

the most submissive and faithful in all your kingdom."

Raoul thanked the *mignon* with a look of profound gratitude, then addressed the king:

"Sire," he said, "Monsieur le Duc d'Epemon, by expressing so flattering an opinion regarding me, emboldens me to plunge freely into the question. I ask your majesty to send a Parliamentary Commission into Auvergne, after the manner of your predecessor, invested with foreign powers, to ascertain and punish such crimes of the nobles as escape the ordinary operation of the laws."

"A tribunal, in fact," said Henry III., "whose sentences are above the laws, without appeal, and of instant execution." He remained for a few moments plunged in thought. "The crimes of the Marquis de la Tremblais require to be punished," he said at length, "and the deplorable anarchy which reigns in the province of Auvergne calls for prompt and energetic repression. But alas!—where shall I find a man firm, just, honest enough to preside over such a Commission?"

"Is there not the Seigneur de Beaumont, Master Harlai, sire?" cried d'Epemon.

"You are right, my son; De Beaumont is upright, courageous, severe; he will give judgment according to his conscience! But what warrior will care to attack the half-revolted nobles of Auvergne?"

"I, sire!" cried Sforzi.

"You, chevalier!" repeated Henry III., contemplating with admiration the features, glowing with audacity, of Raoul. "Yes—I will trust you. Will you promise me to be inexorable, and to listen only to the voice of justice?"

"I swear to do so, sire!"

"Chevalier Sforzi," replied the king, solemnly, "I name you my Commissioner Extraordinary in the province of Auvergne, and as such I grant you an authority unlimited, exceptional above all human laws. You shall receive your commission to-day."

"Thanks, sire," cried Raoul, kneeling, and kissing one of the king's hands with indescribable emotion.

"Come and see me again to-morrow, dear and well-beloved Sforzi," said Henry III.; "it remains for me to consult you as to the persons to be selected from the State and Privy Councils and other officers of the Courts of Law, who are to form part of the Commission."

"Oh," cried Raoul to himself, on leaving the king's presence, "the dream of my life is at length moving towards realization! Diane, you shall be saved or avenged!"

At the moment when Sforzi was passing out of the king's cabinet, one of the gentlemen in attendance entered to inquire whether it was true that Captain de Maurevert had received his majesty's permission to have himself announced. The king and d'Epemon looked smilingly at each other. Then, turning towards the gentleman in waiting, Henry III. said:

"Show Captain de Maurevert in."

#### CHAPTER LIII.

##### LOVE AND DUTY.

Events take us back to the little village of Saint Pardoux, where our story commenced.

Though it was scarcely six o'clock in the morning, and no holiday or festival was indicated in the almanack, the inhabitants of the place, dressed in their best clothes, were gathered in groups about the door of our old friend Maitre Nicolas, the keeper of the inn. Judging by the noisy conversation of the mountaineers, the subject which was engrossing their attention was one of great interest. Maitre Nicolas, more than any one, was noticeable for the animation of his butterfly-like movements from group to group, as he gave a friendly tap on the back to one, a smile or a nod of intelligence to another. Let us add that these attentions of the *cabaretier* were not only well received but eagerly courted, all those whom he deigned to favor with these attentions appearing to be proud of his notice.

"By Saint Blaise, comrades!" he cried, halting in the midst of the crowd, "if we stop chatting instead of setting off for Riom, we shall not arrive in time to witness the entry of the Commissioners. I would not lose the sight for ten crowns. Come—one last drink, and then away."

"The Seigneur Sforzi is the same gentleman the Marquis de la Tremblais was going to hang, and who was so miraculously saved at the moment the apostle Benoist was about to put the rope round his neck—is he not?" inquired one of the party.

"The very same, Guillaume," replied Maitre Nicolas; "and you may be certain that Monsieur Sforzi, after having been so ill-used by the high nobility of the province, feels vigorously ill-disposed towards it. His arrival in Auvergne, I repeat, is for us poor people a piece of unexpected good fortune. I would not exchange positions with the Marquis de la Tremblais at this moment for a thousand crowns ready money! I shall not be surprised to see him, before long, on his knees upon a scaffold, his head on a block, awaiting the stroke of the executioner!"

These words spoken by Maitre Nicolas so terrified his hearers that, by a spontaneous movement, they all moved rapidly from him. The *cabaretier* also appeared to repent of his temerity, his visage expressed the greatest alarm, he trembled in every limb, and it was in tones singularly tremulous that he went on:

"Comrades, I rely on your discretion! I was only joking. I know, of course, that Monsieur le Marquis is powerful enough to resist all the king's forces." He looked anxiously round, and perceiving none but friendly faces, continued:

"When I think of the courage displayed by the

Chevalier Sforzi, however, in his duel with Captain de Maurevert—a combat of which you were nearly all of you witnesses—I feel hope revive in my heart. Ah, dear comrades, if we were only rid of the Marquis de la Tremblais and his apostles, what happiness could be comparable with ours? No more forced labor, no more lashes, no more extortions, no more murders—how happy we should be. What is the use of looking so terrified? Imitate me, comrades, and have no fear. If you had heard what was publicly said in the streets of Clermont yesterday, you would all be more valiant. It appears that the king will not permit his poor people to be oppressed any longer, and that he has at last come seriously to our defence. All the nobles who have tyrannized over us are to be tried and punished, all vassals who have been wronged and injured are to be indemnified. Comrades, long live Henry III.!"

