

night is not far advanced, and it is not more than an hour's ride further on to the town of Aveze.

"Confound your raven-erosk about riding to Aveze! don't you see that a troop of horsemen are moving down upon us—the apostles of the Marquis de la Tremblais—your mistress's enemy as well as ours? Does she wish to enjoy the sight of our being cut to pieces before her closed gates?"

Raoul who, up to this point had remained silent, but whose features had exhibited a momentarily increasing excitement, in sight of the approaching band of murderers, now spoke.

"Pardieu! Is it for two gentlemen to wait till it pleases a troop of salaried cut-throats like these to attack them? Why shouldn't we fall upon the apostles? Forward, captain!"

"Tudieu!" cried Roland. "There speaks my tiger of Saint-Pardoux again! Dear friend, your enthusiasm is contagious. You are right—to us belongs the honor of the initiative. Forward!"

The two friends plunged their spurs into their horses' flanks, and had reached to within five hundred paces of their antagonists, when they were arrested in the midst of their impetuous charge by the soft and penetrating accents of a woman's voice.

Turning their heads, both Raoul and Roland were surprised by an apparition as unexpected as it was charming. On the further side of the moat they beheld the form of a young girl dressed in white, whose beauty, as far as they could distinguish it in the gathering twilight, appeared to be of ideal perfection.

"Gentlemen," she cried, "if it is really true that you are being pursued, you have a right to the shelter of my mother's house; if, on the contrary, you design to betray our hospitality, heaven will punish you."

While she was yet speaking the drawbridge was lowered, and the captain lost not an instant in taking advantage of the protection thus offered to him. After casting behind him a last look of defiance at the pursuing troop of assassins, Raoul followed his friend's example.

From the moment of the appearance of Diane d'Erlanges the expression of fury which had animated Raoul's features vanished as if by enchantment.

"What a lovely girl, captain!" he cried, in a whisper to Roland, as they rode side by side under the dark and narrow vault of the gate on the inner side of the drawbridge.

"The house looks opulent," replied the captain, "and the devil's in it if, with a little management, we can't make some honest profit here. By all the joys of Paradise," he murmured to himself a few minutes later, when he and Raoul were conducted into the presence of the lady of the house, "the aspect of the interior more than confirms my anticipations! Excellent Dame d'Erlanges, I feel thoroughly disposed to devote myself to your cause."

"Gentlemen," she said gravely, and rising from her seat, "welcome to my poor house. My servants tell me that you are pursued by the Marquis de la Tremblais's people; I hope that, thanks to heaven, you are now out of danger."

"Madame," replied Raoul, bowing respectfully, "you have saved me from almost inevitable death. Permit me to lay at your feet my inviolable gratitude and the offer of my sword."

On hearing these words, pronounced not in a tone of gallantry, but with the expression of perfect sincerity, Captain Roland bit his moustache furiously, and was about to interrupt his friend, with the view of putting the tender of their services on a footing promising greater profit, but Raoul continued:

"This table ready set, and the hour of the day, leads me to believe that you were about sitting down to supper. It would distress both me and my friend to be the cause of any disturbance; we should prefer, if you will permit us, to join your meal."

The Dame d'Erlanges made a sign of acquiescence, and motioned the captain and Raoul to seats placed right and left of her own at the table.

In a very short space of time the captain had made up for all the shortcomings of the meal furnished by Master Nicolas, and while eating lost no opportunity of endeavoring to rectify what he considered Raoul's preposterous inconsistency in offering his sword without promise of fee or reward, to the mistress of an evidently rich house. But his intentions were entirely baffled and set at naught by the earnestness of the chevalier.

"Madame," cried Raoul, "I feel certain that at your call the whole nobility of the province would rise in arms and hasten to your aid." For a moment he paused, and then with a slightly faltering voice, continued, "there is another and yet simpler means of overcoming these odious persecutions of the Marquis de la Tremblais. He would not refuse to measure swords with a gentleman. Why do you not, then, place in the hands of a champion of your own choosing, the honor of defending you? Numbers of your friends would compete for the honor. Myself, in spite of the small claim I have to such a favor, would venture to place myself upon the list. And indeed, madame, something tells me that I should be the victor in the struggle."

The rage of Captain Roland, repressed as it was, was terrible to see; but it made no impression on the chevalier. Riser at length finished, the Dame d'Erlanges rose, and saluting Raoul with grave courtesy, said:

"It is growing late, and doubtless you have need of rest. Do you wish to be shown to your chamber?"

