

to send for the gentleman who demanded twenty thousand crowns for that delicious little spaniel, I saw on my way to Bel-Esbat, the day before yesterday?"

"You know well, Henry, that your requests are orders to me. This gentleman ought now to be in the waiting-hall."

"Thanks, my dear D'Arques. What do you think of his demand?—twenty thousand crowns for a spaniel! I never heard of such a thing! All last night I did nothing but think of this spaniel. As far as I could judge at a mere glance, the dog is wondrously beautiful."

"Possibly, Henry. What rouses my indignation is, that his master, knowing the king's desire, should not have hastened to gratify it, without making any sort of conditions."

"Alas, my dear son!—kings are rarely beloved by their subjects."

"Henry!" cried the future Duc de Joyeuse in a slightly reproachful tone, "it is somewhat ungrateful, as well as unjust, for you to say such a thing. Do you esteem as nothing the incomparable attachment which binds us to you, Lavalette and me? What man in all the extent of your kingdom can boast of possessing such friendship? Not one!"

"You are right, my dear D'Arques; you two represent to me France entire.—I am truly curious to see this twenty-thousand-crown man. Shall we have him brought in?"

"With pleasure, Henry."

The king at once gave orders to one of his attendants, and shortly afterwards the Chevalier Sforzi appeared at the door of his majesty's cabinet.

So grave was the young man's purpose, and so heavily did it weigh upon his mind, that for a moment his self-possession deserted him. If the king had abruptly spoken to him, while he was making the customary three bows, he would have been utterly incapable of making an answer. His embarrassment was of short duration, however; the thought of Diane speedily bringing back to him all his energy.

After bowing thrice, he remained standing at a distance of about five or six paces from the chair in which his majesty was seated, waiting until it should please the king to address him.

Though ordinarily gay of humor and good-natured, the sight of Raoul appeared to produce an unpleasant impression on D'Arques. He fixed upon him a haughty look, and addressed him in a sharp and overbearing tone:

"You are the person, monsieur, who has dared to haggle with the wishes of his majesty? Your conduct appears to me singularly ill-judged. In spite of the dress of a gentleman, which you wear, you are doubtless the son of some artisan? Just try and explain the irreverence of your behavior. His majesty deigns to listen to you."

The paleness which had overspread the chevalier's countenance on being introduced to the presence of the king gave place to a lively hue of red at the Duc de Joyeuse's words; and when the duke ceased to speak, he remained silent.

"Did you hear what I said to you?" demanded the favorite, sharply.

Sforzi bit his lower lip till the blood came, and his downcast eyes flashed with indignation; but he still remained silent and motionless.

Henry III. spoke to him.

"Do you not see, monsieur," he said, "that my beloved brother, the Duc de Joyeuse, is getting impatient? Why do you not answer the questions he has deigned to address to you?"

"Sire," replied Sforzi, "I hope your majesty will pardon my ignorance of the usages of the Court of France. I had thought—so great and immense is my reverence for royalty—that no one had the right to speak before the king, until invited and authorized by his majesty himself."

"Your instincts have not deceived you," replied Henry III. "Such is, indeed, the usage."

The Duc de Joyeuse could not repress an angry gesture, and the king, whose tone had at first been somewhat sharp, went on more gently, looking fixedly at Sforzi while speaking:

"How do you reconcile, monsieur," he said, "the immense respect you pretend to feel for royalty with the exorbitancy of your demands? Does not the twenty thousand crowns you have named as the price of your spaniel amount to a formal refusal on your part?"

"Sire," replied Raoul, "my intentions have unfortunately been misunderstood. I confess that, though poor, I said I would not part with my spaniel for twenty thousand crowns, but I added that I valued far above that sum the happiness of approaching your majesty."

"Having been received into our presence, then, you ask nothing for your spaniel, but declare yourself to be perfectly satisfied?" remarked Henry III.

"Sire," answered Sforzi, "the remembrance of the honor I have this day received, and which would have been more precious still had your majesty called me to him to require me to expose my life in his service, will fill my entire existence with joy."

"Your sentiments," said Henry III., after a short pause, during which he looked at the chevalier with increased attention, "are those of a good and loyal subject. What is your name?"

"The Chevalier Sforzi, sire."

"How old are you?"

"Twenty-four years."

"Four years younger than you, my dear brother," remarked Henry III., turning towards the Duc de Joyeuse. "Good heavens!—how rapidly time flies! When I saw you for the first time you were the chevalier's age—it seems but yesterday! On looking at you closely, however, I see that you have grown older."

