

"My part is taken," answered Raoul, gravely. "I shall carry my complaint to the foot of the throne; I shall demand justice and protection of the king."

"Better and better!" cried the captain, bursting into a loud laugh. "What a strange young man you are, Sforzi! You actually believe in the king's power, then? You really imagine that Henry of Valois is of some account in his kingdom? That his power already fettered and confined in Paris, extends to the province of Auvergne? You are a ludicrously bad politician. Henry III. exists only by consent of the nobles, whom he caresses and detests at the same time; the moment Messieurs de Guise withdraw their support from him, he will have nothing to do but to hide himself in a cloister. Address yourself to Henry?—the idea is a farce!"

"What an entertainingly different idea of royalty," replied Raoul with the utmost seriousness of tone; "you laugh at it—I venerate it as a divine institution. From the day when the King shall deign to show his will, nobody—I do not except the greatest in the kingdom—will dare to resist him. For power he wants but will. Captain, in my heart I hate and despise feudalism. I have witnessed so many of its excesses, its abuses, its indignities committed by the nobles of the Italian states; I have seen the tyranny of the great press with such cruelty on the poor people, that I put my entire hope of remedy in royalty. Royalty, which levels positions, overthrows the superb, and defends the weak, is liberty! For a long time I have been tormented with an ardent desire to combat the tyranny of the provincial nobles. Who knows whether my steps may not have been directed to the Château de Tauve, to furnish me an occasion to accomplish my project? Perhaps, but for the infamy of the Marquis de la Tremblais, and the dangers that threaten these ladies, I might not have sought his Majesty. My resolution is now unshakable—nothing can turn me from its execution. I will go to the king."

Raoul expressed himself with so much animation, his visage so shot with enthusiasm, that Diane, whose eyes had been bent upon his face all the time he was speaking, was electrified, and cried from her heart:

"May heaven bless your efforts and your courage!"

"He will need something more than prayers to enable him to reach Paris!" replied De Maurevert. "Before he has ridden ten leagues, the apostles of Monsieur le Marquis will swoop down upon him, like a flight of hungry ravens on a sick sheep. Sforzi is brave—his har, at least, that one good quality—and he will defend himself valiantly. He will kill one, two—half a dozen if you like; but Messieurs de la Tremblais are twelve in number, and they will end by killing him. Trust in my old experience, chevalier. Remain quietly here—under no pretext set foot outside the château. While you keep in safety here, I will work. Since the ambush scheme displeases you, I will have recourse to another means. Will you oblige me, madame, by ordering my horse to be brought out? I wish to start at once."

"Alone, captain?" cried Raoul. "I will not permit it."

"Hundred thousand devils! Chevalier, I have respected your scruples—let too much to expect that, in return, you will leave me my liberty of action?"

"But if you are attacked?"

"Bah! I shall not be attacked! I am a person of some importance. It is known that my cousin, De Maurevert—as great a thief as ever walked the earth—estime vous—is on good terms with Messieurs de Guise and the princess; his credit is reflected on me."

"Where are you going, captain?"

"To the Château de Tournoll, five leagues from here; and now I have answered your question, you are doubtless as wise as you were before."

"You are going to the Château de Tournoll?" cried the Dame d'Erlanges, in a tone of astonishment, and with an expression of terror on her face.

"Is it possible, captain, you are going to the Château de Tournoll?" asked Diane, scarcely less surprised and terrified than her mother.

"Certainly I am," replied De Maurevert. "The Château de Tournoll is inhabited by a band of co-religionists of yours—excellent Huguenots, one and all."

"You call such men co-religionists?" cried the Dame d'Erlanges, indignantly.

"Great merit, like theirs, is always at the mercy of slander," replied the captain. "I know people say that these brave gentlemen of Tournoll are of no religion whatever, and only use the title of Huguenots to screen their real calling."

"Which is that of robbers and murderers?" cried the Dame d'Erlanges.

"Flat calumny!" replied the captain. "but what is certain truth is, that but for the neighborhood of the garrison of Tournoll, Monsieur le Marquis de la Tremblais would long since have purchased himself of your pleasure, Château de Tauve. Oblige me by answering one question before I start on my visit to Messieurs de Tournoll. What sum may I offer in your name to these gentlemen for their immediate aid against the marquis? I imagine that four or five thousand crowns will satisfy them. The sum you will say, is a large one; no doubt it is. But the service is a large one—to strike the most powerful nobleman in the province!"

