

"Payable when?"

"At once, if you require it."

"No; Benoist is watching us."

"Well, then, at my hostelry—the Stag's Head, in the Rue des Tournelles."

"I accept. The word is—Guise and Italy."

"Very good. Now raise your voice and talk of anything that comes into your head; Benoist is coming towards us."

After having made a dozen turns in company with Croixmore, De Maurevert moved towards the apostle, who was approaching almost on tiptoe.

"Are you going to remain on guard here till night, Benoist?" he asked.

"I am not bound to give you an account of my actions, captain," replied the apostle, brusquely.

"Benoist," said De Maurevert, calmly, "from the little politeness you now exhibit, I imagine you must have a bad memory. Recall to mind that I have once already, at the inn at Saint-Pardoux, slightly incommoded you; and be quite assured that, should ever the fancy take me to knock out your brains completely, I shall not deny myself that gratification."

The apostle made no reply; but out of his viper-eyes he darted a glance of deadly hatred at his adversary.

De Maurevert abandoned Croixmore's arm, and moved away in the direction of the solitary house. It was only after the third blow of the knocker that a faint sound was heard in the interior; and shortly afterwards a small grating in the door, so closely barred with iron as scarcely to afford admission to the point of a dagger, was opened with a creaking sound, and a masculine voice demanded of De Maurevert what he wanted.

"Guise and Italy," answered the captain.

The door in an instant turned noiselessly on its hinges, and the captain resolutely passed into the mysterious dwelling-place.

"Inform your noble and honored mistress," he replied, "that one of her most intimate and devoted servants desires to see her without a moment's delay, to convey to her a communication of the highest importance."

Whether it was that the captain's decided tone imposed on the man who opened the door to him, or whether the latter had orders not to question any person possessing the pass-word, he hurried away to execute the visitor's order.

"Monsieur," he said, returning almost immediately, "will you have the goodness to follow me?—my mistress awaits you."

De Maurevert did not wait for the invitation to be repeated. With rapid strides he ascended the same stairs Raoul had mounted two days before; but instead of being introduced, as the chevalier had been, into the oratory, he was conducted into another room.

"*Pudieu!*" he cried, taking in at a glance the details of the whole apartment, "I am no longer surprised at the fair Marie making such handsome presents. What luxury! Whom can she be?—a descendant of Danae? But her Jupiter? Paris, as I well know, does not furnish one—if I except Messieurs D'O, or De Villequier. Yes; possibly it is one of these. Only such eminent thieves could be able to afford all this splendor. I hear the rustling of a dress. If she should take a fancy to me!"

De Maurevert, drawing himself up to his full height, and looking firm as an oak, felt considerably moved as the unknown mistress of the solitary house entered the room. She wore a half mask, and she limped slightly. The latter characteristic gave the captain infinite satisfaction.

"If she were only as ugly as sin, my chances would be so much the better!" he muttered to himself. The proud and somewhat theatrical bearing of the young lady somewhat discomposed the gallant captain, however. "I am not used to these great ladies," he thought, "and this one certainly belongs to the high nobility. However, I will do my best."

On seeing the adventurer, Marie uttered a faint cry of surprise. Seating herself in an arm-chair, she said, in an imperious tone:

"I did not expect the honor of seeing you, Captain De Maurevert. What has procured me the pleasure of this visit? How have you succeeded in reaching my presence?"

Extremely astonished to find himself thus well-known to Marie, De Maurevert was so taken aback as to lose his habitual assurance. To conceal his embarrassment, he took a seat.

"Did I invite you to sit down, captain?" demanded the unknown.

At this question, at once disdainful and arrogant, De Maurevert could not control an angry impulse.

"My charmer," he replied, moving his chair nearer, "I did not know that we were at the Louvre in the presence of his majesty. The deuce!—pardon; I retract the word. By Venus, I should have said—by Master Cupid, if you prefer it—the etiquette of such houses as this is not quite so rigid as that of the royal palace, I fancy."

"Captain," interrupted Marie, "I have not come here to listen to such old soldiers' jargon. Saying which, she removed her mask, and looked fixedly at her interlocutor.

De Maurevert bounded from his chair as if it had suddenly turned into a red-hot gridiron, and with an air of confusion, and bowing lowly before Marie, said with the deepest respect:

"Deign to pardon my foolish conduct, your highness. I was so far from thinking of the honor your highness confers upon me by this audience."