The king again paused, and then without observing signs of impatience on the part of his favorite, addressed himself to Raoul:

"It would be difficult, chevalier," he said, "to find in all my Court a gentleman better-looking than yourself; but I can see clearly, by your sunburnt complexion and certain details of your dress, that you do not appreciate as you ought the advantages with which you have been endowed by nature. I take a great interest in the happiness of our ladies, and I hold that our gentlemen eclipse in beauty and elegance all their rivals at foreign Courts. You will go this very day to my yeoman of the laundry, and tell him, in my name, to furnish you the powders, essences, and perfumes prepared for our personal use. I particularly recommend you to use Castre soap. It produces a marvellous effect on the skin. Have you no request to address to us, Chevalier Sforzi?"

Raoul's heart beat violently. The moment so ardently desired for obtaining justice against the Marquis de la Tremblais was come. He was about to reply when the Duc de Joyeuse, whose impatience had become more and more uncontrollable, rose from his seat and addressed the king:

"Sire," he cried; "let me beg you to observe that it is already nearly six o'clock, and that, contrary to the etiquette of the Court and the directions of your physician, you have not yet called either for your morning broth or your wine. It seems to me that you can defer to some other time this interesting interview with Monsieur Sforzi. Really, if your friends did not take care of your health, you would in a short time become so changed as to be unrecognizable. The infraction committed this morning on your regular habits is already bearing fruit. The freshness of your complexion—so conspicuous a little while ago—has vanished. You accused me a few minutes ago of growing old! look at yourself in a mirror!"

"Don't make yourself uneasy, my son," said Henry III., at the same moment snatching up a mirror and anxiously looking into it; "I own I have done wrong. Chevalier Sforzi, give one of my gentlemen your address, I will see you again soon. Heaven preserve you! Don't forget what I told you about the Castre soap. My dear Joyeuse, tell the two gentlemen of the chamber, my physician and the officer of the goblet, that they may bring me in my broth and wine. Let the princes, cardinals, officers of the Crown, and Secretaries of State come in. I certainly have talked too long fasting. Chevalier Sforzi, good-day."

From the mocking look of the Duc de Joyeuse, Raoul was at no loss to understand that he had seen the king for the first and last time. It was with a heart swelling with anger and despair that he took his departure from the royal cabinet.

CHAPTER XXVII.

OUT OF SCYLLA INTO CHARYBDIS.

For the space of half an hour Raoul Sforzi was completely unmanned by the failure of his interview with the king. A cold perspiration beaded his forehead, his legs bent under the weight of his body, so that he was fain to lean for support against the balustrade of a balcony. By degrees the fresh morning air calmed his agitation. His pride, too, rebelled against the weakness by which he had been momentarily overcome.

"Am I a child or a woman?" he asked himself, "to allow myself to be thus cast down? No, I will not be conquered! If Monsieur D'Arques interposes between me and the king, I have still my sword. His majesty loves bravery. Monsieur le Duc de Joyeuse is not immortal—of his body I will make a stepping-stone to reach the throne! Accursed race of courtiers! To live in intimacy with the king, to have the means of inspiring him with generous resolutions and grand designs, and to make him spend his time in prattling about fashions, and talking about the trumpery scandals of the Court!—woe to whoever of you shall come in my way! After all, why should I despair? I have not yet lost the game. His majesty's reception of me was even kinder than I ventured to hope. When D'Arques and Lavalette first went to Court, they were as unknown as I—and to-day the highest-handed seigneurs dread their interest and bow before their power. Why should not I succeed as well as they have done?"

After indulging in these reflections, which had the effect of arousing him from despair, he descended from the balcony to the open court of the Louvre where his horse awaited him, and sprang into the saddle.

Passing along the Louvre, he saw at about fifty paces off a numerous and brilliant cavalcade of gentlemen advancing towards him. By an instinctive movement he drew his horse towards the wall, without observing in so doing that he occupied the upper portion of the paved road.

"Mordieu, gentlemen!" cried a young man of about eight-and-twenty, who rode at the head of the party, "there are two kings in France, it appears!—for I do not recognize anybody in the kingdom, if not his majesty, or the Duc d'Anjou, or Messieurs de Guise, all at this moment absent, who have the right thus to take the wall of me!"

"Unless it should be the redoubtable Seigneur Bussy d'Amboise, come from his grave," said one of the gentlemen, laughing.

The young man whom Sforzi's involuntary pretensions had so strongly moved, took this jesting remark in anything but good part.

"Monsieur," he replied coldly, "the Seigneur

Bussy knew that my sword gave way in nothing to his; therefore, though we were enemies, and he had several times announced his determination to seek a quarrel with me, he always saw fit to remain on terms of the most exquisite politeness with me."

