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FEUDAL TIMES;

OR,

TWO SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE.

A Romance of Daring and Adventure.

(Translated especially for the FAVORITE from the French of Paul Duplessis.)

CHAPTER LV.

UNEXPECTED HAPPINESS.

As Raoul had stated they would be, the sittings of the Royal Commission were opened on the day but one following the evening of the above-related conversation, innumerable forms having first been gone through—not without some discussion between the President, Monsieur de Harial and Sforzi—with the view of rendering the exceptional action of the tribunal as effective as possible.

The public mind was extremely disturbed. The daring attitude taken by the Marquis de la Tremblais forbade hope of an easy victory over the incriminated noblesse. The appearance in the open streets of several gentlemen who had not previously ventured to show themselves in public, still further confirmed the supposition that the task of the Commissioners would be one of infinite difficulty.

Their labors were commenced, however, in open court, by the reception of a series of complaints of ill-usage by the Marquis de la Tremblais, preferred by the *cabaretier* Nicolas, Captain de Maurevert acting as his representative and spokesman. Certainly the complaints brought forward by the captain were very insignificant, compared with the odious crimes committed by other nobles; they proved, however, a profound contempt for the laws on the part of the marquis, and were amply sufficient to constitute a grave offence.

"Monsieur de Maurevert," said President Harial, when the captain had finished his long, and, it must be added, somewhat pompous address, "the court will retire to deliberate on your demand."

Ten minutes later the Commissioners returned into court, and their decision was made known by the mouth of the President. The Marquis de la Tremblais was commanded to deliver himself up a prisoner within twenty-four hours, on pain of being declared guilty of the crimes of rebellion and *lèse-majesté*, and as such without the pale of the law.

The reading of this proclamation produced an indescribable impression on the crowd. It was the signal that a terrible struggle had commenced between Justice and Might.

On the rising of the court, Raoul retired hastily to his own apartments, where he was almost immediately joined by De Maurevert, who, after carefully closing the door behind him, advanced joyously towards his friend, exclaiming:

"Rejoice, Raoul!—Diane is not dead, and she is still worthy of your love."

Sforzi uttered a cry of delirious joy, and threw himself upon De Maurevert's neck, weeping.

"Now," continued the captain, "ask me no more questions, but read this letter, which has just been handed to me by one of the servants of his house. It may not tell you all you desire to know, perhaps, but"



"BENOIST, IT IS IMPOSSIBLE TO EXPRESS THE PLEASURE IT GIVES ME TO CONTEMPLATE YOU IN THIS PITIFUL CONDITION."

Raoul snatched the letter from his hand and eagerly read:

"Captain, having the honor to know you personally, I address you on a matter which concerns your friend, the Chevalier Sforzi. The Demoiselle Diane d'Erlanges is now actually in my presence. If Monsieur le Chevalier desires to deliver this demoiselle from captivity, I am disposed to treat with him on the price of her ransom. My conditions are as follows:

"Monsieur le Chevalier Sforzi shall quit the city by the postern-gate at nightfall this day, and proceed straight before him into the open country until he shall be accosted by one who shall approach him, saying, 'Fidelity and gratitude.' This person will be instructed to discuss the price to be paid for the ransom of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges. If the chevalier and this person shall be unable to agree, Monsieur Sforzi shall make no attempt to detain her, but shall permit her to go free."

At the foot of the letter were two lines more elegantly written; they were in the handwriting of Diane.

"Monsieur Sforzi," wrote the young girl, "I thank heaven that my captivity has protected me from the odious love of the Marquis de la Tremblais, and preserved to me the right to think of you without remorse or shame."

"Well, dear companion," cried De Maurevert, when Raoul had finished reading the letter, "what do you propose to do?"

"Can you doubt what I shall do?" replied Raoul, radiantly.

"You will go to the rendezvous, of course; but what if this letter should hide a trap?"

Raoul did not trouble himself to reply—he was intoxicated with happiness.

