

She was dead.

Benoist, as little moved by this frightful assassination as if it were a matter of the commonest occurrence, pushed aside the châtelaïne's body with his foot, and passed out of the room.

Brave Lehardy, after informing the chevalier of the capture of the château, had hurried with all speed to Diane; but, more fortunate than Raoul, he had not encountered any enemies on his way, and reached the apartments of his young mistress without impediment. He found Diane, already aroused by the noise, up and partly dressed. In a few words he explained to her the desperate situation of affairs, and then passed to what was more pressing:

"Do not be alarmed, mademoiselle," he cried; "I will do my best to save you. Follow me."

"Where to, Lehardy?"

"Two steps from this place. In your servant's room there is a secret door of which I have the key. This door leads out into the country. Come, mademoiselle, the moments are precious."

"But—my mother?"

"Madame la Comtesse runs no danger, I am sure. Come, mademoiselle, come."

Diane, reflecting on the feeble aid which her presence could afford to her mother, was preparing to obey, when an outburst of furious sounds close by froze her with terror and paralyzed her movements.

"Malediction!" cried Lehardy. "The assassins are here—it is too late!"

It was at that moment the Dame d'Erlanges fell under the bullet of the Chief of the Apostles.

At the approach of the bandits, Diane exhibited no alarm. She was pale and her bosom heaved, but beyond these slight indications of agitation, nothing in her face betrayed the agony that was rending her heart. Her eyes gleamed with a dark fire, announcing a firm and powerful resolution.

"My brave Lehardy," she said, "if heaven by a miracle, permits you to escape the dangers which environ us, tell my mother that I died pronouncing her name. As to the Chevalier Raoul Sforzi, he has been very good and devoted to us—I shall await him in heaven!"

"Die! you, mademoiselle! Oh, impossible! You are overcome by terror. Who would dare to kill you?"

"I myself, Lehardy," replied Diane. "Do you think that I will cowardly submit to the outrages of the marquis? Heaven forgive me! I am a D'Erlanges, and a D'Erlanges has never failed in honor!" And as she pronounced these words she showed Lehardy a dagger with which she had armed herself.

The old servitor uttered a cry of despair, and stamped violently upon the floor.

"You are right, mademoiselle!" he exclaimed. "A D'Erlanges never failed. But wait awhile. I will make a desperate attempt!"

"It is too late! Hark! Some one is rushing this way!" replied Diane.

"Wait awhile, I say, mademoiselle; the steps may not be coming here."

Lehardy cocked his arquebuse, and projecting his body out of the partially opened door, fired. A cry of suffering followed the discharge, and the assassins stopped.

"The wretches fear a trap, mademoiselle, and are consulting as to what they shall do," cried Lehardy. "We could not have a better chance—let us profit by it!"

Lehardy seized a lighted candle from Diane's *pris-dieu*, and held it to the wide hangings which hung from the ceiling. In a moment a whirl of smoke and flame filled the room and poured out of the door. Seizing his young mistress in his arms, Lehardy lifted her from the floor, and rushed forward with all the strength afforded him by despair.

Raoul Sforzi, somewhat recovered from the overwhelming fatigue of the combat, was making his way towards Diane's apartments, when he saw an immense sheet of flame burst out before him.

"Heaven!" he cried, "the assassins have set fire to the château! Diane, Diane—I am here! Oh, I shall be too late to save her. Nothing will remain to me but to die!"

At that moment he caught sight of the group of murderers upon whom Lehardy had fired. A roar like that of a tiger burst from his chest.

"Diane, my beloved!" he cried, "if I cannot save, I can at least avenge you!"

He dashed upon the marquis's soldiers,

## CHAPTER XV.

### THE LION VANQUISHED.

It was not a combat, but death, the Chevalier Sforzi went to seek. The sacrifice of his life, to which he was resigned, quitted his strength. He thought not of victory; his one sole object was to avenge Diane, whom he believed to be dead, and to give her a sanguinary funeral. He attacked the marquis's people with unequalled impetuosity and rage.

The two first who opposed themselves to his terrible sword fell grievously wounded. Not encouraged, but only freshly excited by this success, he redoubled his energy, and a third opponent quickly fell before him with his skull cloven.

"Assassins," he cried, "I will destroy the whole of you!"

Cowed for a moment by the chevalier's overwhelmingly vehement and victorious attack, the marquis's men speedily recovered from their panic on seeing that they had to do with

one man only. They numbered twenty. Their swords, daggers and poignards quickly formed a deadly circle, of which the centre was Raoul's breast.

