

"Benoist," said De Maurevert, "it is impossible to express the pleasure it gives me to contemplate you in this pitiful condition. This, by the bye, is not the first time that you and I have found ourselves in the same dungeon. You remember, I daresay, the interview I once had, in your presence, with the Chevalier Sforzi, imprisoned in the chateau of La Tremblais? I myself shall never forget your air of glory and importance on that occasion. How things are changed! The persecuted chevalier has become a powerful seigneur, and the executioner Benoist—food for the gibbet! Who, after this, will dare to doubt the justice of Providence!"

"Captain!" cried the bandit violently, changing countenance, "you are trying to deceive me, but you will not succeed. Since when has a man—however many crimes soever he may have committed—been condemned without being first tried?"

"Since the Royal Commissioners have been established, Benoist! What!—have you been such an utter idiot as to avow to Monseigneur Sforzi that you possessed a compromising secret, and to imagine that Monsieur the Commissioner Extraordinary of the King would call you before the tribunal? Your offences are so public and well-established that the Royal Commissioners have decided that it is altogether useless to interrogate you. You have been condemned, Benoist, with flattering unanimity. I would even add, if I were not fearful of hurting your sensibility, that the sentence pronounced against you has been received with enthusiasm by the public. Why should I deceive you? What have I to gain by doing so? Be calm, Benoist. After all twenty-four hours are soon passed—I had nearly forgotten to tell you that you are to remain for twenty-four hours bound living on the wheel. Meanwhile,"

"Captain," cried the wretched prisoner, in a voice almost choked with terror, "in the name of heaven—I conjure you with joined hands—on my knees—let me speak with Monseigneur Sforzi without delay!"

"Speak with Monseigneur Sforzi—your old victim? You are mad to think of such a thing!"

"Captain, for pity's sake do not refuse my prayer! However great, however abominable my offences towards Monseigneur Sforzi have been, if I can but get to see him, he will defer my execution—he will pardon me!"

"You are delirious, Benoist."

"No, no, captain! I possess a secret—a terrible secret—that will save me from the wheel. De Maurevert smiled in a singular manner, and opened the door of the dungeon.

"Ho, there, archer!" he cried; "conduct the prisoner to the torture chamber."

Struck dumb with terror, Benoist was led into a lofty and barred room on the ground floor of the prison, in which all the frightful paraphernalia used by the "sworn tormentor" met his eyes. As the well-known implement confronted him, he trembled violently in every limb.

De Maurevert seated himself, and the expression of gravity in his face and air was of ill augury for the terror-stricken prisoner. At four paces from the captain stood two persons, whose cold features announced the most complete insensibility: these were the recorder and the prison doctor. A little further removed stood a tall and muscular young man of jovial aspect, with frank and free manners, engaged in testing the firmness of some of his implements; it was the executioner. In the background were ranged six individuals, who watched with respectful attention the slightest movement of the public executioner of Clermont, of whom they were the assistants or valets.

"Maitre Cherubin," said De Maurevert, pointing to the Chief of the Apostles, "here is a miscreant and reprobate of the worst sort; to effect his conversion, it is for you to display all your talents—to give full play to your imagination."

"Benoist was a gossip of mine once," replied Cherubin, nodding in an amicable way to the Chief of the Apostles, "and on that account I owe him my best attention. I will treat him quite as a friend."

"What do you mean by that, Maitre Cherubin?" inquired De Maurevert, severely.

"I mean, seigneur, that I intend to employ on him all the most artistic means of torture of which I am master—choosing all my best tools, my sharpest pincers, my newest cords, my thickest wedges. Though I am at present but a modest provincial executioner, I am equal—I say it without boasting—to the most fortunate of my calling in Paris! I promise Benoist that he shall be submitted to a torture as learned, as perfectly performed, and as complete as he could have had at the Châtelet. What shall we commence with, monseigneur?"

The reader may with advantage be spared the horrible details of the torment to which Benoist was subjected under the accomplished hands of Maitre Cherubin. Little by little the long history of his crimes was drawn from him amid vain shrieks and cries for mercy, until the recorder was fairly tired of writing, and begged of De Maurevert to be allowed to rest for a moment.

"With pleasure, monsieur," replied the captain. "It is yet quite early, and there is no need to hurry; we have all the day before us. Maitre Cherubin, unfasten your friend Benoist, and place him on this bed; a little repose will render him as fresh for your further experiments as if nothing had happened. You have so far operated in a manner on which I cannot too warmly compliment you. I will inform the Royal Commissioners of your great ability, and I doubt not that, if you go on exhibiting equal

zeal in the performance of your functions, you will one day be promoted to the Châtelet."

