

have him for a useful ally. Only one chance remains for us: that Monsieur de Cailliac has followed to the letter the instructions I gave him; if he has but acted with address the part he undertook to play, my peasants and your vassals may enable us to accomplish the work in hand. It will be a tough task; but death! if it is to be done, it shall be done! What noise is that?—shouts! groans!"

De Maurevert opened the door and looked out.

"My dear mademoiselle!" he cried, turning to Diane, "the moment is come for you to show your courage! Raoul is being brought to the place of execution. Do not look so pale! Death!—if my dear companion is hung, and I by any chance escape, I promise to find you another adorer, even though I have to go to Court to seek him—equal in all respects to our dear chevalier! Farewell for the present—perhaps for ever—my dear Mademoiselle d'Erlanges!"

As he uttered the last word, De Maurevert rushed from the cottage and made his way as near as he could get to the pillory.

CHAPTER XXIV.

A VOW OF VENGEANCE

At the same moment at which Captain de Maurevert was forcing his way through the close ranks of the spectators, the lugubrious procession turned into the market-place. A murmur of admiration and pity arose from the bosom of the crowd at the sight of Raoul's youth and masculine beauty, and, above all, at the calm and intrepid expression of his countenance.

The wagon bearing the executioner and his victim stopped close to the pillory.

"From the wonderful way in which you play your part, Monsieur de Sforzi," said Benoit, "one might almost suppose you had been hanged several times before. What ease, what dignity! I knew your execution would be a triumph for you!"

The Chief of the Apostles descended and offered his hand to the chevalier. Sforzi made a gesture expressive of disgust, and sprang unaided to the ground. Five or six armed men instantly dismounted from their horses and surrounded him.

However resigned he was, Raoul could not repress a movement of affright and abhorrence on seeing the pillory. Instantly recovering his self-possession, however, he mounted the stone step with a firm tread, and making a tribune of the platform on which he was standing, addressed the crowd:

"O, all you present," he cried in a loud voice, "I take you to witness my innocence and the outrage committed upon me! I owe it to the noble blood which flows in my veins—I owe it to my honor, to protest against the odious abuse of power of which I am the victim! Ready to appear before my Maker, and wholly severed from the bonds of this earth, it is without passion or hatred that, from the depths of my conscience, I proclaim the Sire de la Tremblais a coward and a murderer!"

"By the gallows, monsieur, these are wicked blasphemies!" cried Benoit, who, on a sign from the marquis, sprang upon Raoul, and, with the help of his assistants, stifled the young man's voice with a banister drawn tightly over his mouth, and firmly secured to the stone pillar.

One of the marquis' heralds immediately advanced to within two paces of the pillory, and unrolled—odious parody of justice—a large sheet of parchment, and began to read the sentence pronounced against the Chevalier Sforzi. Such was the deathlike silence maintained by the crowd, that not a word or act was lost.

While the herald was fulfilling his infamous mission, Captain de Maurevert with clenched hands, bloodshot eyes, and panting chest had all the difficulty in the world to keep his fury under control. With anxious eye and attentive ear he looked vainly around the outskirts of the market-place; nothing indicated the arrival or approach of the cuirassiers on whom he counted.

As soon as the herald had finished his reading of the sentence, his place was taken by the Chief of the Apostles, who, in his turn, raised his voice:

"Nobles, townsmen, and peasants," he cried, "I, Benoit, the chief executioner of Monsieur le Marquis de la Tremblais, declare, in the name of my master, that the Sire Sforzi, not having been able to substantiate the quality of noble, to which he pretends, leading to the conclusion that he has unworthily lied in raising this pretension, the said Sforzi shall be treated as a serf. Sforzi, in the name of my master, the Marquis de la Tremblais, the noble and powerful seigneur of divers places, invested with the right of executing justice, I declare you a serf, infamous; and, in the sign of the baseness of your extraction, strike you in the face!"

The Chief of the Apostles, sullen the action to the word, raised his hand and brought it down upon Raoul's cheek. At this odious and degrading contact, the young man, in spite of the banister over his mouth, uttered a hoarse yell, and writhed with such prodigious violence as to burst the bonds from his arms. An instant later, and he sprang upon one of the men-at-arms placed at the four corners of the scaffold, and wrenched his sword from him.

"Heaven be thanked!" he cried, placing his back against the pillory. "I shall die as a gentleman—sword in hand!"

With such rapidity was that action performed that Raoul scarcely had time to get on his guard before

one of the marquis' servants had thought of opposing him.