CHAPTER XXXV.

AN AFTERNOON WELL SPENT.

The unknown, whom De Maurevert had addressed as "Highness," but whom we shall continue to call "Marie," received the adventurer's excuses like a woman accustomed to the most humble homage.

For an instant disconcerted, the captain speedily recovered his full presence of mind; he was, indeed, not the man to remain long abashed by defeat.

Whether it was that the adventurer's respectful submission had disarmed Marie's anger, or that she did not desire to make an enemy of him—or, possibly, that she had need of his services—it was in an almost kindly tone that she next addressed him.

"Captain," she said, "before proceeding further with this interview, I desire to know what means you employed to reach my presence. Your presence here is not the result of an odious indiscretion—or of an act of cowardly treachery?"

"Madame," replied De Maurevert, slowly, and weighing every one of his words, "your suppositions—so humiliating to my self-esteem—are entirely void of foundation. I see, madame, that you have never taken the trouble to inquire what sort of man Captain De Maurevert is. If your highness had deigned to question the first gentleman she happened to meet regarding me, she would have learned that nature has endowed me with a supple and subtle intellect, with an imagination fertile in resources, and she would then not have felt astonished to see me here."

"You are greatly mistaken, Monsieur De Maurevert, if you suppose you are unknown to me," replied Marie. "The information which has been supplied to me concerning you is, on the contrary, most complete."

"You fill me with delight, madame; for it is always painful to have to speak in eulogy of one's self."

Marie smiled, half incredulously, half jocularly.

"You have not yet, monsieur," she said, "answered my questions. What means have you employed to reach me?"

"I humbly beg permission to remain silent on that subject, madame. I desired to speak with you, and I am here in your presence. Pray let that suffice."

"Captain," said Marie, after a slight pause, "I will do you justice; and this will prove to you how well I know your character."

"Justice, madame?"

"I know that nobody is more the slave of his word than yourself. Will you swear to me that you are not trying to deceive me, and that you will answer me with complete frankness? On this condition alone will I consent to continue our interview."

"Alas, madame!" cried De Maurevert, sadly, "this exigence on your part will deprive me of all my advantages, and reduce me to complete nullity. No matter; to be agreeable to you, I feel capable of making any sacrifice. Permit me only to put one restriction on the fulfilment of your wishes."

"What is that restriction, captain?"

"That of remaining silent, madame, whenever I believe it to be my duty not to answer your questions. From the moment you deprive me of the use of falsehood, the least you can do is to leave me the resource of silence."

"I accept your conditions, captain; but you must swear to me on your word, as a gentleman, not to attempt to deceive me."

"Madame, I will only swear to you not to tell you a single falsehood—nothing more. If I deceive you by an adroitly contrived silence, you must not think you have the right to accuse me of having broken my oath."

"Agreed, captain. In the first place, tell me the motive which impelled you—without knowing whom you were seeking—to make your way into my presence."

"With pleasure, madame. I had been instructed by my friend and companion in arms, the Chevalier Sforzi, to remit to the mistress of this house a mantle, and two hundred crowns in gold, which she had deigned to send to him. Here is the mantle, madame; and here are the two hundred sun-crowns. I beg you will allow me to add that the chevalier owes me fifteen hundred *livres tournois*—I have his acknowledgment in my pocket—and that you will fill me with joy if you will deign to accept this acknowledgment as so much money."

Marie blushed slightly, and a flash of anger darted from her eyes.

"So it was the Chevalier Sforzi who sent you?" she remarked.

"Yes, madame—the Chevalier Sforzi."

"In that case he is a scoundrel!"

"I do not understand you, madame."

"He swore to preserve the secret of our acquaintance."

"The chevalier has kept his promise, madame. If I have the honor to find myself in your presence at this moment, it is because I have unworthily abused my good friend's confidence. I persuaded him that I also was a party to the secret."

"But the pass-word—who gave you that?"

"Not Raoul, madame."

For a few seconds Marie remained thoughtful and reflective.

"And why, captain," she said at length, "has Monsieur Sforzi returned my present?"

De Maurevert made no answer.

"You are already deceiving me, captain."

"No, madame; my silence conceals no pitfall. It is imposed on me by the profound respect I bear towards your highness, and by the

fear I feel of displeasing her by a frankness too abrupt."

"Explain yourself, captain."

