

your manner of questioning me at first considerably surprised me; now I understand you better. You told me you were a jolly companion, and I now see how agreeably you can handle a joke. I assure you, you completely succeeded in taking me in."

"A joke! A thousand legions of devils!" cried the giant. "It seems to me, my friend, that you are laughing at me! Take care what you are about. My patience soon comes to an end, and once Captain Roland de Maurevert loses his temper, there's no knowing to what lengths his anger may go. I pardon your blunder this time, but don't repeat it. Now, yes or no!—do you consent to give up the pullet?"

"You are really in earnest, then?" demanded the young man, still calmly.

"As earnest as if the cause were a thousand times more important. Let me advise you to entertain no particle of doubt on the point."

"Allow me, in turn, to address a word of advice to you, Captain de Maurevert. Do not too readily assume to yourself the right of directing me in the present circumstances; I am used to regulate my own conduct." After a short silence, he continued: "You must allow me to tell you that, in my estimation, the duel, so much honored in France, constitutes the most guilty act, the most odious crime, that a Christian can engage himself to commit. The duellist, properly so-called, has not the excuse of passion; he kills simply for the sake of killing. That is cruelty pushed to its last expression—something at once vile, sanguinary and shameful."

"A homily worthy of the monk Poncet!" cried De Maurevert. "If such are your enlightened sentiments, why don't you give up the pullet?"

"I've not quite said all I have to say," continued the younger man. "I have made it a rule of conduct to avoid as much as possible affairs of honor. I must be pushed to extremities before drawing the sword from the scabbard. Are there no means of arranging our difference. Is it not truly deplorable to see two men, strangers to each other, rip one another to pieces with their daggers, like two hungry dogs over a bone? I assure you, captain, if it were not that I have been fasting for nearly twenty-four hours, I would not hesitate to resign my dinner to you."

At these words the captain rose and shrugged his shoulders with an air of pity.

"Monseigneur," he said in a disdainful tone, "all that you have said may be summed up in three words—you are afraid."

"Captain!" cried the young man, biting his lips till the blood came from them.

"Well—what? You are not going to lose your temper? That would be too good a joke."

The young man paused for a few seconds, during which time his lips quivered and his brows contracted nervously.

"Captain," he said, in a voice which he tried to render calm, but the tones of which trembled with anger, "if I hesitate and hold back from entering upon a duel so singular as the one in which you are now seeking to engage me, it is because nature has unhappily inflicted me with instincts of which I dread the explosion. At the flash of steel my heart beats with joy, my blood becomes fired, my brain transported, and the idea of carnage seizes me like a delirium. It is not ferocity, captain; it is a malady. Perhaps this terrible fury may have been transmitted to me from my father. Sometimes I am tempted to believe that I come from an accursed race. Captain, have pity on me! Do not add a new remembrance of blood to those which already weigh upon my past!"

During the time the young man was speaking De Maurevert observed him with the closest attention.

"Monsieur," he cried, "accept my sincere apologies. I see that I am mistaken in my opinion of you."

"So, then—our duel?"

"Is now inevitable. A sort of bravery is what I ought from the first to have expected to find in you. Allow me, on my side, to display to you a sort of honesty which is my peculiar quality; frankness for frankness, monsieur. I also have on my conscience a considerable number of peccadilloes. I have done, in fact, all that a man of war can do. This is equivalent to a terrible confession. In religion I respect but one thing—my word. In this is comprised my entire honesty, and I push it to the farthest; for when one boasts but one good quality, one is clearly bound to make the most of it. Now, I have pledged my word to kill you if you do not give up your dinner to me. It was wrong of me to pledge my word, perhaps, but it's now too late to withdraw it. One word more, by the way—what is your name?"

"My name has nothing to do with our difference."

"Excuse me, I always made a point of knowing the names of those whom I send to another world. It is a sort of library of remembrance I am forming for the entertainment of my old age."

"I am called Raoul Sforzi, and I belong to his Highness, Monseigneur the Duke of Savoy."

"Raoul Sforzi," repeated the captain, tranquilly. "That's a coupling of French and Italian that seems suggestive of a certain irregularity in your birth."

At this response of Roland de Maurevert, his adversary uttered a cry of rage that sounded not unlike the roar of a lion, and instantly stripped off his coat, or *soubreveste*.

"Take off your cuirass, captain," he cried; "you are a wretch unworthy of pity!"

A few moments later they both stood ready to begin the fight.