"Captain," cried the Dame d'Erlanges, firmly, "rather than employ such allies, I would prefer to see my château reduced to ashes, my locks carried off, my girls—"

monieur, to treat in my name with this band of lawless and crime-stained men."

"As you please, madame," replied the captain; "only I am sorry to find you so little understand your own interest. However, since I have to get my friend the blazer out of danger, I will serve you in spite of yourself. Come and help to buckle on my cuirass, Raoul. Ladies, before taking my departure, I have the honor to present to you my respects."

Desirous to obtain an explanation of the enigmatical conversation to which he had been a listener, Raoul took De Maurevert's arm, and passed with him out of the reception-room.

"Who are these Huguenots of Tournoll with the Dame d'Erlanges appears to hold in such small esteem?" he asked.

"To tell you the plain truth," answered the captain, "they are as infernal a set of scoundrels as you could hope to find within so short a riding distance. About four years ago they formed a free company in the service of the king; but, ill paid, ragged, and under the ban of public opinion, they had nothing but a pleasant time of it. One day, driven to it by misery and the desperation they felt at the way they had been treated, they resolved to start in business on their own account. Their career was a shrewd, ambitious, and bold fellow. To him they confided their project, and offered to elect him their captain. He accepted. No very long time after this," continued De Maurevert, "they treacherously seized the strongly fortified Château de Tournoll and massacred the garrison; then, having neither pity nor mercy to expect from the Catholics, they joined the opposite party. The Huguenots had nothing to be proud of in forming such an alliance, but as it promised to be of great service to them, they did not feel justified in refusing it. Since then Messieurs de Tournoll—as they have been called in derision—have lived joyously and prospered abundantly. They seize and ransom travellers, rob farm-houses, surprise armed châteaux, sack heavily the surrounding villages—in short, they are very truly called the terror of the country."

"And has nobody ever thought of destroying this nest of out-throats?" cried Raoul.

"A hundred times, only Monsieur le Marquis de Caullias, the governor of the province for the king, has not yet been able to make up his mind to undertake the task. Messieurs de Tournoll are three hundred in number, and everyone of them during enough to face the devil himself; their châteaux are all but impregnable, they have a large stock of powder, and six cannons. All these considerations weigh against the idea of attacking them."

"And can you believe," cried Raoul, indignantly, "that such abuses could be carried on with impunity, if the nation, instead of being divided into twenty different parties, recognized alone the royal authority? Is not your heart torn by the spectacle of the numberless calamities with which the poor people are now oppressed?"

"Not the least in the world, my dear friend," replied the captain. "If there were but one party in France, I should like to know how one would employ one's self? Only a single master to serve—only one side to gain anything from—'death' one would die of sheer dullness!"

"I'll not discuss that matter further with you, captain. What is your purpose in seeking Messieurs de Tournoll? What advantage do you expect to obtain from their assistance, supposing they agree to assist you?"

"To afford me a support against the Marquis de la Tremblais, and to shield you from his resentment; for the more I reflect, the more I dread the consequences that may result from your conduct, my dear friend. Come up with me to my room, on the table of which, I recollect there is a flask of excellent Saint-Pourcain. Before parting, perhaps for ever, we may as well at least drink glasses together."

Five minutes later, seated face to face and glass in hand, the two friends resumed their conversation.

"My dear Raoul," said De Maurevert, "our friendship is of such a recent date—we have had so few opportunities for talking on matters of business—lost this interview had become indispensable. It will enable me to regulate and understand our relative positions. Is it agreeable to you to enter on this subject?"

"By all means, captain."

"I shall have to begin with a painful avowal," said De Maurevert, as nearly blushing as it was possible for him to blush under any circumstances perhaps. "I cannot hide from you, my dear friend, that I have one ridiculous weakness—I hold to loving and being beloved! No doubt that astonishes you, as it does me; but so it is. I will not discuss the matter—I only state the fact. Don't imagine, however, that I refer to the foibles of Master Cupid! I admire pretty women prodigiously, and court their good graces with spirit when time serves, but never attach the least importance to my successes. No lady, gentle or simple, has ever for more than a second troubled my repose. What I hold to is to be loved by a good, bold and loyal companion—one who will not cast a stone at me if I commit some little error of conduct, and who, when the hour of danger has come, will handsomely lend me the help of his sword. The alliance I propose to you, my dear chevalier, will not in the least fetter your liberty of action. Each will remain master of himself, to employ as he thinks best his activity and intelligence. We will not share our gains, and you have no idea what strength that arrangement will give to our partnership. Two men bound together in that way are as good as ten! So, if my proposition suits you we have only to fix a term for our ex-

tant and all is said. My usual custom is to engage for a year; if that time, however, appears to you too long or too short, I am quite willing to meet your views, whatever they may be."