Seven o'clock was striking by the cathedral clock, when, dressed in a simple costume, and armed only with his sword, Raoul passed out of the postern-gate. Night was closing in, and a quarter of an hour later he was in the open

country in the midst of complete darkness. The young moon at intervals shed through the openings of the heavy clouds which overspread the sky a pale and feeble light, but only sufficient to enable him to direct his course without aiding him in his researches.

Several times he paused and listened, imagining he heard, now close, now further off, the sound of a human footstep. He had at length entered on a winding pathway, when suddenly, from a bush, the bandit Croixmore appeared before him, uttering in a low tone the words "Fidelity and gratitude!"

"Let me know at once the sum you demand for the ransom of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges," said Raoul, impatiently, "and, if it is within the compass of my means, I will pay it down. As soon as you are in possession of this money you can betake yourself to some foreign country, where your person will be secure from any action that may be taken against you by the King's Commissioners. What is the sum you exact?"

"Four thousand crowns, monseigneur."

"Four thousand crowns be it."

The eyes of the bandit glittered with joy.

"And now tell me where is Diane d'Erlanges?" demanded Raoul.

"You give me your word of honor that you will not go from the bargain we have concluded?"

"A thousand times yes!" cried Sforzi.

"Take the trouble to follow me then, monseigneur; in a few minutes you shall be with Mademoiselle d'Erlanges."

At the end of a quarter of an hour Croixmore stopped before a miserable cottage, and said:

"Mademoiselle d'Erlanges is here!"

A few moments passed, and then two cries of joy blended in passionate accord—Raoul and Diane were folded in each other's arms. The remainder of the night was passed by the lovers in one of those half-whispered con-

versations of which lovers only know the secret and the charm. When the first beams of morning appeared, Raoul led the young girl from the wretched hovel, and set forth on the way to the house of Monsieur de Canillac.

As he crossed the threshold he spoke in a low tone to Croixmore, who had kept faithful and discreet watch without.

"Let me know to-day to what place you wish me to send your four thousand crowns," he said.

On arriving with Diane at the postern-gate of the city, though the hour was still so early, Sforzi found a large crowd assembled about a placard affixed with a dagger to one of the gate-posts. This placard consisted of a wide sheet of parchment, written in bold characters, and was the answer of the Marquis de la Tremblais—bearing his signature and seal—to the citation of the Royal Commissioners. By it the marquis outlawed throughout the length and breadth of his lands, domains, fiefs, and seigneuries the members of the Royal Commission, and commanded his vassals to sound the tocsin at their approach, and to pursue, hang, and otherwise put them to death.

Later in the day a long conversation took place between the chevalier and De Maurevert on the subject of the siege of the Marquis de la Tremblais' stronghold, in the course of which the captain observed:

"I may as well give a look in on the Chief of the Apostles; his prison is on my road, and this execrable ruffian can, better than any one, furnish me with exact and precious information as to the forces at the disposal of the Marquis de la Tremblais."

"I doubt greatly whether you will succeed in your attempt, captain—the wretch exhibits incredible impudence and assurance. To judge from his behavior, one would conclude that he is certain of impunity."

"Bah! dear Raoul; if Benoit does not answer, it is only because he is badly questioned. Give me *carte blanche*, and the devil exterminate me if, in less than an hour, I do not make him chatter like a magpie."

"Do what you think best for the interest of his majesty, De Maurevert."

"Then, sit down, Raoul, and write: 'I, the Chevalier Sforzi, Commissioner Extraordinary of the King, in the Province of Auvergne, command all clerks, sworn-tormentors, and gaolers-in-chief of the prison of Clermont to obey Captain de Maurevert, Grand Prévôt of the said province, in all that he may command as if the orders had been given by myself.' Now add your signature and seal. That will do. When shall I see you again, dear Raoul?"

A quarter of an hour after the occurrence of this conversation, the captain entered the dungeon in which the assassin Benoit was confined.

CHAPTER LVI. A SECRET.

Firmly secured to the wall with chains, the Chief of the Apostles exhibited neither surprise nor emotion at the sight of the captain; on the contrary, a sardonic smile passed over his thin pale lips.