"Don't you think we should find better ground for our purpose outside the house than here in

this pent-up garden?" asked De Maurevert. "Here we can only massacre each other like two peasants; out there we may cut each other's throats like gentlemen."

"Just as you please, captain," replied Raoul. "Pass out first, then, I beg."

"After you, captain."

"You'll oblige me infinitely by not insisting."

Raoul bowed to his adversary, and crossed the threshold of the outer door.

"Pardieu," cried De Maurevert, following him; "you are a brave companion, and I hold you in great esteem. To expose your back so to me, when I have a sword and dagger in my hand, proves on your part a loyalty that does you honour. Hallo! you fellows," he cried to the wonder-struck group who stood about the door of the cabaret, "brush me this ground here clear of stones with your caps, and then take yourselves to a convenient distance out of the way; and for your pains you shall see a sight that many a Court lady would pay half her jewels to witness!"

The two adversaries crossed their swords in a moment, and the fight began. It was of short duration; for, to the amazement of the giant, at the second pass Raoul's sword wounded him in the right shoulder. A moment later, and, like a whirlwind, Raoul closed upon him, his foot gave way under him, and before he was hardly aware of what had happened, he found himself extended on the ground, with Raoul's dagger at his throat.

"Apologise, and I will spare your life!" cried Raoul.

"Apologise—for what?" demanded De Maurevert. "I've not offended you in any way. If you give up the pullet, I'll accept my life; if not, cut my throat, and the devil fly away with me. I've given my word, and that I'll never break to save my life."

"Take the pullet, then, captain," said Raoul sadly, releasing his antagonist, and moving slowly back towards the cabaret.

No sooner was De Maurevert upon his feet than he rushed after his magnanimous opponent, and threw his arms about him, crying:

"Chevalier, let me embrace you! The devil confound me if I in the least understand what is the matter with me. I feel a strong inclination to cry: I fancy I must be ill. Don't expect any better explanation; but, since I have not been able to kill you, suffer me to become your friend. I pledge you my word to be faithful and devoted to you."

Raoul's answer to this remarkable and altogether unexpected proposition was a hearty grip of the giant's outstretched hand. The engagement was accepted.

CHAPTER II.

THE MARQUIS DE LA TREMBLAIS' TWELVE APOSTLES.

Hardly had the late adversaries re-entered the cabaret, when a new personage appeared upon the scene.

He was a man about five-and-forty years of age, with low brows, deep-set eyes, angular features, thin lips, and sidelong restless looks; his ensemble conveying at a glance anything but a favorable impression. His costume of sombre-colored serge clearly indicated his station as that of a domestic; he was, in fact, one of the gamekeepers of the Marquis de la Tremblais.

The arrival of this person produced an extraordinary effect—something not far removed from consternation, indeed—on the minds of the holiday-makers of Saint Pardoux. As soon as his presence was observed, the groups separated, and though everybody affected to greet him with a friendly smile and bow, it was easy to be seen, by the embarrassed and even terrified expression of their faces, that their smiling and friendly salutations were drawn from them rather by the sentiment of fear than of friendliness.

Whether the valet Benoist was used to receptions of this kind, or that he set no store by them, he appeared on the present occasion unconscious of the effect produced by his presence. He passed proudly and disdainfully through the throng, which made way for his passage, and entered the cabaret. A malicious smile played about the corners of his evil-looking mouth as he called in a loud and imperious tone:

"Master Nicolas!"

The cabaretier, pale, and uneasily fumbling at the broad brim of his cap, quickly made his bow before his redoubtable guest, who looked at him for a moment or two in silence, and with some such expression as we may fancy a viper contemplates a wren he is about to dart upon.

"You've got a wedding dinner in course of preparation, Master Nicolas, eh?" asked Benoist, after enjoying, as long as was agreeable to himself, the poor cabaretier's agony of mind. "Who are the happy young people, Master Nicolas? I did not know any wedding was in contemplation at Saint Pardoux?"

"Wedding, Monsieur Benoist!" cried the cabaretier, affecting the profoundest astonishment, and holding himself carefully on the defensive. "I've heard of no wedding, Monsieur Benoist."

"I must have been mistaken, then; so we'll say no more about the matter. It was the agreeable smell of roasting meat that fills your house misled me. I made sure I scented a wedding-feast."

Master Nicolas tried hard to protest his innocence, but his presence of mind entirely deserting him at this critical moment, he could do no more than blush guiltily to the roots of his hair. From being simply malleous, the smile of the gamekeeper became hideous.