Fancying that he detected in this suggestion a desire on the part of the lady to be relieved

of the presence of her guests, he bowed respectfully, and at once followed a valet who attended upon him, bearing in his hand a torch of yellow wax.

Captain Roland, who, towards the end of supper, had stretched himself on one of the high-backed forms placed against the walls of the room, had by this time fallen heavily asleep.

Preceded by the servant carrying the torch, Raoul was passing through a long and obscure passage, when he heard behind him a light rustling sound. Turning round, he saw close to him the Demoiselle d'Erlanges.

"Silence, chevalier!" she said in a whisper. "At daybreak, to-morrow, go down into the garden: I wish to speak with you."

The blush that was upon the young girl's face, the trembling of her voice, and the embarrassment of her manner, told how completely she understood the gravity of the step she was taking. Raoul was about to answer, but Diane had already disappeared in the darkness of the corridor.

CHAPTER IV.

A DOUBLE MISSION.

Sleep declined to visit the eyes of the Chevalier de Storz that night. His meeting with Captain de Maurevert, the abominable persecutions of the Marquis de la Tremblais, the danger to which the ladies of Erlanges were exposed, and, more than all, the resplendent beauty of Diane, occupied and agitated his mind, and rendered sleep impossible.

At the first gleam of dawn, he sprang from his bed and hurried to the window of his room, with the view of ascertaining the situation of the garden. To his great joy he discovered that the place of the mysterious rendezvous given him by the charming Diane, was immediately under his eyes, which rested upon a white and vaporous form that caused him a violent beating of the heart.

Five minutes later he stood, bowing respectfully before Diane, who, with downcast eyes and heaving bosom, was scarcely able to return his salutation.

"Chevalier," she said timidly, after a few moments' silence, "I do not understand my own boldness—the feeling which has prompted me now to address you. Do not interrupt me with protestations of devotion; my presence here will tell you how much I rely on your goodness—the faith I have in your courage."

Raoul again bowed, and Diane, gradually conquering her emotion, continued in a firmer tone:

"For the unusual step I have now taken," she said, "my excuse must be the horror with which my position inspires me. Neither judge nor condemn me, I pray of you, before knowing to what extremities I find myself reduced. From what passed last night, I know that you are acquainted with some of the facts of the shameful persecution to which I and my dear mother are subjected by the Marquis de la Tremblais; how terrible those persecutions have been, I will not stop to tell you, but will come to the present time. So late as yesterday, the marquis, by one of his spies, sent me a letter, in which he declares that if within forty-eight hours I do not repair to his castle, he will burn down our house here and put our servants to the sword."

"Horrible insolence!" cried Raoul. "Alas, it is more than insolence—it is a threat," replied Diane. "In your unexpected arrival, and in your generous offer of your sword, I see the hand of Providence—and I have not hesitated to address myself to you. Oh, chevalier!—by what means can you save my mother and me from the fate that threatens us?"

"By a very simple means, mademoiselle. I will challenge the marquis to single combat and kill him."

A sad smile passed over the lips of Diane. "The Marquis de la Tremblais will answer your challenge with treason," she replied. "He does not fight—he murders! He has the ferocity of the wild beast, but none of its courage! Forgive me; I now see how wrong I have been in thus addressing myself to you, when nothing but your destruction could result. Forget this interview—hasten from this place—and leave to their unhappy fate the unfortunates whom you cannot save!"

"Abandon you?" cried Raoul, with a fiery outburst of indignation. "Is it possible that you, a noble demoiselle, can counsel me to such an act of cowardice? Do you count as nothing the goodness of your cause—the support of heaven? No—no! Terror at the thought of falling into the hands of the Marquis de la Tremblais breaks down your pride and robs you of the power to reflect."

"I have no dread of falling into the hands of the marquis!" she cried, while a shudder passed through her young frame. "Death is my security from that. Chevalier,"—as if moved by an irresistible impulse—"you have a noble heart! Will you be my brother?"

Before Raoul, to whose lips an impassioned answer sprang from the depths of his heart, could pronounce a single word, a rough and mocking voice sounded in his ears:

"Parbleu! I know all about such fraternal arrangements."

Raoul's hand flew to the hilt of his sword; Captain de Maurevert stepped from behind a clump of verdure. The apparition of the giant caused Raoul a feeling of surprise and anger.