The Marquis de la Tremblais, who so far had remained, in appearance at least, an unmoved spectator of the execution of his victim, uttered an exclamation of rage, and spurring his horse to a gallop through the crowd, in two bounds reached the foot of the pillory.

"Wretches!" he yelled, the froth oozing from his lips while he spoke; "you are twenty, and allow yourselves to be cowed by one man. To the gallows with this rebel! Let the sentence pronounced be instantly executed on him! Let my justice take its course!"

"Your justice, Marquis de la Tremblais, is nothing more than an odious and cowardly murder," cried a powerful voice from the midst of the crowd. "Blood and carnage!—it would be cowardly and vile to allow the Chevalier Sforzi to be longer martyred! Cowards, fall back!—brave men to the front! Death to the tyrant's followers! Down with La Tremblais! Long live the people! Long live the League of Equity! Forward!—forward!"

De Maurevert, the audacious interrupter, tore off the linen smock frock under which he had concealed his war habiliments, and with raised sword and flaming eyes, like the ancient god of battles, rushed towards the pillory.

The crowd for a moment hesitated, but quickly subjugated and carried away by the captain's example, burst into shouts of fury, and followed the steps of De Maurevert. For a minute there was a clinking of arms, cries of rage, groans of pain, wild imprecations, tumult, and indescribable confusion. Little by little the struggle took shape; the mêlée became an ordered fight.

A dozen of the townspeople and countrymen were trampled under the horses' hoofs of the men-at-arms, and lay extended on the ground.

Five combatants, whom their well-tended mustaches, cloth doublets, boots garnished with spurs, and hats decorated with plumes, indicated to be provincial nobles, joined De Maurevert in surrounding Raoul, making a rampart for him of their bosoms and swords. Finally, five or six groups of fifteen to twenty men each—groups composed of the old vassals of the Dame d'Erlanges, and the boldest of the holders of the League of Equity—were doing their best in the middle of the market-place, holding, if not absolutely in check, at least in suspense, the troops of the Marquis de la Tremblais.

The struggle was too unequal to be long continued. It was evident that the men of the château, with their horses harnessed in steel, and tanks, above all, to their discipline, must easily triumph over their inexperienced adversaries.

Suddenly De Maurevert uttered an exclamation of delight, and in a voice which made itself heard above the noise of the combat:

"Courage, friends!" he cried, "help is coming!"

Almost as he spoke the ground trembled under the heavy tread of a troop of cavalry, and from each of the four corners of the market-place a company of five-and-twenty cuirassiers simultaneously made their appearance.

"By the delights of Master Pluto, I believe we are going to turn the tables!" continued the captain, in his formidable voice. "Hallo, my gentlemen, here—I entrust the chevalier to your safe keeping. I shall be back in a moment."

De Maurevert sprang on the back of a horse of one of the marquis' men who had been brought to the earth, and placed himself at the head of the cuirassiers who had so opportunely arrived.

From that moment the issue of the fight was no longer doubtful. The marquis' men, discouraged, taken by surprise, and inferior in number by more than half to the four detachments of cuirassiers opposed to them, broke up and took to flight in complete disorder.

Not until after he had warmly pursued the flying foe did Maurevert return to the market-place. The first person he perceived was Raoul. He sprang from the saddle, and taking the chevalier's hand between his hands, kissed him again and again with transport. Ordinarily so cool, and so completely master of himself, the adventurer was at that moment moved to tears.

"My brave companion," he cried, "for the moment you are out of danger. You have caused me to spend some villainous days and sleepless nights. How glad I am to see you at liberty again! On the faith of a gentleman, but for this affair of the gibbet, I should never have discovered how strongly I am attached to you. That good and pleasant Diane will be delighted, too—she was trembling so for you awhile ago!"

"Is Diane here?" cried he, forgetting at the sound of this name to thank his deliverer. "Let us lose not a moment in assuring her, captain. Where is she? Come, come!"

A minute later, Raoul sprang rather than entered the room in which Diane had taken refuge, and found himself in her presence. At the apparition of Sforzi, the young girl uttered a scream of joy and surprise; then, turning pale, her bosom heaving with emotion, her eyes overcharged with tears, she seemed for a moment as if bereft of consciousness. The chevalier, not less moved, paused: it was as if he were withheld by some superior power.

For the space of half a minute the two young people looked on each other in silence; then suddenly moved by the same irresistible impulse of passionate delight, both cried:

"Diane!"

"Raoul!"

And, forgetful of the presence of De Maurevert and Lehardy, they threw themselves into each other's arms.