"Captain—Maurevert," replied Raoul, with difficulty repressing a strong inclination to smile, "it would be extremely ungrateful on my part to refuse your offer. Have I not been the cause of your drawing down upon yourself the enmity of the Marquis de la Tremblais?"

"Pardon me, Raoul," interrupted Maurevert, "gratitude has nothing to do with the matter in hand; but only sympathy. Do not let the recollection of anything that has passed in the least influence your determination. Does my character satisfy you—yes, or no? That is the whole question."

"I doubt, captain, whether you and I hold the same opinion; but nevertheless, your manners exhibit a frankness which I highly esteem. With all my heart, therefore, I accept your friendship."

"We contract an alliance, then? For how long—a year?"

"For a year let it be."

De Maurevert rose and held out his hand.

"I swear by my share of Paradise, on my honor as a gentleman, on my sword and dagger," he said, gravely, "to lend you during an entire year, my dear Sforzi, in any place and under any circumstances, whenever you may please to call upon me, a disinterested, energetic, and loyal support—short of committing sacrilege, or of rendering myself an accomplice in murder."

Raoul rose to turn, and repeated this oath.

"Now, captain," he continued, "one last question: by what chance is it that I find you free of all other engagement?"

"Alas, my dear Raoul—simply because, the day before yesterday, I killed my late partner."

"Killed your late partner, captain?" cried Raoul, hardly trusting his ears.

"To my extreme satisfaction, dear friend. For ten months I had been counting the months, the days, the minutes that had to pass before I regained my liberty! For a whole year I had given no sign of impatience—never once failed in the politeness, and attention required by the terms of our association. He—I am speaking of my companion—behaved like a lout; the fool mistook my honesty and gentleness for weakness. Tedium—I perfectly proved to him how great was his mistake; I left him on the floor, pierced with more than twenty good dagger thrusts! A magnificent duel, chevalier; it would have delighted you to see it! Now let us drink a last glass of Saint-Pourcain to the prosperity of our alliance."

The captain emptied at a draught the immen- sity he had filled to the brim, then rose and began to buckle on his cuirass.

"Tell me frankly, my dear companion," he said to Raoul, while proceeding with his toilette, "what is your own character?—a free confessor on your part will spare me the trouble of studying you."

"Your question is a singular one, captain, and somewhat embarrassing to me. A man never knows himself; he easily accepts his defects and vices as good qualities and virtues. However, I will try and answer you as well as I can. I believe there is some goodness in me, for the sight of a worthy action sends a thrill through my heart, as the recital of a magnanimous deed brings the tears to my eyes and rouses my admiration. There are hours, however, when my blood revolts against my feelings—terrible hours, when under the domination of an insupportable fury, I sense to be master of myself. Who to whoever dares to oppose my blind will—be it a dead man! After the trials, I experience a profound depression of spirits, an immense disgust of life; I think of withdrawing from the world—I dream of the calm of a convent, of the peace of the grave. There is in me also, captain, a sort of youth that alarms me. Sometimes I feel the west of luxury and riches, a thirst for pleasures, a fever of activity altogether unbecomable. I am at these times obliged to exert an almost supernatural force of will to resist the whirlwind on which I am being borne along. A moment's weakness, and I should be lost! My passions unchained would take the upper hand! This consciousness of my defects makes me mistrustful, restless. I fear my impetuosity; I keep a ceaseless watch over myself. What has hitherto saved me from many mishaps is my stubbornness of purpose. When I purpose to gain any object, or see a difficulty before me, nothing can turn me from my path until I achieve my end, or overcome the difficulty. Is this a quality or a defect? I know not. For the rest, captain, I believe I have a good heart and a bad head."

Maurevert had listened to Raoul with deep attention.

"Dear friend," he said, after a short silence, "the portrait you have drawn of yourself appears to me to be a tolerably good likeness. Your defects are of a kind either to bring you to great trouble or to splendid fortune. I prefer a hundred times a fiery, high-banded, audacious, and headstrong man, to a modest and peaceable sage. The first takes, while the second, his place on a throne or on a scaffold; while the second remains all his life in deplorable obscurity, and dies in an all too old age. Life is movement, struggle, adventure! Tedium—I fancy our companionship will not be unproductive, but will make a noise in the world and give rise to something both unforeseen and striking! Nothing could be better than the joining in your impetuosity with my experience. I am delighted with myself for having known how to recognize your talents,

and conclude an alliance with you! There! Now I am cuirassed, spurred, armed, and ready to enter on the campaign. Let us go down stairs."