"Captain!" he said, haughtily; "it appears to me that neither I nor Mademoiselle d'Erlanges invited you to share in this conversation. To listen to confidences not intended for your hearing is not the conduct of a gentleman. Captain, I'll not detain you—"

"That's like youth!" muttered De Maurevert, "headstrong, quarrelsome, inconsiderate! Chevalier Storz, I am sorry I cannot obey your extremely courteous injunction. With me, business takes precedence of everything. You may have done wrong to accept me for a companion of fortune, but from the moment you bound yourself to me, you bound yourself to submit to the consequences of our association. Now, I tell you clearly, I protest against your beautiful project of killing the Marquis de la Tremblais; and you, mademoiselle, if you feel for him a hundredth part of the interest he feels for you, will join with me in preventing him from going a step nearer to the abyss he is thinking of throwing himself into with shut eyes. Trust the experience of an old soldier; if Raoul persists in this mad design of his, he has not another twenty-four hours to live. If I am not very much mistaken, mademoiselle, you would be very sorry to see him hanged on a tree by the roadside, like a mere hind?"

The color fled from Diane's cheeks, and she pressed her hand against her heart, to stay its wild throbbing. These marks of strong emotion did not escape the notice of the sagacious captain.

"You see plainly, I am sure, mademoiselle," he continued, "the certainty of his throwing his life away for nothing; so forbid his committing so mad a folly. Don't interrupt me, Storz, I beg; do you not observe that what I am saying is interesting to mademoiselle?"

"Yes, yes, captain—pray go on," cried Diane. Raoul knitted his brows, and with difficulty restrained his impatience, while De Maurevert, in solemn tones, addressed him as follows:

"Chevalier Storz, in my person you see the chargé d'affaires of his Majesty, King Henry the Third of France. His Majesty has deigned to invest me with full powers to engage in his service loyal servants throughout the entire province of Auvergne. Are you free to enter into his Majesty's service—ready to swear obedience and fidelity to Henry of Valois? In that case, in the name of the king, my master, I here deliver to you, in good and proper form, a brevet, as comest—honorary—of a troop of light horse."

With unbending gravity of tone and manner, he drew from his purpouch, and handed, to the astonishment of Raoul, a parchment bearing the king's seal and signature. A moment's examination satisfied the chevalier that the document, so unexpectedly produced, was of unquestionable authenticity.

"This honorary brevet," continued De Maurevert, "gives you neither salary nor regular command. It only authorizes you, in case of an armed rising in Auvergne, to form a troop at your own expense, and to fight against Protestants or rebels, as the case may be. Once the Huguenots beaten, or the revolt put down, you will be at liberty to disband your company, and also to inform his Majesty of whatever services you may have rendered him. These privileges leave something to be desired, I admit; but what is of more immediate importance is this: the nomination, by attaching you to the king, gives to your person a character and inviolability which, up to this moment, was completely wanting to it. For example, it is all but certain that, in spite of his power and daring, the Marquis de la Tremblais would never dare to hang an officer of the king; though, in a moment of ill-temper, he might have him beheaded."

Raoul reflected for a moment, then, in a voice as grave as that in which De Maurevert had addressed him, said:

"I accept, captain. Is it to you that my oath of fidelity to the king is to be given?"

"Certainly! but for that there is no need of hurry. All that is essential for the moment is for you to fill with your name the space left blank in the parchment. By my faith, Raoul," he added with a tone of sudden regret, "I'm sorry with all my heart that that can't be put off till to-morrow."

"Why?" inquired Raoul, with a puzzled air. "To-morrow will be Tuesday. Well, to-morrow I should have been free, and it would have been preferable—to attach you to the house of Messieurs de Guise—It's easily explained," he continued, in answer to Raoul's look of bewilderment. "On Mondays I occupy myself with his Majesty's business; on Tuesdays I devote myself to that of Messieurs de Guise; and so, on alternate days. I have already had the honor to inform you, chevalier, how completely I am the slave of my word—for a thousand quadruples of gold I would not have enrolled you among the Guise on a Monday! I have only one thing more to say, chevalier: your looks, your courage, and your manners tell me plainly enough that you are a gentleman. Nevertheless, in conformity with my instructions, I must ask you for proofs of your nobility."

Raoul started, blushed, and hesitated. Before he had time to reply, the sound of a hunting-horn vibrated in the morning air.

"Good heavens!" cried Diane, "what new danger threatens us? It is the alarm signal of our servants. Let us hasten to the ramparts!"

The terrified young girl hurried from the garden, followed silently by the captain and Raoul.

"Heaven protect us, mademoiselle!" cried the first of the servants, whom Diane interrogated. "The Marquis de la Tremblais, at the head of a troop of horsemen, is advancing towards the chateau."