"You overwhelm me with gratitude, Monsieur le Grand Prevôt. To get to the Châtelet is the dream of my life!"

"I will do my best to forward your views, Maitre Cherubin," said De Maurevert. "You had now better take advantage of Benoist's repose to go and get your breakfast. I will remain here until you return. You also, messieurs," he added, addressing the doctor and the recorder, "will no doubt be glad of the opportunity of going to breakfast. There is no need for you to return for the next two hours."

All the assistants of the horrible scene retired, and as soon as they were gone De Maurevert turned the key in the lock, and seated himself by the side of Benoist, who lay groaning and half unconscious, as Maitre Cherubin had laid him.

"Benoist," said the captain, raising his voice, "there is now no one here to listen to us. Let us converse. Take advantage of my benevolence without losing a moment's time. You have so far, take my word for it, scarcely tasted of the cup of suffering prepared for your lips! You know that I never break my word. Well, I swear on my name of De Maurevert—on my honor as a gentleman—that if you reveal to me the terrible secret which you pretend would save you from death if it were known to Monseigneur Sforzi—I swear, I say, that, in consideration of your frankness, you shall not die on the scaffold. I offer you a means of escaping the wheel and the rack!"

At the last words the livid and discolored features of the patient were overspread by a faint blush; and by a powerful effort he succeeded in articulating.

"Captain," he said, "I do possess a terrible secret—a secret deeply concerning Monseigneur Sforzi; but that secret is my strength!"

"Your strength, poor wretch! It seems to me you ought to know what it is to die upon the scaffold, Maitre Benoist! One last word: it does not comport either with my dignity or my birth to play the part of a pleader to you. Do you decide to remain silent or to speak? I demand a 'Yes' or 'No.'"

"It is true, captain," replied Benoist, appearing to have made up his mind, after hesitating for a moment; "everybody admits the loyalty with which you keep your oaths. You have sworn to me."

"A truce to idle words!" cried De Maurevert. Benoist paused for a moment to collect himself, and then, almost in a whisper, said in the captain's ear:

"I rely on your promise, captain, to save me from the scaffold. I feel my senses failing me—do not interrupt me. This is my secret:

"The Seigneur de la Tremblais, the father of the present marquis, was a man of fiercely violent habits; my master, haughty, passionate, and vindictive as he is, but feebly recalls his terrible sire. The old Marquis de la Tremblais was married to a charming and gentle young girl, whom he loved wildly—with the ferocious intensity of a tiger. He was madly jealous of her, and constantly reproached her with having been previously affianced to a cousin of hers, and accused her of preserving a guilty preference for her relative.

"I was at that time the most trusted of all the servants in the Chateau; and, assured of my obedience, the old marquis willingly entrusted me with important missions. I was scarcely five-and-twenty when he named me Chief of his Apostles."

"The present Marquis de la Tremblais, then, is not the founder of the beautiful Institution of the Twelve Apostles?" interrupted De Maurevert. "Go on, Benoist; you tell a story delightfully."

"One night, four-and-twenty years ago, monseigneur called me to him. I found him, walking furiously up and down his private closet. The room was dimly lighted by one lamp, but I could see his eyes dart lightnings in the half darkness. 'Benoist!' he said, 'I require you to do me a terrible service. I have a dreadful secret to confide to you! If you so much as think of abusing my confidence, I will have you thrown into an oubliette.* I have acquired the certainty that Madame de la Tremblais has odiously betrayed me; my second son owes his birth to a crime. I will not keep before my eyes this living witness of my dishonor; this child must die! Before two days are passed, the chateau must have one inhabitant the less—this child of shame, or the unfaithful servant.'"

"Well?" demanded De Maurevert, observing that Benoist paused.

"Well, captain," continued the Chief of the Apostles, "two days after this interview with the marquis, monseigneur made me a present of a hundred croissants—and the chateau rung with my poor innocent mistress's cries; her child had disappeared."

"You had killed it?"

"I stabbed it full in the chest; but the same day a company of free-lances were passing through Auvergne, and, in the depths of a wood, where I had thrown the child, found it still living, and saved its life."

"And this child, so miraculously preserved from death?"

"Was the Chevalier Sforzi."

"Sforzi the brother of the Marquis de la Tremblais! You are delicious, Benoist!" cried the captain, overwhelmed with astonishment.