At this picture of happiness, which seemed fabulous to them, the mountaineers lost all their apprehensions, and repeated with noisy enthusiasm the cry raised by Maitre Nicolas.

The worthy *cabaretier*, joining the prudence of the innkeeper with the enthusiasm of the patriot, collected some sous owing to him by his customers, and the column of mountaineers set forward on its way.

Noon was striking when the inhabitants of Saint Pardoux reached the gates of Riom. Noisy animation reigned in the town. A compact crowd of people, dressed in their Sunday clothes, was gathered without the fortifications, waiting the arrival of the king's delegates. Presently all noise was hushed into silence; the approach of the Commissioners was signalled.

Shortly afterwards five carriages, each drawn by four horses, appeared on the road. Immediately the sheriffs and consuls of the town, with six canons of the cathedral of Clermont, sent by the bishop, went forward in two lines, to receive the envoys of the king.

In the first carriage was Maitre Achille de Harlai, Seigneur de Beaumont, and Raoul Sforzi; the four other carriages contained fourteen judges.

We will not attempt to describe the eager curiosity, the ardent sympathy with which the Commissioners were greeted. The people saluted them with prolonged and deafening cheers, regarding them not only as their defenders, but as their avengers. The president, Monsieur de Harlai, and the Chevalier Sforzi attracted most attention, for the powers were known with which was invested, the first as president of the tribunal, the second as Commissioner Extraordinary of his Majesty.

By the side of the carriage occupied by the two superior delegates of the king, on a magnificently caparisoned horse, rode Captain de Maurevert. Unlike Raoul, the adventurer was radiant, and took no pains to restrain his joy.

"With what admiration and love all the women look at me—happy rogue that I am!" he murmured to himself, pressing back the crowd with the powerful chest of his steed. "At last I am installed in a post of real importance! Captain Roland de Maurevert, Grand Prévôt of all the forces of Auvergne—how well the title sounds!"

The personage who, after the Commissioners, awakened the greatest public curiosity was a man loaded with chains, and led by archers. At sight of the prisoner shouts of wild delight rose from the crowd on all sides; in the prisoner, Benoist, the leader of the apostles had been recognized.

The terror which the Marquis de la Tremblais' executioner inspired in the minds of the mountaineers was such that the *cabaretier*, on catching sight of him when he was hardly yet in view, was almost on the point of changing his cry of "Long live the King's Commissioners!" into "Long live Monsieur le Marquis de la Tremblais!" However, after he had satisfied himself as to the number of the archers that had the wretch in custody, and observing the solidity of the bonds that held him, ashamed of his want of courage, he stooped low, so as to avoid being recognized, and shouted with all his might, "Long live Monsieur Sforzi! Death to the hangman and murderer, Benoist!"

Immediately afterwards the *cortège* reached the house of the Lieutenant Criminal, where a splendid collation and a select company awaited the Commissioners.

While the Commissioners were being entertained in the house of the high legal functionary, the crowd waiting in the streets to witness their departure was filled with an almost insane delight. People who had not spoken to one another for ten years now addressed each other as if they had been brothers, and embraced with the warmest demonstrations of friendliness.

It was already four o'clock when the *cortège* reached Clermont. Already half way, that is to say at the point called the Chapelle-de-Cabazat, the first deputations, sent by the capital city of Auvergne, had presented themselves to compliment the illustrious and terrible guests sent them by the king. As soon as the carriage bearing Messieurs de Harlai and Sforzi came in sight of the city, the Grand Prévôt of Auvergne, mounted at the head of his company of archers, one of the most numerous in France; then, after him, came the Chevalier of the Watch of Clermont, followed by more than sixty archers in red coats.

"Poor companion!" murmured de Maurevert, looking at the Grand Prévôt with an air of mockery. "If you only knew that the superb cavalier caracolled within a couple of paces of you is about to replace you in all your functions, you would not be quite so zealous, and would not waste so much time in trying to make us take your grimaces for smiles!"

The Marquis de Canillac, who appeared in person to receive the Commissioners on their reaching the city, pretended to rejoice at their arrival, and made to them the strongest protestations of respect and obedience.

"Ah, supple and cunning companion!" muttered De Maurevert—"how you must now regret having helped me to save my gentle Sforzi from the gallows!"

After having received addresses from all the public bodies of the city, the *cortège* was at length permitted to enter Clermont by the postern gate—the drawbridge of which had been painted afresh for this solemnity—and passed on to the house of the Marquis de Canillac, where the Commissioners were to sup.

