

"Where is my horse, René? Quick! quick! Let it be saddled and bridled!"

At this order, profound astonishment, mixed with serious alarm, ran through the ranks of the little troop. Diane turned towards the servants, and addressed them:

"What, friends! did you imagine that I should abandon you in the hour of danger? Heaven, in pity for my loneliness and the persecutions to which my youth has been subjected, has shed upon my heart a ray of the courage which animated during his life my father, the noble Count d'Erlanges. I cannot like him shield you with my sword, I can at least show you contempt of death."

These words, pronounced with an enthusiasm tempered by a seductive modesty and irresistible grace, caused the whole troop of servants to thrill with admiration and courage.

"Yes, come, mademoiselle!" cried one of them, "in the midst of us you will have nothing to fear! Every one of our bottles will serve you for a shield. To save you, we will, one and all, pass through a circle of fire and steel!"

At this moment an apparition, of whom nobody had thought, came and cut short this outburst of enthusiasm. The Dame d'Erlanges appeared in the middle of the court of honor.

The châteline, dressed entirely in black, had an air more grave, more solemn, than usual; an expression of cold severity overshadowed her face. She advanced with a majestic step, and somewhat haughtily, towards Diane, and in a voice whose calmness was evidently under strong restraint, inquired:

"What is the meaning, mademoiselle, of all this noise and confusion may I ask? Who has given my servants the order to arm themselves? What is the end or object of this expedition? It appears to me that nobody but myself has the right to dispose of my servants. Explain yourself, mademoiselle."

For a moment rendered speechless, Diane quickly recovered her presence of mind.

"Madame," she answered, "your servants are armed to go to the assistance of Monsieur le Chevalier Sforzi and Lehardy, who are in danger of losing their lives. Pressed by time, I thought that I might act without waiting to consult you. Do not withhold your servants, madame, but let them go on their way. A moment lost may cause the destruction of poor Lehardy, of whom you are so fond—of the Chevalier Sforzi, who has so nobly undertaken our defence. The Marquis de la Tremblais is prowling in the neighborhood, at the head of a band of assassins. I repeat, madame, and supplicate you with joined hands to take my prayer into consideration—moments are precious—suffer your servants to go forth!"

The Dame d'Erlanges preserved her impassiveness during the whole of her daughter's appeal.

"Mademoiselle!" she replied severely, "I have been waiting to hear you justify your conduct; I have waited in vain. The warmth you have exhibited becomes neither your sex nor age. What do I see!—your horse being brought! Are you then pushing forgetfulness of propriety to the extent of downright folly—thinking of riding at the head of these men-at-arms?"

"Yes, mother," cried Diane, "but I bitterly regret that my conduct displeases you. You know that I always obey the first dictate of my heart; and my heart tells me it would be cowardly in me not to share the dangers of Monsieur le Chevalier Sforzi and Lehardy. For pity's sake, mother, in the name of your love of justice, in the name of your future repose, do not restrain me, but allow me to follow my first inspiration."

"Enough, mademoiselle," exclaimed the châteline, raising her voice, "I command you to be silent!"

Diane bowed her head in silence. The Dame d'Erlanges then addressed her servants:

"One of you," she said, "endeavor to overtake Monsieur le Chevalier Raoul de Sforzi and his companion Lehardy, and warn them of the snare that has been set for them; that will be sufficient."

One of the servants stepped from the ranks and offered to fulfil the mission. The drawbridge was lowered and the horseman ready to start, when suddenly five or six arquebuse shots were heard in the distance.

"Oh, heaven!" cried Diane, in despair, "it is too late!"

Then, by a movement quicker than thought, she sprang upon her horse, struck it with a whip she held in her hand, and cleared the drawbridge at a bound, crying in a voice of agony:

"Whoever loves me, follow me!"

Before the Dame d'Erlanges, overwhelmed and exasperated by Diane's disobedience, had time to recover from her astonishment, the whole troop of servants had dashed off on the the young girl's track and disappeared.

Mounted on a finer and more spirited horse than the men-at-arms, and her weight offering no impediment to his speed, she was soon separated from her followers by a considerable distance.

CHAPTER XII.

THE AMBUSCADE.

The intelligence brought to Diane by Charlot was thoroughly correct in all its particulars, the ambushade planned by the Marquis de la Tremblais was composed of eight armed men.