"But, captain, if your absence should be prolonged, I cannot remain here indefinitely a prisoner."

De Maurevert was silent for a moment before answering.

"Frankly, chevalier," he said, "the demoiselle Diane is one of the best looking and most delicious creatures I have ever seen. You are afraid, you mean, that I may be too long away if I am not back in four days, I allow you to take the road."

"Very well, captain, I will wait four days for you."

The two companions of fortune gave each other the accolade, the servants on guard at the postern let down the drawbridge, and de Maurevert, proudly seated in his saddle, his hand on the stock of his arquebuse, his ear on the alert, and his eyes keenly on the watch, went off at a heavy trot of his powerful horse.

Raoul, after watching his retreating figure for a few moments, turned towards the garden of the château, where Diane—doubtless not in the least expecting the young man would visit that spot—had already been for upwards of half an hour.

CHAPTER VII.

THE MYSTERY OF RAOUL'S LIFE.

The three days which followed the departure of Captain de Maurevert passed on in a dream for Raoul, intoxicated as he was by the intellect, beauty and graces of Diane, whose company he hardly quitted for an instant, forgetting, so to speak, the dangers by which he was environed. Sometimes, indeed, he felt almost grateful to the hatred of the Marquis de la Tremblais, to which he owed the delightful society of the Demoiselle d'Erlanges.

When, however, the fourth day—the day which gave him back his liberty of action—was passing away without bringing him any news of De Maurevert, Raoul began seriously to think about the prolonged absence of his companion-in-arms, and to regret not having accompanied him in his perilous enterprise, in spite of his refusal.

"I greatly fear, mademoiselle," he said to Diane, "the poor captain has fallen a victim to his temerity. Honor calls on me to abandon my ambition. Be so good, then as to give me one of your trusted servants who knows the country, and can guide me to the Château de Tournoll."

"What, chevalier?" cried Diane in a trembling voice, and turning very pale, "can you be thinking of quitting Tauve?—oh! it is to incur certain death. Our house is surrounded by spies; you would hardly cross the drawbridge before a bullet would pierce your heart. You must remain here, chevalier—I beg, I entreat you to remain."

"Mademoiselle," replied Raoul, with an emotion equal to that exhibited by Diane, "the general interest you assign to me in my resolution, to abandon Captain de Maurevert at the moment, perhaps, when he is invoking the aid of my arms, would be for ever to dishonor myself, and render me for ever unworthy of your esteem."

Diane reflected, and after a short pause, replied:

"You are right, chevalier. A gentleman must not fail to do his duty, whatever may happen. If I were a man, I should not hesitate to hasten to the captain's assistance! As the same time, courage does not exclude prudence. To venture out of the château in the day-time would be the height of folly; wait at least till night has set in before starting on your journey. For your guide, I will send with you Lehardy, a trustworthy, faithful man, incapable of an unworthy act. Better than betray you, he would suffer himself to be out in pieces."

This conversation took place in the garden of the château. Diane sent one of her women to summon Lehardy, who immediately presented himself before his young mistress.

Lehardy, said Diane, in accents of marked kindness, "I am going to entrust you with a mission at once dangerous and delicate—that is, to conduct Monsieur le Chevalier Sforzi to the Château de Tournoll. May I count on your good-will?"

Lehardy was a man about fifty years of age. The crabbled expression of his face and the roughness of his movements did not at the first glance tell in his favor; he appeared ill-tempered, rough, sullen. On closer examination, however, the expression of his eyes spoke so clearly of honesty and frankness as to alter completely the first impression formed of him.

For nearly a century—and the occurrence was common at that epoch, rare as it has become in our days—the family of Lehardy had furnished servants to the house of D'Erlanges. At the question put to him by his young mistress, Lehardy made an ungrateful movement; and, in tones that expressed without concealment his ill-humor, replied:

"If you order me to accompany the chevalier, mademoiselle, I have only to go with him, however, unpleasant the duty may be. To go to the Château de Tournoll—one might as well at once set out for the infernal regions!"

"My good Lehardy," said Diane, gently, "you know as well as I what obligation we were under to Monsieur de Sforzi. It is not to his having undertaken our defence that he owes his present embarrassment? It would be an ill