The vengeance which had drawn him towards those whom he looked upon as the murderers of Diane did not yet appear to him sufficiently complete; he desired to mow down a more ample harvest. By a vigorous bound he tried to break through the ranks of his adversaries, but unfortunately his foot slipped in the blood of the man he had first struck down, and he fell to the ground helpless.

In an instant the marquis's men were upon him, and in another instant his life would have been taken, but for an altogether unexpected intervention.

"Woe to whoever touches this wretch!" cried the Chief of the Apostles, appearing suddenly upon the scene. "Monseigneur intends that this Sforzi—unworthy of the end of an honorable soldier—shall perish on the gibbet, after being put to long torture. Disarm the scoundrel, and drag him before monseigneur."

Though the mercenaries were loth not to complete their easy victory, the prospect offered by Benoist promised such a reward to their ferocity that they obeyed his order without much grumbling. Twenty powerful arms seized Raoul and dragged rather than conducted him into the chamber of the murdered Dame d'Erlanges, where the marquis still remained.

At sight of the prisoner, the Marquis de la Tremblais could not repress a cry of satisfaction. A sigh of relief rose from his chest, and an indefinite expression of joy glittered in his eyes. He rose from his chair, advanced slowly towards the man he had so cruelly insulted, and gazed at him in silence. His face, prematurely withered by his passions, reflected all the evil suggestions of his heart. He already tasted his vengeance.

Raoul submitted without opposition to the marquis's examination. Still palpitating under the fatigue and excitement of his last struggle, he but dimly saw what was passing around him. The mocking voice of the marquis roused him from his physical depression and torpor of mind.

"Your presence at Tauve, fellow, does not at all surprise me," said the marquis. "Knowing the sort of ruffians the Dame d'Erlanges had hired to aid her in her rebellion, I expected to see you here again."

"Monsieur," replied Raoul, trying to recover his coolness, "your conduct no more surprises me than my presence here surprises you. Cowardice and cruelty go together, marquis. Your conduct towards the Dame d'Erlanges is worthy of you! How proud you must be of your nocturnal exploit! People murdered in their beds, the house of a noble and defenceless lady broken into, despoiled, sacked from ground to roof—how admirable and glorious! But take my advice, marquis, do not yet proclaim your victory! It is impossible that the noblesse of Auvergne will consent, by inaction, to become the accomplices of your crime. But even if the noblesse in this province should fail in their duty, is there not the power of the king? Henry III. will lend an ear to the supplications of the Dame d'Erlanges, and will draw down an exemplary punishment on your infamy!"

Assured of his vengeance, the marquis took no heed of the chevalier's boldness of speech, but replied:

"The Dame d'Erlanges has already paid the penalty of her rebellion. She is no more!"

"What?" cried Raoul. "Oh! impossible! you are jesting! The Dame d'Erlanges dead! dead, like her daughter—her servants! No! I say again, it is impossible!"

The marquis, without replying, crossed to the châtelaïne's bed, and with a firm hand drew aside the hangings.

"Look!" he said.

Raoul turned, and beheld the body of the Dame d'Erlanges lying bathed in her blood.

At this frightful spectacle, which brought to his mind with such poignant reality the supposed death of Diane, Sforzi passed his hands several times before his eyes; his looks became haggard, and told of madness. In truth, under the terrible blow received by his heart, he felt his reason giving way; he doubted the evidence of his senses, and was tempted to believe himself under the influence of a dream. He soon awakened to the truth, however.

"Infamous wretch!" he cried, hoarsely, and mechanically grasping the scabbard of his sword, while a flash of indescribable fury darted from his eyes, he advanced towards the marquis until their chests nearly met, and then, with a movement rapid as thought, he raised his right hand and struck him full in the face.

Words are impotent to describe the marquis's rage. His first action was to draw his poignard; but almost instantly he flung it away from him.

"Such a vengeance would be too puny for my rage," he cried. "Let no one stir," he continued, seeing his men-at-arms springing towards Raoul; "Monseigneur Sforzi belongs to me! For a hundred thousand golden crowns, I would not give up my prey! Oh, fear nothing; I will invent a chastisement that shall equal the offence."

On one of his cheeks rose, in deep red, the stigmata of shame, which had been imprinted on it; his upper lip rose and trembled convulsively, presenting an expression of implacable ferocity; his forehead—singularly and strangely like that of Raoul—was crossed and re-crossed by a network of projecting veins. For more than a minute he stood silently contemplating

his victim; at length a sinister smile passed over his lips.