A glance sufficed to enable Sforzi to count his enemies; for—and the phenomenon is such rare that may be supposed—in the hour of danger the young man joined to extreme impetu-

ously extraordinary coolness of head. He calculated that, by the three shots Lehardy was able to deliver, the struggle, if not equalized, might at least be rendered possible. He therefore repeated to the servant the direction he had already given him, not to fire until he was quite sure of doing execution.

The marquis's armed men had never expected to meet with resistance; their astonishment, when they saw Sforzi, instead of taking to flight, dash upon them sword in hand, exhibited itself in a certain indecision, of which the young man took instant advantage.

While making his horse rear up so as to cover him, he placed his pistol against the forehead of one of the assassins and fired. The wretch fell dead. At the same moment there was another report, and a second enemy fell to the ground. Lehardy, faithfully following the directions of the chevalier, had used the butt of his arquebuse.

"Well done, Lehardy!" cried Sforzi; "victory 's with us! Out with your sword and at them, point and edge!"

This episode of carnage passed with prodigious rapidity; for a moment it reversed the parts played by the combatants. The assassins, cowed by a resistance so unlooked for, put themselves on the defensive.

"Forward, cowards!" cried the marquis, in a piercing tone. "What! six to two, and you hesitate!"

De la Tremblais, who, up to his point, had prudently held aloof, spurred his horse, and, pistol in hand, rode towards Raoul.

"Ah!" cried the young man, "I am an adversary worthy of my anger!" And imitating the example given him by De la Tremblais, he plunged his spurs into his horse's flanks and threw himself upon the marquis. This audacity cowed him perhaps, for, taken by surprise, his adversary fired at random, and the bullet passed harmlessly close to his head.

"What will you do now, wretch, that you have only your sword?" cried Sforzi, charging. Alas! he had not noticed the second pistol of his antagonist, which De la Tremblais fired point blank at him. He uttered a yell of rage, a cry like the roar of a lion baited in his lair. His sword, struck by the ball, had been broken in two.

"Malediction!" he cried, and, mad with rage and despair, spurred his horse with irresistible impetuosity against that of his adversary. The shock was terrible: horses and men rolled upon the ground.

While Raoul, partly stunned by the violence of his fall, but still sustained by the ardor of the fight, was recovering his senses, Lehardy worthily redeemed his promise of doing his best. Surrounded by the marquis's assassins, he struck right and left without pause or mercy. Had it not been for the excellent cuirass which protected his bosom, the valiant servant would long ago have fallen. But though his strongest efforts, according to all probabilities, could but result in prolonging his sufferings, and in rendering his death more glorious, it had at least the immediate result of creating a diversion in favor of Raoul.

The valorous young man, though at first stunned, as we have said, by the violence of his fall, speedily recovered his consciousness, and, seizing the sword and horse of the man he had killed, dashed to the assistance of Lehardy. A fresh mishap awaited him: he had hardly entered the mêlée before an arquebuse shot, fired at him almost point blank, fractured the skull of his horse, and he was once more thrown to the ground.

A shout of ferocious triumph broke from the lips of the assassins, who believed their terrible adversary to be mortally wounded.

"Heaven has mercy on me!" murmured Lehardy, whose arm, fatigued, not by the duration but by the vivacity of the combat, supported with difficulty the weight of his sword. "Heaven in mercy take my soul—I am lost!" But wishing to make even his death serviceable to the chevalier, he placed his horse over that of Sforzi, who recovered his feet, and handed him his sword, saying: "Seigneur, my strength is exhausted. Take my sword—keep up your courage—and adieu!"

At that moment a voice shouted in the distance:

"Courage! assistance is coming!"

The sound of a horse galloping furiously was then heard. At this intervention, so unlooked for, so providential, Sforzi and Lehardy trembled with surprise and joy.

"Blood and slaughter!" cried the young man with wild enthusiasm. "Heaven declares in our favor! Death to the assassins and traitors!"

Seizing the sword held out to him by Lehardy, and with eyes flashing with audacity, he sprang with the buoy of a tiger on two marquis's men. The assassins seeing the struggle, which they had imagined over, again renewed more ardently than ever, lost all confidence; the fall of one of them, whose horse, as it in the flank by Raoul, fell heavily, completed their panic, Sforzi having cloven the head of the overthrown ruffian.

Without thinking of continuing the fight, the wretches hastily turned their bridles and scattered in every direction across the country.

The astonishment of the chevalier and Lehardy, on finding themselves masters of the field of battle, is indescribable; and it was still further increased when they perceived Diane, who, with hair wildly floating on the right wind and seeming like a supernatural visitant, reined up her panting and foaming horse before them.