CHAPTER V. THE INSULT.

A few moments brought Raoul and De Maurevert to the ramparts, and enabled them to observe completely the movements of the advancing cavalcade.

"Tudieu!" cried the captain; "twenty outrances, ten arquebuses—a magnificent following! I almost repent me of that box on the ear I gave to Master Benoit. Bah! the marquis is too much of a gentleman to bear malice against me, because I found it necessary to knock down one of his varlets. A frank explanation will make us the best friends in the world."

While the captain was saying this to himself, the marquis, making a sign to his escort to halt, spurred forward alone to the edge of the moat.

"Halloa, varlets!" he cried, "is it in this fashion you receive your lord and master? Lower the drawbridge quickly!"

The Marquis de la Tremblais was about six or seven-and-twenty years of age; his features, moulded with extreme delicacy and of irreproachable regularity, would have been beautiful but for the haughty and sneering expression they conveyed. In height he was about five feet eight, and already his form was bent, either by excess, or by fatigue, and indicated that he possessed but little bodily strength.

He wore no defensive armour of any kind, and carried only the ordinary sword and dagger at his side. At his saddle-bow, however, were a pair of long holster pistols, richly damascened and of exquisite workmanship.

"S'death, varlets!—did you hear me?" he cried, with fierce impatience, seeing no sign of the drawbridge being lowered.

"Monsieur," replied the oldest of the Dame d'Erlanges' servants, "the Chateau de Tauve is not large enough to hold your numerous escort."

"Suspicious!" said the marquis; "but I am not surprised, seeing that it is the ordinary custom of my vassal, the Dame d'Erlanges, to causticate and defy me! Well, as I wish to leave her without excuse for her bad faith and disobedience, I will enter alone."

The marquis turned towards his attendants, and with an imperious gesture, motioned them to retire.

"Take care that your confidence does not prove fatal to you, monsieur," cried one of the arquebusers, moving forward from the ranks. "The Huguenots are fond of employing treachery."

In this man Raoul recognized Master Benoit, the chief of the apostles.

"Attack my person!" cried the marquis, with a smile of sovereign contempt; "they dare not."

As a refusal to allow the seigneur of La Tremblais to enter the chateau would have furnished him a kind of motive for commencing hostilities, the drawbridge was let down.

"Thousand thunders!" cried De Maurevert, in a low tone; "this man, my dear Raoul, is not so strong as I thought him. To throw himself like this into the wolf's mouth! Do not you think it would be easy for us to make something by his blunder? It is certain that he is rich enough to pay a handsome ransom."

"We may take him prisoner, you mean?—and by so doing outrage his confidence, and violate all the laws of hospitality?"

"I expected nothing less from you," replied the captain. "Why do you not take orders?—you were made for an affective preacher! Kindly inform me in what respect we should violate the laws of hospitality? This house is not ours—our word is not given to the marquis! Moreover, I hold that if he bears me ill-will for the tap on the skull I gave to his chief of staff, I should be a fool not to make use of this advantage which chance has so opportunely thrown in my way. But let us go down and see what passes below, so that we may at least be ready to act according to circumstances."

When the two companions of fortune reached the reception-room, the Dame d'Erlanges, pale, but with a firm and assured countenance, was standing before the marquis, who, seated in an arm-chair, was speaking to her in a harsh tone of voice, and with a haughty bearing.

"Madame," he cried, "I remind you for the last time that your fortified house is within my jurisdiction; that it is held directly under my sign; and that you owe me submission and respect. I am determined to punish severely your first disobedience. Instantly direct your servants to admit and provide for the people of my escort, whom your insulting suspicion has compelled me to leave without the walls of the chateau."

"Monsieur le Marquis," replied the Dame d'Erlanges, calmly, "in the name of truth and justice I repel your pretensions. I am not your vassal, and I owe obedience only to my lord and master, Henry III., King of France. Your designs are obvious, your intentions known—you are seeking a pretext to despoil me of my fortune and possessions. Marquis de la Tremblais, your conduct is unworthy of a gentleman, and brings an eternal stain upon your escutcheon."

"Madame," cried the marquis, white with rage, "this last act of rebellion and unpardonable insolence shall quickly receive due chastisement."

The Dame d'Erlanges drew herself up to her full height, and with a proud gesture pointed to the door.

"Monsieur," she said, "I will not detain you any longer."

A sinister smile came upon the thin lips of the Marquis de la Tremblais.

"Before the day has closed, madame," he replied, "I shall return. There is but one thing I regret—the death of the Comte d'Erlanges."