"Soldiers," he said, "bind firmly this demoniac, and do not lose sight of him till you return to the château."

The first rays of dawn were touching the hill-tops, when the marquis abandoned the Château de Tauve. The aspect of desolation presented by the dwelling-place of the Dame d'Erlanges, lately so calm, smiling, and peaceful, is not to be described. It was one of those terrible pictures beyond the power of the pen to trace. A party of the marquis's men-at-arms were left to guard the house in the not very probable event of Monseigneur de Canilhac, the Lieutenant-General of Auvergne, thinking of retaking it.

It is necessary to read and re-read the authentic memoirs of the sixteenth century to believe in the odious spoliations and incredible violence committed at that epoch. But it is absolutely certain that every day the feudal nobles of provinces far removed from Paris, and consequently beyond the action of the royal power, were guilty of such crimes as that committed by the Marquis de la Tremblais.

On reaching the Château de la Tremblais, Raoul was cast into a dark, damp, and narrow dungeon. Bowed down in strength and spirit, he was oblivious of the horror of his position, however. He wept for Diane, and sighed for the repose of the grave.

While Sforzi was held captive, and the marquis was triumphant, Diane d'Erlanges, fortunately saved by Lehardy, who had conducted her to a poor goatherd's cabin, waited anxiously the return of her faithful servitor, who was gone to gather intelligence. Lehardy's absence was prolonged for several hours, and Diane, grown more and more alarmed, had decided to leave her retreat, when she perceived her brave attendant ascending the side of the mountain. She hurried down to meet him.

"Well?" she cried.

Lehardy remained silent. His cheeks were wet with tears.

Seized by a horrible presentiment, Diane stood for several seconds without daring to question him further. At length, making a great effort to control her agitation,—

"My mother?" she asked.

Lehardy bowed his head, and slowly pointed towards heaven.

"Dead!—murdered!" cried the poor girl.

"Yes, dead—murdered!" repeated Lehardy, in tones that sounded like a funeral echo.

Diane felt herself sinking to the earth, but she made a powerful effort to sustain herself; she had yet one more question to ask of Lehardy.

"Raoul?" she murmured.

"Dead, without doubt, mademoiselle. No body has survived this immense catastrophe."

The poor girl uttered a piercing shriek, and then, blindly stretching her arms before her, fell cold and inanimate to the ground. When, thanks to the care of Lehardy, she returned to consciousness, she spoke not a word. It was only at the approach of night that heaven accorded her the relief of tears, and she was at length able to reply to questions put to her by her faithful servitor.

"What must I do, mademoiselle?" he asked. "It will be almost impossible to leave this shelter; yet it is absolutely necessary for me to go to Clermont to Monseigneur de Canilhac. The governor must do you justice. A crime so odious must not be allowed to go unpunished! But if the marquis's people meet me on the road they will kill me; and then what will become of you?"

"Lehardy," cried Diane, trying to repress the sobs which stifled her, "it is useless to address yourself to Monseigneur de Canilhac; he will only repulse your supplication with disdain. All men are monsters—tigers maddened by blood! Heaven, in its inexorable justice, will mete out punishment to these assassins! Remain near me, my faithful servant, my trusted friend; you are now my only support on earth."

"Mademoiselle," cried Lehardy, "remember that you are a D'Erlanges—noblesse oblige! You must avenge your mother. Yes, you are right. Monseigneur de Canilhac would laugh at your complaint; it is of no use addressing him; but there is a brave companion who may help you in this lamentable state of things. I do not, to speak the truth, greatly esteem this man, but his experience is equal to his cupidity, and if he finds it to his interest to serve you, he is capable of carrying the boldest actions to successful results."

"Who is this man?"

"The companion in arms of Monseigneur Sforzi, Captain Roland de Maurevert. I know, besides, that the fate of brave Monsieur Raoul, whom he loved, will affect him deeply, and will dispose him to receive my proposals favorably. Lastly, mademoiselle, do not forget that if the Château de Tauve is not rendered back to you, you will see yourself reduced to poverty, which will assort neither with your name nor rank. What do you decide on, mademoiselle?"

Diane returned no answer. Since Lehardy had pronounced the name of Raoul, she had been convulsed with sobbing, and had heard nothing he had said.

## CHAPTER XVI.

### IN THE TIGER'S DEN.

It was six o'clock in the morning; the warm and brilliant rays of a bright sun lit the picturesque summits of the Mont d'Or. In the

wildest gorges of this mountain was encamped the Army, daily growing in strength, called the Army of the League of Equity.