"Diane!" cried Raoul, beside himself with surprise and delight. "Oh! I must be dreaming—delusions! It is impossible!"

Diane was so completely overcome, either by the rapidity of her ride or by joy at finding the chevalier still living, that for a few seconds she was unable to speak.

"Chevalier," she murmured at length, pressing her hand upon her bosom to keep down the beating of her heart, "you have risked your life to defend my mother—was it not my duty to attempt to save you? And you also, my good Lehardy, I owed you this proof of interest and gratitude."

She might have spoken at greater length, and Raoul would not have thought of interrupting her. From the passionate expression reflected in the young man's face, the deep admiration visible in his tear-filled eyes, it was easy to be seen that his soul was under the influence of a delicious ecstasy far removed from earth, and bathing in the ineffable delights of an ideal world.

"Chevalier," continued Diane, a charming blush overspreading her face, for doubtless she understood the young man's eloquent silence—"chevalier, do you not fear that your enemies may return? Would it not be prudent for us to get away from this spot as quickly as possible? On my own account, I think!"

At this moment an exclamation of terror uttered by Lehardy, interrupted Diane in the midst of the sentence she was speaking.

"Mademoiselle! take care of yourself—be behind you!" he cried.

Before she had divined the nature of the danger threatening her, Sforzi had bounded towards her, and made a rampart of his body. At the same moment the report of a shot awoke the echoes of the night. The Marquis de la Tremblais, recovered from his insensibility, had remounted his horse, seized a light arquebuse hanging at the pommel of his saddle, and, blind with jealousy and rage, had fired at Diane.

"Coward and assassin!" cried Raoul after him, as he galloped off; "I shall know well where to find you again, and punish you!"

When the sound of the retreating horse had died away in the distance, Raoul, who had been standing erect and splendid, facing his enemy, slowly sank to the ground.

"Chevalier!" cried Diane, in tremulous tones; "are you fatigued only—or are you wounded?"

"It is no doubt my joy at having had the good fortune to be useful to you in any way, mademoiselle," he stammered; "for, in truth, I do not feel any pain from the ball which the marquis intended for you, but which happily entered my body!"

"Oh, heavens!" cried Diane, raising her eyes despairingly towards the sky, "will you suffer so noble a young man to die!" And then, in tones so low that they did not exceed a murmur, she added: "If Raoul were to perish, oh! what should I do on earth?"

The servants of the Dame d'Erlanges, whom Diane had outstripped, arrived at this moment on the scene of combat. At sight of the chevalier insensible, the three bodies of the marquis's men stretched on the earth, their admiration was equal to their surprise and sorrow.

Lehardy, complimented and saluted on all sides, deferred until later to talk of his prowess of the night, and employed himself and fellows in constructing a sort of litter, on which to carry the wounded chevalier to the château. Eight of the men dismounted and having placed the young man on four arquebuses covered with a cloak, they moved slowly back to the fortified house of the Dame d'Erlanges.

The mistress of the château was waiting, with severe looks and clouded brow, the return of Diane, and her sternness was not in the least softened by the sight of Raoul's bleeding form borne across the drawbridge.

"Mademoiselle," she said coldly to her daughter, "you have been prancing about enough for to-night, I think; please to go to your room."

"Madame," replied Diane, in a gentle and submissive voice, indicating with a sorrowful gesture of her head the litter on which Raoul was being carried, "the bullet which struck down Monsieur Sforzi was aimed at me! It is to his devotion—fatal as it has been to him—that I have the happiness of seeing you again! Would it not show odious ingratitude to abandon him so? Suffer me at least to see that all the care he needs in his condition has been taken of him."

"Mademoiselle," replied the châteline, in an icy tone, "I could never have believed that a daughter would dare to dispute her mother's orders! Your behavior teaches me that I have too highly esteemed the present generation! It appears that respect for parents has become a barren which youth casts off with pleasure. You cause me great regret, mademoiselle, but determine me to exercise over you my fullest authority. I merely requested you a moment ago; I now order you to retire to your apartments!"

This harsh language of the Dame d'Erlanges, brought tears into Diane's eyes; but she did not yet give up the struggle.

"Madame, my mother," he said, in a humble and supplicating voice, "permit me to insist! Will it not be at least proper for me to learn, before retiring, whether Monsieur Sforzi is living or dead?"

"Mademoiselle!" cried her mother, "your scandalous conduct dishonors you and covers me with confusion! Do you not understand that to exhibit such interest in the chevalier Sforzi is sufficient to give rise to a suspicion as to the purity of your sentiments? Silence, I tell you—and follow me!"