An almost imperceptible smile passed over the lips of the courtier who had called forth this reply, but he refrained from pursuing the subject further.

The young man, who boasted of having daunted the most dangerous duellist of the time, the Seigneur de Bussy, might have been, as we have said, about eight-and-twenty. His visage, in spite of the delicacy of his effeminate features, presented a remarkable expression of coldness, pride and arrogance. His costume was of almost incredible sumptuousness; but a certain carelessness with which it was worn seemed to indicate that its extreme richness arose rather from the position at Court of the wearer, than in obedience to the wearer's own taste.

Sforzi, absorbed in his own reflections, was waiting to continue his way until the cavalcade had passed, when his attention was roused by a voice calling out roughly:

"Get to your proper side of the road, lout! You are blocking the way."

So little did the chevalier imagine that these words were addressed to him, that he turned his head to see who the person was thus addressed. The road by the side of the Louvre was completely deserted. He started; it was to himself, then, that the insulting words had been spoken?

His uncertainty was of brief duration. A second interpellation, not less energetic than the first, cleared away all doubt. The young man at the head of the cavalcade spurred his horse up to Sforzi, and cried, with an imperative gesture of the head:

"Get to the lower side of the road, or, *mordieu!* I'll send you and your sorry nag rolling in the dust!"

To provoke Sforzi, even when he was in a normal state of mind, was to run a great risk; but to venture to insult him gratuitously, at the moment when all his passions were in a state of turmoil, was to run upon almost certain death.

"Monsieur," said Raoul, with that fearful calmness which rage driven to extremities gives, "was it really to me you spoke?"

The only answer deigned by the young man was to raise a riding whip he held in his hand.

"Blood and carnage!" yelled Raoul, "your last hour has come!" And driving his spurs into his horse's flanks, he drew his sword, and dashed upon his adversary.

So prompt was the chevalier's movement, that the young man in luxurious costume had barely time to draw a pistol from one of his holsters and fire it. He fired point blank, but with such precipitation that the ball injured only the small plume of feathers in the front of the chevalier's cap.

"Help, gentlemen!" cried the courtier, spurring towards the cavalcade—help! I am being assassinated!"

"No, only chastised!" cried Raoul, striking him across the face with the flat of his sword.

A witness of this scene, which passed within the space of a dozen seconds, would have remarked that at this proceeding of Sforzi's the companions of his adversary exhibited more pleasure than either astonishment or anger. Nevertheless, they did not hesitate to go to the assistance of the latter, and twenty swords instantly gleamed in the morning light.

To defend himself against such superior forces was impossible. The chevalier bravely and promptly took his measures. He replaced his sword in its scabbard, dropped his bridle on the horse's neck, crossed his arms, and contemplated his enemies without quailing.

"Messieurs," he cried, "if you are out-purses, leave me at least time to recommend my soul to heaven. I will not attempt to escape. If you are gentlemen, do not dishonor yourselves by a cowardly and odious assassination. You are twenty—I am alone."

These words, uttered with as much firmness as dignity, controlled the troop of courtiers.

"Messieurs," continued Raoul, quickly, "I see I have to do with gentlemen. Nobility has been insulted in my person: which of you will act as my second?"

No one replied. The constrained and embarrassed mien of the gentlemen, however, testified how much this silence cost them, and that all of them, if they had not been withheld by some powerful consideration, would have answered warmly to the chevalier's appeal.

It was Sforzi's adversary who was the first to break the silence.

"Monsieur," he said, in a voice indistinct with rage, "you have to thank heaven that our meeting took place before the Louvre. A loyal and respectful subject of the king cannot fight, so to speak, under the eyes of his sovereign. My vengeance will lose nothing by waiting. I shall find you on some more convenient spot. Your name, if you please?"

"Monsieur," replied the chevalier, pointing to the walls of the Louvre, "I should better understand your scruples and your delicacy if I did not perceive here, upon the wall of his majesty's dwelling, the mark left by the ball from your pistol. No matter; I consent to admit that you gave way to the prompting of unreflecting rage, and that your intention is to meet me again. I am called the Chevalier Raoul Sforzi; I lodge at the Stag's Head, in the Rue des Tournelles. And you, monsieur—who are you?"

The young man, decorated with the cordon of the Saint-Esprit, hesitated. Presently, however,

the wicked smile contracted his mouth, and, in an undefinable expression of voice, made up equally of sarcasm and menace, replied:

"I, monsieur, am called the Vicomte de Lavalette, or, if you prefer it, the Duc d'Epéron. I am well enough known at the Court to be found without difficulty."