"You command me, madame?"

"I command you."

"Madame," continued De Maurevert, coolly, "your truly royal gift appeared to the chevalier to constitute a veritable donation of charity; and that idea outraged his immense pride almost to delirium. He grew so furiously angry with you as to treat you with supreme disdain."

"The chevalier was right," cried Marie. "His greatness of soul enchants me. He has acted like a true gentleman. Not a single courtier—not one—would have shown under the same circumstances so much delicacy and honorable pride!"

"I confess, madame," said De Maurevert, greatly astonished at Marie's response, "that if your magnificent present had been addressed to me, I should have accepted it with as much joy as gratitude. Let me beg of you indeed, to take back this mantle and purse—the sight of which distracts me."

"If these objects please you, keep them in remembrance of me," said Marie, thoughtfully. "Ah!—is it possible, madame!" cried De Maurevert, gladly. "It is a hundred times more than I deserve. No matter; your highness's wishes are commands to me. I accept. As to the chevalier's acknowledgment for the five hundred crowns——"

"You will destroy it, captain. My intention is that Monsieur Sforzi shall possess entire liberty of action, and that he shall be indebted to no one."

"I had hoped that your highness would have permitted me to retain my friend's written acknowledgment; but, since you wish otherwise, it shall be obeyed. I will burn the paper," murmured De Maurevert, with a sigh.

"You know the Chevalier Sforzi intimately, do you not, captain?"

"Yes, madame; intimately is the word."

"Do you believe him capable of devoting himself, body and soul, to the accomplishment of a vast and perilous design, to follow with invincible perseverance a course traced out for him?"

"Yes and no, madame. The Chevalier Sforzi certainly possesses rare energy, unconquerable obstinacy of purpose, and dauntless intrepidity; but, unfortunately, he is afflicted with a thirst for liberty and independence which will always stand greatly in the way of his fortune. Interest has no weight with him."

"And love, Captain De Maurevert?" interrupted Marie, with passionate impetuosity.

This question, so entirely consonant with the manners of the time, did not in the least surprise De Maurevert.

"Love, madame," he replied, tranquilly, "is the weak side of Monsieur Sforzi. The chevalier is a volcano. I have seen him, at the thought of a woman he adores—and it is only within this hour that I knew that woman was your highness—I have seen him, I say, turn pale, blush, tremble like a child, shake like a lion, pass through all the phases from delight to despair."

"Are you not exaggerating, captain?" asked Marie, in a voice touched by emotion.

"On the contrary, madame, what I tell you is within the truth. You may imagine that it is not possible for me to describe to you the wild transports of a madman; but, out of gratitude for the unparalleled generosity you have shown towards me, I owe you a delicate confidence. Before knowing you, Monsieur Sforzi had, to use one of his own expressions, affianced his soul. Good heavens!—I have done wrong, perhaps, to explain myself so abruptly—for you have turned pale——"

"Go on—go on, captain, I command you. Who is this woman?"

"A young girl, your highness."

"Pretty, amiable, intellectual?"

"Alas! as ravishing and beautiful as possible!"

"More beautiful than I?" demanded Marie, proudly, and looking at her interlocutor in a manner so seductive as to move the phlegmatic and sceptical adventurer to the bottom of his soul. "Well, captain, answer me," she continued, "which of the two, this young girl or me, is the more beautiful?"

At this difficult question De Maurevert hesitated; but at length he replied:

"Madame, there are marvels so absolute and so contrary, of all kinds, as to defy comparison."

Marie frowned and made an impatient gesture. From the captain's not daring to express himself in a more explicit manner, she knew that her rival was really worthy to enter into competition with her on the score of beauty.

"The girl lives in Paris, doubtless?" inquired Marie.

"She only arrived there a few days ago. Monsieur Sforzi became acquainted with her in Auvergne."

"A provincial!—some lawyer's daughter, perhaps?"

"No, your highness; the daughter of an excellent house."

"And the name of this marvel?"

"Diane d'Erlanges, your highness."

"Diane d'Erlanges! That is a name I shall not forget."

Marie sank into deep meditation.

"Monsieur De Maurevert," she said, suddenly raising her hand, "I have been wrong up to the present moment in not according to you all the attention you deserve. You are a man on whom one may rely. I shall employ your talent and utilize your merit. I need not add that your services shall be generously rewarded."