"As truly as there is a sky above us, captain, Monseigneur Sforzi is the son of the late Marquis

* A well-like dungeon in feudal castles, into which the victim was thrown and—forgotten.

de la Tremblais, I have seen with my own eyes the scar of the wound left on his chest by my dagger; I have recognized in his features an indisputable likeness to my former master. But more than that, by his own lips—without suspecting that I was his murderer—Monseigneur Sforzi told me the story of his life from the moment of my attempt to kill him. Do you now understand the cause of my security, captain? A brother cannot kill a brother! My master's impunity secures mine!"

"How long have you known that Monseigneur Sforzi was the brother of your master?"

"Since the day I failed to hang Monsieur le Chevalier."

"And you have kept the secret of your discovery? Really, you have been most unfortunate with Raoul; you stab him in his infancy, try to hang him in his manhood, and here he is to-day as well as he can be!"

Taking up a pen which the recorder had left, De Maurevert proceeded to write, not too correctly, but in a clear and precise style, the confession just made by Benoist. It was a rare thing, at that period, for a man of low origin to be able to write; but Benoist knew how to sign his name, and, after many painful efforts, succeeded in attaching his signature to the parchment spread before him by De Maurevert.

"Captain," said Benoist, sinking back exhausted, "you have given me your promise."

"What promise, beloved son of Lucifer?"

"That you will save me from the scaffold."

"Oh! as to that you have nothing to fear," replied De Maurevert, accompanying his words with a strange and sinister smile; "but do not forget that if, in an hour's time, when your torture is continued, you allow one syllable of our secret to escape your lips, I shall consider myself completely disengaged from my promise."

"When my torture is continued!" shrieked Benoist.

"Why, you did not surely imagine that a trifling pressure applied to your legs would be considered as sufficient atonement for all your offences against justice? No, no, Maitre Benoist—you have been submitted to the 'ordinary question'; it now remains for you to be submitted to the 'extraordinary question!'"

Without further troubling himself with the supplications of the miserable wretch, De Maurevert called in the archers, confined the prisoner to their charge, and hurried away.

"By Minerva!" he cried, "this is a great discovery!—but the last person to be informed of it is my gentle Raoul! Rather than fight against his brother, he will resign the powers given him by the king; and then what would become of my credit? Besides, if he were to resign his powers on the very eve of the combat, he would be for ever dishonored. No, no; I shall certainly not tell him anything about Maitre Benoist's revelations. But then he has singular susceptibilities. If the marquis is conquered, to enable Raoul to take possession of his estates, it will become necessary to inform him as to his birth; and then he must discover that I have long known this secret! Would he forgive me? The question is beset with difficulties. The need of caution is imperative. One often repents of having said too much, rarely of having acted cautiously. There is no hurry; I can—I must wait!"

Two hours later the Chief of the Apostles died under the hands of his former friend, Maitre Cherubin, to whom the captain had given certain instructions as to the application of the "extraordinary question."

In the meantime, and in spite of the philosophical conclusion he had come to, De Maurevert's doubts and perplexities of mind grew upon him, and at last, acting upon a sudden resolution, he sought Diane, whom he found alone, the chevalier being absent at the moment with the army which was engaged in the investment of the Marquis de la Tremblais' castle.

"My beloved and honored demoiselle," said De Maurevert, as soon as he found himself in the presence of Diane, "I ask permission to come at once to the subject which brings me to you."

"Speak, captain," said Diane, whom this brusque exordium filled with alarm; "some danger threatens Monseigneur Sforzi?"

"Not yet, mademoiselle."

"Not yet!" repeated Diane, in trembling accents; "but some danger does threaten Monseigneur Sforzi, then?"

"Alas! yes, mademoiselle—a great danger; Raoul is on the eve of involuntarily committing a crime which will fill the rest of his existence with a terrible remorse."

"In heaven's name, explain yourself, captain!"

"It is not in my power to speak, mademoiselle, save on one condition."

"On what condition, captain?"

"That you will never reveal to Raoul what I am going to confide to you. Do not question me, dear Diane; you must give me a 'Yes' or 'No.'"

"But if I am not permitted to warn Monseigneur Sforzi of the danger that threatens him, of what use would be your confidence, captain?" demanded Mademoiselle d'Erlanges, more and more agitated and anxious.

"To forbid Raoul to throw himself into this danger. The devil!—I beg your pardon—I should have said, by Cupid—if you love Raoul, it will not be difficult for you to invent some pretext for keeping him by you."

"Speak, captain," cried Diane, after a brief hesitation; "I accept your condition. I swear never to reveal to Monseigneur Sforzi anything you may now confide to me."

De Maurevert hesitated before replying.