The favorite of Henry III. looked at Sforzi from out the corner of his eye to enjoy the overwhelming effect he expected to see this revelation produce; but his expectation was enormously disappointed.

On learning that he was in the presence of one of the witnesses of Henry III.'s death, and in this circumstance a stroke of Providence, and gave utterance to a cry of savage joy.

"Ah! you are the Duc d'Epéron!" he cried. "It is your evil-star that has brought you on to my path. I have a double revenge to take upon you!—revenge for the personal insult you have put upon me, revenge for the impertinent behaviour of your companion, the Duc de Joyeuse, towards me. Now, Monsieur le Duc, dismount! If you are victorious, his majesty will duly applaud your valor; if you fall, he will shed tears to your memory. In either case, impunity is assured to you. Dismount, I say, and let us settle our difference."

At the trembling voice, flashing eyes, and knit brows of his adversary, the Duc d'Epéron turned lividly pale; his hand moved stealthily towards the holster of his pistol.

Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron, who, the year preceding, had the good fortune to be wounded at the siege of La Fère, at which so many gentlemen were destroyed, and where young D'Arques, since then become Duc de Joyeuse, lost seven teeth—Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron did not like figuring, as an actor, in a duel. Gifted with an active mind, clear-sighted and ambitious, differing greatly from Quéjus, Maugiron and Joyeuse, who, all headstrong and quarrelsome, drew their swords on the slightest pretext, and of a party of honor made a party of pleasure, he had always taken the greatest care to keep out of single combats!—so much so, that many courtiers doubted his courage.

The king alone, blinded by the boundless attachment he felt for his favorite, believed him to be infinitely brave and daring. It is true that, under the king's eyes, d'Epéron exhibited a rare audacity. With the remembrance of the tragic ends of his beloved Quéjus and Maugiron, Henry III. exerted himself to interpose his authority, and, with tears in his eyes, implored the fiery d'Epéron to control his transports.

Every duel which d'Epéron sacrificed to his love for the king was worth a new favor. And as the fortune of d'Epéron had been overwhelmingly bountiful, it may be judged how many affairs of honor he had given up.

"Well, monsieur," cried Sforzi, in a mocking tone, "have you yet succeeded in coming to an understanding with your courage?"

The Duc d'Epéron gently half drew his pistol from the holster, and addressing Raoul, either to throw him off his guard, or to drive him to a fresh aggression, warranting a prompt defensive movement:

"Monsieur," he said, "I cannot, whatever my wishes may be, compromise my dignity with the first person I happen to encounter. Laws exist for the chastisement of the insolencies of such as you. Perhaps I ought to have recourse to the severity of these laws."

At this arrogant reply, Raoul felt a cloud of blood swim before his eyes. However, not wishing to injure the goodness of his cause by any outburst of passion, he contrived to retain the mastery over himself.

"Monsieur," he said, "his majesty by deigning to admit young Caumont to intimacy, after it was pretended that the young man was not a gentleman, has given you a beautiful example of humility for your guidance. I do not see in what way Monsieur Caumont, become Duc d'Epéron, can tarnish his glory by accepting the challenge of the Chevalier Sforzi. Monsieur, my patience is exhausted; do not force me, by refusing me a just reparation, to use violence towards you, which I should assuredly regret afterwards, but of which you would at once be the victim."

"You threaten me, I think?" demanded d'Epéron.

Sforzi was about to answer, when a voice, at once piercing and charming, sounded near him, and checked the words upon his lips. This voice, proceeded from the interior of a coach which, distant from the spot on which this scene of violence was passing.

"Monsieur le Chevalier," the voice cried, "be on your guard. Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron is always to be distrusted when he plays with the pommel of his pistol, as he is now doing. Do not harass yourself to obtain an impossible reparation: reserve yourself for the future. Get away from this spot, chevalier, as fast as you can. I admire your valor and your just pride. Monsieur le Duc is already my enemy; it will be a true pleasure to me to join my interests with yours. You may see by my language that I very little dread the anger of Monsieur Caumont. Do you not think, dear Duke, that my support will be extremely useful to Monsieur Sforzi?"

"Madame," replied d'Epéron, with the assurance which nobody carried to such an extreme as himself, and which brought him a great deal of ill-will at Court, "your interference does but confirm the opinion I have always held, that you shamelessly take your lovers from all ranks of society. The appearance of this Sforzi pleases you, that is all. Good day, madame. It is I who tell you we shall meet again."

The Duc d'Epéron gave the rein to his horse