Mademoiselle d'Erlanges was the first to recover the mastery over her emotion. Blushing with modesty, she gently disengaged herself from the chevalier's passionate embrace, and with downcast eyes, confused countenance, and trembling voice, said:

"Monsieur de Sforzi, we have to thank heaven!"

The two knelt and prayed fervently. "Thunder and furies!" muttered De Maurevert; "I do believe I am crying!"

As for Lehardy, he suffered his tears to flow without trying to conceal them.

The voice of the captain speedily drew Raoul and Diane from their tender ecstasy.

"Come, chevalier," he cried; "we have not a moment to lose. Without the shadow of a doubt this infernal marquis will return with reinforcements, to try and take his revenge. My intention is not to fly, but to get away from this place as quickly as possible. What are your intentions?"

"My intention, captain, is not to leave Mademoiselle d'Erlanges so long as she needs my protection."

De Maurevert shrugged his shoulders impatiently.

"That's like youth!" he cried; "forgetful and senseless in the extreme! You talk of protecting Mademoiselle Diane, chevalier, but it has passed clean out of your memory that but a short time ago you were bound up to the pillory out yonder, and on the point of being put to a vile and infamous death. You are promising protection to Mademoiselle d'Erlanges, while the burning of your cheek, still red from its odious contact with the hand of the executioner, ought to remind you of your powerlessness. Can you hope to keep at a respectful distance the formidable forces commanded by the marquis with the point of your own sword alone? By Momus, my young friend, my very dear companion, your answer has not half a grain of common sense in it."

At the recollection of the outrage he had been subjected to—a recollection which his joy at meeting with Diane had for a moment quenched—he bowed his head sadly.

"Mademoiselle," he said, in broken accents, and after a short and bitter silence, "forgive me for having dared to press my lips upon your brow! Yes, yes; the captain is right. I have been unable to defend my honor! I am a coward and a wretch! Honest men may justly shun me with disgust and horror!"

"Good!—now you impute to me things I should never have dreamed of," cried De Maurevert. "A coward! By Jupiter!—my firm belief is, that one of these days you will take a splendid vengeance for the outrage inflicted on you! But, in the first instance, you have to find a place of security."

"Monsieur Sforzi," said Diane, in her turn, "you do yourself injustice. Your conduct has exceeded in energy and nobleness that which any one had a right to look for even in an accomplished gentleman. I too highly respect the memory of the Count d'Erlanges, my late honored father, ever to give my esteem to a man who has disgraced himself. With my hand upon my heart, chevalier—before heaven which hears my words—I declare that I hold you to be the most perfect and loyal gentleman that has ever existed."

"Thanks, thanks!" cried Raoul, with wild delight. "The outrage perpetrated on me was so terrible as to deprive me of my reason. Your generous words have shown me the path I have to follow! The vengeance which shall relieve me of the opprobrium that now hangs upon my name shall be so great and striking, that the very enemies of the marquis shall be constrained to pity him! I will combat and destroy this proud and powerful provincial nobility, which cowardly insults poor gentlemen, pitilessly pillages the people, devastates the country, and believes itself above both human and divine laws. If my word and my sword are not sufficiently strong to raise and guide the oppressed, I will carry my complaints to the foot of the throne; I will address myself to the king!"

"Do it, chevalier!" cried Diane, enthusiastically. "Believe in my presentiments, heaven will bless your efforts, and bring you triumphantly out of the glorious struggle you are undertaking!"

"I don't know whether this struggle will prove very profitable," interrupted De Maurevert, "but what I am perfectly sure of is, that it will not even come to a commencement if Monsieur de Sforzi amuses himself any longer in disconcerting, instead of thinking of putting himself in some place of security. You may take it for sure that, in less than an hour, the marquis will be back here."

"But if I leave this place," cried Raoul, "what will become of you Diane? If the Seigneur de la Tremblais learns that you are here?—the blood boils in my veins at the bare thought!"

"Monsieur le Chevalier," said Lehardy, who had held himself modestly aloof, "I have no doubt of being able to conduct my honored mistress to Paris in safety, where she will find in her aunt's house a secure asylum."

"To horse, to horse!" cried De Maurevert. "Every moment now passing is worth a year of your existence! To horse, chevalier, and let us start!"

Raoul took leave of Diane.

"Mademoiselle," he murmured, pressing a long, passionate kiss upon her hand, "if you bear of my death be sure that my last thought will have been of you—of you whom I love and shall ever love with the whole strength of my soul."