"Exercise has given me an appetite, Master

Nicolas," he said, after a slight pause. "Cannot you find for me in a corner of your larder—say a crust of bread and cheese? Certainly I should prefer a slice of venison; but then, I know you are so poor!—such luxuries as fresh meat or game of any kind never find their way into your humble house."

The unfortunate Master Nicolas felt very much as if he had been stretched upon a red-hot plate. He saw that there was no escape from the terrible clutches of Monsieur Benoist.

"If you will promise me your protection, Monsieur Benoist," he cried, with trembling humbleness, "and also to keep the secret—I think I shall be so happy as to be able to treat, as he deserves, the head gamekeeper of Monseigneur the Marquis."

"Aha! A confidence! Pray let me hear what it is."

This command was given without any accompanying guarantee, and the unfortunate cabaretier bitterly repented his unguarded proposition. But as it was impossible to retreat from the position he had taken, he resigned himself to the consequences with an inward groan.

"Yes, Monsieur Benoist," he replied, affecting an air of careless gaiety, which had the effect of making his embarrassment more conspicuously noticeable, "I have something better to offer you than a mere crust of bread and cheese—a roasted pullet!"

"Oh, you're joking, Master Nicolas," cried the gamekeeper, with a well-acted look of incredulity.

Master Nicolas, however, felt but too poignantly how little of jocularly there was in the affair. His only chance of escaping punishment lay in inventing a plausible lie, and he had not hesitated to attempt to save himself by that means.

"The fact is, Monsieur Benoist," he said, lowering his voice, "about an hour ago two cavaliers dismounted at my door, and gave me a pullet, with orders to roast it for their dinner. It's no uncommon thing for travellers to carry their own provisions, is it, Monsieur Benoist? Now, what prevents me from telling my guests that the fire was too strong, and that it has burnt up their pullet?"

"Nothing whatever, good and faithful Master Nicolas."

"Of course, between you and these strangers I would not hesitate for a moment."

"I am happy, Master Nicolas—for your sake that I was mistaken. For a moment I suspected you of a design to defraud monseigneur of his rights."

"Ah, Monsieur Benoist," cried the cabaretier, putting on the best look of injured innocence he was able to assume; "how could such a thought have come into your mind?"

While poor Master Nicolas was thus doing his best to lie himself into security, Captain Roland and Raoul were amicably talking away the time, and waiting as patiently as they could the advent of their dinner.

"I consider that to-day has been a lucky one for me, chevalier," cried the giant; "for not only have I had the honor of gaining your friendship, but the sword-thrust which you gave me, and which might have laid me up in bed for a fortnight, is nothing but a skin-deep prick, of which there will be no sign by this time to-morrow. I assure you, chevalier, it is impossible for me to tell you how much your character attracts and pleases me. Let us remain in company. I've a presentiment that we shall do something remarkable together. We each complete the other. You will bring into the partnership youth, mettle, beauty; I, what is worth all the rest—experience. For, to speak frankly, my dear Chevalier Sforzi, I don't think much of your intelligence as a negotiator; you've superabundantly proved to me that you don't in the least know how to make the most of an advantage."

"How so, captain?"

"For example: When you held me down just now, and had your dagger at my throat, why didn't you impose a ransom? In your place, I should have done so. Why, I've fought duels that have brought me five hundred crowns. In fact, a sword in the hands of a brave and ingenious man represents a certain source of income!"

"Fight for money, captain?"

"You wouldn't fight for love, would you? My young friend, I don't for a moment dispute that you fence admirably; but I sustain that, beyond that you have everything to learn. In the course of the next few days, when I know you better, I'll carry this conversation further. Meantime, my stomach cries *famine!* Let's dine, and I offer you a share of my pullet. What ho!"

At the captain's summons, Master Nicolas appeared with a contrite air and a piteous countenance.

"Forgive me, monseigneur," he said, "I have had the misfortune to be called away from the cooking of your pullet for a few minutes, and the fire—has burnt it up entirely!"

On hearing this disastrous news, Captain Roland dashed his clenched fist down upon the table before him with such tremendous force as to shiver the worm-eaten wood into splinters.

"Wretch!" he cried; but then suddenly checked himself, and after a moment's reflection, continued in an unexcited tone: "My friend, it isn't to an old fox like me that it's any use talking such nonsense as that. You'll never make me believe that you have allowed a dinner worth two *livres tournois* to melt into smoke. You must have found some magnificent customer for it?"

