he cried. "All is over now--all over! Here, take it; take it. Give this to your lady now, or tomorrow if you like it better." As he said this in a whisper, he took the candelabra from her, blew out the tapers, and placed a casket in her hands. "As you prize your eternal salvation," he cried, "give this to your lady." He dashed out of the door, and was gone.

La Martinière had sunk to the floor. She raised herself with difficulty, and groped her way back in the darkness to her room, where she fell into an arm-chair, wholly overcome and unable to utter a sound. Presently she heard the rattling of the bolts, which she had left unfastened when she closed the house door. The house was therefore now shut up, and soft unsteady steps were approaching her room. Like one under a spell, unable to move, she was preparing for the very worst, when to her inexpressible joy the door opened,

and by the pale light of the night-lamp she saw it was Baptiste. He was deadly pale, and much upset.

"For the love of all the saints," he exclaimed, "tell me what has happened! Oh, what a state I am in. Something--don't know what it was--told me to come away from the wedding yesterday--forced me to come away. So when I got to this street, I thought, Madame Martinière isn't a heavy sleeper; she'll hear me if I knock quietly at the door, and let me in. Then up came a strong patrol, horsemen and foot, armed to the teeth. They stopped me, and wouldn't let me go. Luckily Desgrais was there, the lieutenant of the Marechaussée. He knows me, and as they were holding their lanterns under my nose, he said, 'Ho, Baptiste! How come you here in the streets at this time of the night? You ought to be at home, taking care of the house. This is not a very safe spot just at this moment. We're expecting to make a fine haul, and important arrest, tonight.' You can't think, Madame La Martinière, how I felt when he said that. And when I got to the door, lo! and behold! a man in a cloak comes bursting out with a drawn dagger in his hand, dodges me, and makes off. The door was open, the keys in the lock. What, in the name of all that's holy, is the meaning of it all?"

La Martinière, relieved from her alarm, told him all that had happened, and both she and he went back to the hall; and there they found the candelabra on the floor, where the stranger had thrown it on taking his flight. "There can't be the slightest doubt that our mistress was within an ace of being robbed, and murdered too very likely," Baptiste said. "According to what you say, the scoundrel knew well enough that there was nobody in the house but her and you, and