Nothing could be more strange and fantastic than the aspect of this gathering of insurgent peasants. However, among this heterogeneous and undisciplined crowd a certain order reigned, indicating at a glance the presence of a chief practically acquainted with the science of war. Advanced sentinels, supported by detached bodies, guarded the approaches to the camp; videttes stationed on the heights—all the elementary and indispensable precautions against surprise were rigorously observed.

The soldiers of the League awakened at dawn were occupied in preparing their modest morning meal, the basis of which was chestnuts and maize. At the same time several quarters of kid and venison, cooking in the heat of ancient braziers, proved that the sobriety of the insurgents was not that of an exaggerated puritanism, and that they were far from disdaining the advantages offered by the then common practice of marauding.

A good-sized tent, surmounted by a white flag *fleur-de-lis* stood in the middle of the camp, and was inhabited by the Generalissimo of the Army of the League of Equity, the illustrious Captain de Maurevert. The giant was at that moment seated at table before an enormous piece of venison; and in face of him, on a rough stool, sat the servitor Lehardy.

"So, captain," said the latter, "you repeat my idea of going and besieging the Château de la Tremblais?"

De Maurevert shrugged his shoulders with an air of pity, at the same moment thrusting into his mouth a piece of the venison large enough to have furnished a meal to another man.

"My poor Lehardy," he replied, "your soul outruns your wits! How the devil do you suppose that, without artillery and with only fifteen sorry nags to mount the whole of my cavalry, I could go and besiege the strongest place in the whole province of Auvergne? You are simply demented to think of such a thing."

"But, captain, do you not fear that your inaction may prove fatal to the chevalier? Is it not a great miracle, that after being kept a prisoner for a fortnight, he is still living?"

"The truth is," said the captain, "I do every day expect to hear of my young friend's execution. I have no luck with my associates. When I do not kill them myself, some one stabs them or hangs them for me! A good fellow, Raoul—whom I loved with all my heart."

"And you are not going to make any attempt to save him, captain?"

"Not make any attempt! What do you think I have encamped here for, hardly two leagues from the Château de la Tremblais, if not to approach the chevalier? The idea of Raoul strung up on a gibbet is never out of my mind! If it were not that I have to keep up my strength, I should by this time have died—of fasting and drinking! Take my word for it, friend Lehardy, that which almost always leads men to commit blunders—or, if you like better, stupidities—is precipitation. The passions or desires should never be taken for counsellors. To know how to wait for the propitious moment, and then to seize the occasion by the hair, is the great secret of life. If my brave companion in arms should be hanged, I shall be in despair, and shall do my best to avenge him; but my conscience will not reproach me. Ah, my good Lehardy, you do not know, as I do, how sweet a thing it is to be at peace with your conscience!"

At this moment a tumult which arose in the camp drew off the attention of De Maurevert.

"What now?" he cried. "Ah, it is easy to see that my soldiers are not used to being in camps! The rascals shout and dispute unceasingly, without ever, by any chance, cutting one another's throats! What a difference between them and regular troops! Three years ago, during a night-bivouac, in a company which I commanded, a furious discussion arose over a game of dice. My brave fellows took sword in hand, and for an hour fought so gently and quietly—so as not to disturb me in my sleep—that I was not even waked. Two of them were killed. What a beautiful thing discipline is! This infernal uproar drowns my voice! Women talking loudest of all! This will go on all day if I do not put a stop to it."

De Maurevert had scarcely set foot out of his tent ere he was surrounded by a group of mountaineers, who all addressed him at once.

"Silence!" he cried, in a tone that dominated the tumult as much as the report of a cannon dominates the sound of a volley of muskets; "it is not for soldiers to question their general." Then, turning towards one of the crowd, who appeared the least excited, he asked:

"What is the matter, companion?"

"Monseigneur, a young girl of the people was carried off last night by Monsieur de Laverdan's men, and wickedly abused. The father and mother of the poor child have come to the camp to implore your protection and justice. They demand that we should go and attack the Seigneur de Laverdan; and it really is time that we caused our sisters, daughters, and wives to be respected! Death to the Seigneur de Laverdan!"

De Maurevert's lips curled with a smile of pity.

"Companion," he said, "do not let us spoil the goodness of our cause and the justice of our demands by exaggerated pretensions. By the gallantries of Madame Venus! it would be ridiculous to attempt to prevent noblemen having passions like ourselves. The Seigneur de Laverdan may have been a little too lively in