"Dear and honored Diane," he said, at length,

"I cannot hide from myself the fact that I am committing a grave indiscretion in confiding my secret to you, for the discretion of even the most accomplished woman hardly exceeds that of an echo. However, no matter; the danger is so pressing that there is no shrinking back. Dear and honored Diane, Monseigneur le Chevalier Sforzi is my own brother to the Marquis de la Tremblais."

De Maurevert's communication filled Diane with anxiety.

"Oh, you are right, captain," she said; "it is impossible that Monseigneur Sforzi can besiege the castle of the Marquis de la Tremblais in person. I shudder to think of these two brothers meeting face to face and hand to hand in the breach—it would be frightful—abominable! And what a terrible position is mine! Not to tell him, is knowingly to associate myself with his involuntary crime; while to tell that he must spare the marquis, is to break my sacred oath of avenging my mother!"

"But for the accident of his being exposed to the danger of becoming either a traitor or a fratricide, there would be no difficulty in the matter. In all other respects affairs are going on as well as possible. The question is, how is Raoul to be withdrawn from the position he occupies as commander-in-chief of the siege forces?"

"Alas! is not that an insurmountable difficulty, captain?"

"I think not, honored Diane. In your place I should send for him, and so work upon his feelings, by pretending that I was dying of fear for his safety—jealousy of his love of glory—doubts of his love for me, if he preferred his reputation to my sufferings—in short, wheedle him into remaining with me, instead of placing himself at the head of the troops. That done, I should get him to abandon to me the command of the royal forces, and the direction of the siege operations; I should take the chateau, hang the marquis, your mother would be avenged, you would marry the chevalier, who would inherit, and everybody would be amply satisfied."

Diane made no attempt to interrupt the captain; but it was easy to see, by the expression of her charmingly pure face, how much her delicacy was pained by his propositions.

"Monsieur," she replied, "I too sincerely love and esteem Monseigneur Sforzi, I too highly value my own self-respect, ever to think of playing such an ignoble part. Captain—I am your very humble servant."

At this abrupt dismissal, De Maurevert rose from his seat, bowed profoundly, and quitted Diane's presence without uttering a word.

"Death and carnage!" he said to himself, as he descended the stairs of the Marquis de Canillac's house; "the cold cruelty of this little Diane completes my studies of women! Decidedly the very best of them are not worthy of a moment's serious attention. *Tudieu!*—with her gentle air! Poor Raoul—poor Raoul!"

If De Maurevert could only have witnessed Diane's despair as soon as she was left alone, he would have passed a very different judgment upon the poor girl. Humbly kneeling before a crucifix attached to the wall, her eyes bathed in tears, and her voice broken by sobs, she prayed heaven to guide her.

A smile of strange significance illumined her features when she rose.

"Heaven be thanked," she murmured—"heaven be thanked!—Raoul has no longer anything to fear!"

Calling a page, she directed him to summon Lehardy to her presence.

In the course of the evening, she succeeded in obtaining a private audience of Monsieur de Harlai, to whom she confided the astounding intelligence conveyed to her by De Maurevert, leaving it to the wise discretion of the President of the Royal Commission to act upon it in such a manner as to serve best the public and private interests involved.

Without a moment's delay, he sought the chevalier, whom he found in his tent surrounded by the chief officers of the royal army, discussing the course to be taken in regard to the siege. At the moment of the president's joining the party, De Maurevert had explained a method of attack which had been hailed by all assembled as infallible.

"Captain!" cried Raoul, throwing himself upon his friend's neck and embracing him warmly, "your presence of mind has saved the royal cause from the shame of immediate defeat, and assured my vengeance! Death of my life!—it will at length be permitted me to wash out with his blood the outrages I have sustained at the marquis's hands!"

A cloud of sadness overspread the brow of Monsieur de Harlai as he listened to this outburst.

"Chevalier," he said, after a brief hesitation, "I must not leave you for one moment in uncertainty. I received from his majesty certain powers—one of which is to take from you the command of the army at any moment I may think necessary to do so. I now feel called upon to exercise this authority. Do not look upon this proceeding as implying the least doubt of your talents or of your probity. I swear to you, monsieur, that such is not the motive of my determination. And let me add that, with the exception of the command of the army, your powers will remain as heretofore, illimitable. You will suffer no sort of disgrace."

Monsieur de Harlai might have continued to speak without receiving any interruption from Raoul, who was completely dumfounded. It was some little time before the use of his faculties returned to him.

"Monsieur," he cried at length, with a trembling voice, "I know that it is my duty to sub-