"I swear to you, gentlemen"—
"Silence! If you dare to interrupt me again,

I'll wring your neck without pity. Confess your crime—it's the only way of saving yourself from my indignation. Now, tell the truth, or dread my terrible wrath!"

So many examples of cruelty were daily given at this period by the feudal nobility of the provinces, the life of a peasant was held of so little account, that Master Nicolas began to tremble in every limb.

"Promise to forgive me, monseigneur," he stammered almost unintelligibly, "and I will confess to you the entire truth."

"I consent," replied the captain, after a moment's reflection; "but at the same time, that your fault may not go unpunished, you will lodge and feed my friend the chevalier and myself gratis."

"You do me too great an honor, monseigneur. I thank you for your goodness."

"Never mind thanking me, but go on with your confession," cried the giant.

Nicolas was perfectly sincere. He related the fact of Benoist's arrival, the critical position in which the presence of the Marquis de la Tremblais' head gamekeeper had placed him, and, in fine, the sacrifice he had been obliged to make of the roast pullet intended for the travellers, to save himself from fine and imprisonment.

"By all the furies," cried Captain Roland, when the cabaretier had finished his lamentable narrative, "conduct me to this knave. The gormandiser has the audacity to attack gentlemen, has he? Racks and gibbets!—we'll get some fun out of this!"

The giant, now moved to real anger, had risen from his seat, and was already some way towards the door of the cabaret, when Master Nicolas threw himself on his knees before him, and clung to one of his legs.

"In the name of all the saints, monseigneur," he cried, "do not think of anything of the sort. You do not know Benoist! Woe to whoever offends him! Benoist never forgives."

"Fear has robbed you of your wits, fellow, and made you forget in whose presence you are and to whom you are speaking," cried the giant, roughly throwing off the terrified cabaretier. "Dare to threaten me—Roland de Maurevert—with the anger of a hind?"

"Monseigneur, I conjure you take care," cried Nicolas, beseechingly. But seeing that the captain paid no heed to his words, he sprang to his feet and placed himself in the doorway. "Monseigneur," he cried, as pale as a corpse, and in a hoarse whisper, "what I am about to tell you may cost me my life; but I cannot bear to see you heedlessly rushing upon your fate. Monseigneur, the gamekeeper, Benoist, is chief of the twelve apostles of the Marquis de la Tremblais."

On hearing these enigmatical words, the captain stopped.

"What do you mean by the twelve apostles of the Marquis de la Tremblais?" he asked.

"Did you not know of their existence, monseigneur?"

"Not the least."

Leading his guest well out of earshot of whoever was in the house, Nicolas, after a moment of painful hesitation, explained.

"What are called the twelve apostles of Monseigneur the Marquis de la Tremblais are murderers charged with the execution of his vengeance. Monseigneur never leaves his castle without having them for an escort—for monseigneur never lives on good terms with the neighboring nobility. The twelve apostles are a band of pitiless and lawless wretches, who, feeling themselves supported by the power of their master, shrink from no deed to which they are incited either by greed or wickedness. If I were to attempt to tell you all the dreadful things they have done, the day would not be long enough for the story. Let me beseech you, monseigneur—do not draw upon yourself, much less rouse the anger of the chief of the apostles."

"What do you think of all this, my dear chevalier?" demanded the giant of Raoul, whose flashing eyes and knit brows spoke clearly enough the indignation with which the cabaretier's recital had filled him. "Does it not strike you that luxury is being carried to an unheard-of pitch in the provinces? This Marquis de la Tremblais appears to deny himself nothing. Twelve assassins in his pay!—it's truly royal. One might really believe oneself in Paris."

Having delivered himself of this judicious reflection, Captain Roland passed straight through the cabaret, followed by Raoul.

The first object their eyes rested on, upon reaching the road in front of Master Nicolas' house, was the chief of the apostles, seated at table and in the act of beginning to carve the pullet. Uttering an involuntary cry of distress at the sight, the captain sprang fiercely towards Benoist.

"Gallow's bird!" he exclaimed, "this fowl belongs to me! Up with you, and off with your cap when I speak to you!"

The chief of the apostles made no movement towards rising from his seat; but his viperous eyes turned with an indescribable expression of malice upon his interlocutor, and his hand sought the hilt of a heavy cutlass which he carried by his side.

The captain observed both the gesture and the look that accompanied it.

"Home of Beelzebub!" he cried, "this fellow is mad!"

Without troubling himself to utter another word, and with the most perfect coolness, he raised his right arm, and brought down his closed fist upon the head of the gamekeeper, who fell to the ground as if struck by a thunderbolt.