At this clear accusation Diane raised her head proudly, and, in an unflinching voice, replied: "Alas, my heart does not fear the eye of

heaven; why should I care, then, for the opinion of the world? I own I feel for Monsieur le Chevalier all the tenderness of a sister!"

"Be silent, mademoiselle!—such impudence!"

"Thanks, thanks, Diane," cried a voice, which made the young girl tremble with joy and the châteline turn pale with fury. "Thanks!—your avowal has saved me—for now—now—I wish to live—to live, that I may for ever love you!"

The voice was Raoul's, who, raising himself, had overheard all that had passed between Diane and the Dame d'Erlanges.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE CATASTROPHE.

For over a week Raoul's condition was one of serious danger. It was not until the ninth day that he returned to consciousness: until that time he remained continuously delirious. The inquisitive and odious interdiction pronounced by the Marquis de la Tremblais had prevented any doctor reaching the chevalier, who owed his life entirely to the strength of his constitution and the constant care of Lehardy.

As to Diane, forbidden by her mother to watch over the wounded chevalier, she could but pray to heaven for his restoration.

The first words spoken by Raoul on recovering his reason were of the young girl. Lehardy assured him that she compassionated his sufferings with all her heart, and this assurance did him infinite good.

On the morning of the tenth day, Sforzi was awakened by the entrance of Lehardy into his room. The old servant appeared to be greatly agitated.

"I will not attempt to conceal from you, monsieur," he said, "how much I wish you were at this moment well and able to handle your sword."

"What is going on, Lehardy? Is the château threatened with some new danger?"

"I fear so, Monsieur le Chevalier."

"What is the nature of the danger—tell me, Lehardy?"

"I know nothing positively yet. All I can tell you is, that the watch has just caught sight of a numerous troop advancing towards the château."

"You alarm me, Lehardy! Hasten to the ramparts, and bring me back as quickly as you can intelligence of what is going on. No; rather help me to rise—I will go myself!"

"You cannot think of such a thing!" cried Lehardy. "A sword thrust through your body would harm you less! I have acted wrong to talk to you as I have done. Come, come, Monsieur le Chevalier, be prudent, and have a little patience. Wait a few moments for me, and I will return to you."

Lehardy hurried away, leaving Raoul greatly agitated. When the old servant came back to the chevalier's room, a few minutes later, the expression of fear which had been observable in his face had given place to a look of a deep astonishment.

"Well?" demanded Sforzi, anxiously.

"Well, monsieur," replied Lehardy, "I hardly know whether to believe my eyes! The troop seen is composed of nearly three hundred armed peasants, with Captain de Mauververt at their head."

"Captain de Mauververt?" cried Raoul.

"In person. He is mounted on a magnificent black horse, richly caparisoned—and, in good faith, he looks admirable. Do you hear the sound of a horn?—the captain is being saluted on entering the courtyard of the château."

Lehardy had reported truly. The partisan of Messieurs de Guise and the familiar of the King—Captain de Mauververt, in a word—had entered the Château de Tauve, in company with the bandit Croixmore. In proportion to the superb air of de Mauververt was the pitiful appearance of the Seigneur de Tournell—swordless, bare-headed, his breast-plate was fractured in several places, his eyes downcast with shame, and altogether he seemed oppressed by the weight of a boundless humiliation.

"Announce to the Lady Châteline the Commander-in-Chief of the holy and royal League of Equity!" said de Mauververt to one of the servants.

Shortly afterwards Raoul's companion-in-arms entered the reception hall, where the Dame d'Erlanges was already awaiting him. Advancing with majestic step up to the great chair in which the châteline was seated—who rose at his approach—de Mauververt bowed to her with solemn gravity.

"Madame," he said, "since I had the honor of last seeing you, many events of which I must inform you, since you are interested in them to some extent, have occurred. Will you favor me with your attention?"

The Dame d'Erlanges slightly inclined her head, in sign of acquiescence, and de Mauververt continued:

"You will remember, madame, that when I quitted your fortified house, some fortnight ago, it was for the purpose of going to solicit, in your favor, the support of the Protestants of Tournell. It is needless for you to interrupt me: I know perfectly what you are ready to reply—that you dissuaded me from attempting this proceeding. I admit that; but there are imperious circumstances under which it becomes necessary to oblige people in spite of themselves. In short, then, I want to find the Protestants of Tournell. The manner in which their chief, here present, the Seigneur Croixmore, whom I have the honor to present to you, received my petition was not very encouraging; he declared that I