De Maurevert, fearing to continue the interview longer, spared Diane the embarrassment of replying by quietly taking the chevalier up in his arms and bearing him out of the cottage.

Soon afterwards the two companions, mounted on powerful horses, rode at full speed out of the little town of Besse.

"Excellent De Maurevert," said Raoul, "how you must curse the day when you joined your fate with mine! You see I have not a chance. Why should I draw you into my destruction. Let us break off our engagement; take back your liberty."

"I never break an engagement I have once entered into, my dear friend," replied the captain. "Of course I see plainly enough that I have gained nothing by you directly so far, but my work has not been wholly lost time. By going to see the robber of Croixmore, I realized four hundred crowns; the League of Equity—whom I sold much too cheaply, but I was anxious to save you—has brought me in more than double that sum; and lastly, the Marquis de la Tremblais made me a present of a magnificent gold chain. If you had not taken the part of the Dames d'Erlanges, and in doing so incurred the resentment of the marquis, I should not have gone to Croixmore, and all the events which have followed would not have taken place. So that, indirectly, I have not done badly since my association with you—in fact, I freely own that our partnership has been highly satisfactory to me."

While the two companions were riding from Besse at the utmost speed of their steeds, the Marquis de la Tremblais, intoxicated with rage, caused the entire garrison of the château to mount their horses, and sent them out in every direction in pursuit of the fugitives.

His orders were that, in case of resistance on their part, both were to be killed without hesitation.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE STREETS OF PARIS IN 1531.

Towards eight o'clock, on the evening of the 25th of July, 1531, the captain and the chevalier were passing along the bank of the Seine, alongside of the arsenal. The atmosphere, heavy and charged with electricity, announced a coming storm. Not a breath of air was stirring—dark and threatening clouds were banked upon the horizon.

"Chevalier," inquired De Maurevert, "may I ask whether you propose to continue much longer this sentimental and melancholy stroll? It is supper time, and I venture to suggest that we should return to our hostelry, the Stag's Head. Now you are plunged in one of your everlasting reveries and fits of the blue devils! Hallo! do you hear what I am saying, Sforzi? I tell you it is going to rain and thunder furiously!"

The chevalier appeared to start as from a dream, and, turning towards his interlocutor with a vague and wondering look, asked:

"Did you speak to me, captain?"

De Maurevert shrugged his shoulders, bit his mustaches, and stamped sharply on the ground. "By all the saints in Paradise, Raoul!" he cried, "I must, indeed, have taken a furious liking for you to give myself up as I do to the wearisomeness of your society! What the devil ails you? Discouragement has nothing to do with men of your age! That a man may be down in the mouth after a heavy loss at play is understandable; but to fret from morning to night in this way is altogether unreasonable—ridiculous to the last degree! What mortification so particularly galling weighs on your existence? None. You have escaped the gallows, you are young, handsome, brave; you are at Paris—that is to say, at Court; and you have Captain de Maurevert for your associate. What more do you want to make you happy?"

"It is true that you have shown an unequalled devotion towards me, captain," replied the chevalier; "but, unfortunately, your friendship is powerless against the remembrances and disquietudes that oppress me. How can I forget the danger that threaten Diane? One thought—one terrible thought—pitilessly pursues me: I see Diane in the power of the Marquis de la Tremblais! I hear her calling to me—claiming my love, invoking my courage! I have abandoned her like a coward, while my duty was to have remained near her, to have made for her a shield of my body, to have died at her feet! Ah, captain! why did I follow your counsels?"

"Youth or madness, it is all one!" cried De Maurevert. "What!—instead of rejoicing in the wonderful good luck that attended us on our journey, in the liberty you are at this moment enjoying in Paris, you are now absurdly cursing your fate! You are ungrateful to Providence! I do not deny that Mademoiselle d'Erlanges is a charming and seductive young lady, and worthy of a gentleman's respect and love. I admit that it would be a misfortune if she were to fall into the marquis's hands; but even supposing such a misfortune to come to pass, would there be anything in it to drive you to despair? A thousand times, no! The Court is overflowing with the daughters of rich houses. Please to observe, by the way, that Diane possesses not one crown of fortune. Without doubt, you will make some advantageous alliance that will compensate you for this little love disappointment."

"Forget Diane!" exclaimed Raoul, indignantly. "Never!"

"Why not?" asked the captain, coolly. "I assure you it is easy enough to forget a woman. There! now you are knitting your brows; my language displeases you. Let us change the subject of our conversation. For the tonight,