"Madame," said De Maurevert, radiantly, "I have asked how it was that your highness had not attached me to her party. The consciousness of my value and the care of my dignity did not permit me to make to your highness the offer of my intelligence and my sword. I am now really enchanted that your highness has deigned to come first to me. I cannot too highly compliment her on the acquisition of my person."

"De Maurevert," interrupted Marie, who had scarcely given any attention to the adventurer's response, "I need be under no restraint before you. I know your rare discretion; and you are not ignorant that to betray me would be to expose yourself to infinite unpleasantness. Listen to me attentively. It is necessary that, to be able to serve me effectually, you should thoroughly know my intentions. When I saw Monsieur Sforzi for the first time his audacity pleased me, and I determined to employ to my own advantage his resentment against Monsieur Lavalette. I gave a rendezvous to Monsieur Sforzi, and in the hours we passed together the sudden intimacy—for he was ignorant of my rank—which had arisen between us ripened speedily. I recognized in him a finely-tempered spirit, proud, ardent, accessible to all kinds of noble enthusiasm. This discovery caused me almost to feel remorse. Would it not be a pity, I said to myself, to cast into the midst of the Court a furious and devouring struggle of the Court's youth so full of life and promise? You are not ignorant, De Maurevert, how perfidious towards women is the sentiment of pity. It is seldom that it does not insensibly lead them to love. I now love Sforzi, and woe to the woman who places herself between my affections and him! You, De Maurevert, are admirably placed to serve me. You possess the chevalier's confidence, you live in close intimacy with him, and it is easy for you to control his least actions. I count on your aid."

"Madame," replied De Maurevert, gravely, "there is one circumstance which you have ignored, and which I feel it to be my duty to call to your notice. I have entered into a defensive alliance with Monsieur Sforzi for the space of a year. Until that time shall have elapsed I could not possibly either betray him or act in any way in opposition to his interests. If I were to become convinced that the chevalier had the bad taste, the unpardonable folly, to prefer Mademoiselle Diane d'Erlanges to you, I do not for a moment conceal from you that I would do nothing against this demoiselle, but would retire into an honest, neutral position."

"So be it, captain. I accept that reservation."

"A thousand thanks, madame. Your highness may rest assured that I shall serve her interests with absolute devotion."

Marie slightly bowed her head to the adventurer, and was preparing to close the interview, when De Maurevert said:

"Will your highness permit me to inform her that the Marquis de la Tremblais is Monsieur Sforzi's mortal enemy? Indeed, it would not astonish me to learn that the marquis had made some wicked attempt against the chevalier's life."

"You know, then, that the Marquis de la Tremblais is here at this moment?" asked Marie, in astonishment.

"Madame," replied the adventurer, bowing to the floor, "Captain De Maurevert is ignorant of nothing which he has need of knowing. I cannot too strongly repeat—however much the avowal costs me to make—that in attaching me to your person you have made a most excellent bargain. If your highness will shortly deign to grant me a second audience, we can arrange—for short reckonings make good servants—the price of my devotion."

"I will see you again soon, captain," replied Marie. "*Au revoir!*"

On leaving the solitary house, De Maurevert found the apostle Benoist and the bandit Croixmore still acting as sentinels. Having at the moment no further information to win from those honest personages, he passed on without speaking to them.

"*Parbleu!*" he said to himself as he went along, "it must be admitted that I have not badly employed my afternoon. Happy, a hundred times happy, Raoul! What a mine for him to work! What a magnificent position to take! Have I done right to speak of Diane d'Erlanges? I don't know; but I did it for the best, and beyond that things must take their chance. The deuce is in it if, out of all these events, I shall not be able to gain something. Her highness's generosity is prodigious! Yes, I have certainly well employed my afternoon. I may say with the Emperor Titus: 'My good De Maurevert, you have not lost your day.'"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

MARQUIS AND HIGHNESS.

After De Maurevert's departure Marie returned to the Marquis de la Tremblais, and continued the interview interrupted by the arrival of the adventurer.

In Marie's presence the bearing of the Marquis de la Tremblais very little resembled that which it assumed in Auvergne, and which, if his vassals had beheld it, would have filled them with doubt as to the identity of their master. Nothing about him indicated the proud and unyielding feudal seigneur, who made every one in the province tremble before his glance. His manners were obsequious, the expression of his face respectful, and the tone in which he spoke approached humility.

But an observer would have detected, by