As soon as Raoul had alighted, and before passing to the room which had been prepared for him to arrange his dress after the wear and tear of the journey, he sent for De Maurevert.

"Captain de Maurevert," he said, addressing the new Grand Prévôt of the province of Auvergne, "be so good as to follow me—I have some information to ask of you."

"At your orders, monseigneur," replied the captain, bowing lowly before the chevalier, and making way for him to pass first.

Hastily dismissing the servants, who were assisting to dress him, he bolted the door of the room, and then hurried towards De Maurevert.

"Well, captain," he cried, "have your inquiries resulted happily? Have your emissaries discovered any traces of Diane? May I still hope?"

"Dear companion," replied De Maurevert, who, the moment they were alone, returned to his habitual tone of familiarity, "I will not conceal from you that, so far, my endeavors have been fruitless. But, remember, I have yet hardly had time to think of the matter, having had enough to do to get here! But have patience—we shall find her."

"When it is too late!" cried Raoul, passionately.

"Oh! forgive me for interrupting you. Mademoiselle is endowed with such superhuman virtue that a delay of two or three weeks cannot put her innocence in any greater danger; and besides, the longer you are separated the more delightful will be your meeting! Don't roll your eyes so furiously, and drive the nails into the palms of your hands. Rage is useless. Instead of quarrelling like two boys, let us combine our plan of action. Will you listen to me, dear, companion?"

"I listen to you, captain."

"It appears to me," continued De Maurevert, with the utmost coolness, "that it is through the apostle Benoist we must operate; this scoundrel—one of the actual abductors of Diane—must certainly be aware of the designs of his master. The thing to be done is to make him tell what he knows."

"Have I not vainly questioned him ten different times?"

"By Mercury, dear Raoul, your simplicity is delightful! You questioned him, and he would not answer—astonishing, was it not? Why, you might as well be wonderstruck at a bear's not returning your politeness! There are two ways, almost infallible, of wringing his secret from this scoundrel."

"What means, captain?"

"The first—which I will not conceal from you is most to my taste—is to apply to him a strongish dose of the torture. Nobody better than myself knows the science of the thumbcrew and the brodequins, or what can be done with a pair of pincers. There is not a sworn tormentor capable of matching the knowledge and experience of a valiant captain who has commanded bands of rioters and free-lances, and passed twenty years of his life in civil wars. Give me your permission, and I answer for the success."

"What is the other way?" inquired Raoul, after a short pause.

"The other way is exactly the opposite of the first," replied De Maurevert; "but the moment you abjure the use of force you fall into weakness. Promise this vile scoundrel Benoist, a thousand crowns, paid down, with his liberty, if he consents to tell you where Diane is concealed, and I will consent to be hanged if the wretch will not betray his master without hesitation."

"Captain," said Raoul sadly, "honor forbids me to employ either of the means you advise me to adopt. It is not possible for me, without betraying all my duties, to use for my own private service the powers the king has deigned to confer upon me. My mission is a holy and sacred thing." For a few moments he paced up and down the room, then again addressing De Maurevert, said: "Captain, order the apostle Benoist to be brought here."

De Maurevert was doubtless about to dissuade Sforzi from again making a useless attempt to draw Benoist from his obstinate silence when he suddenly checked himself.

"The devil take me," he muttered to himself as he left the room, "if, before an hour is passed, I do not make this scoundrel speak out!"

A quarter of an hour later the apostle Benoist entered the chevalier's room, the escort accompanying him remaining outside.

The countenance of the wretched executioner of the Marquis de la Tremblais contrasted singularly in its insolence with his position as an accused. The first look which he cast on Sforzi almost resembled a threat, and he himself, without being invited, opened the conversation in a mocking tone.

"Monseigneur," he said, "I should be glad to know, before commencing this interview, whether I am appearing before the Commissioner Extraordinary of his Majesty, or whether I am

simply in the presence of my old acquaintance, Monsieur Sforzi?"

Raoul turned pale with anger, but recalling to mind of what utility the assistance of the ruffian might be in the recovery of Diane, he made a violent effort to restrain himself, and replied gently:

"His Majesty's Commissioner will have no knowledge of anything that passes between us at this interview; you may therefore speak out freely, and without fear."

"Thanks for the permission you so generously grant of being of service to you," replied Benoist, with a short laugh; "be quite sure I shall not abuse it."

Raoul must have been very unhappy at the abduction of Diane to bear such insolence patiently.

"Benoist," he said, after a brief silence, "I will give you all I possess, nearly ten thousand crowns, if you will tell me where Mademoiselle d'Erlanges has been concealed."

"What would be the good of your money to me, if I am to be hanged?" replied the apostle. "What I want is security. Will you pledge me your honor as a gentleman, not to pay any heed to the calumnies which are sure to be made against me during the sittings of the Commission?"

"My duty forbids me to enter into any such engagement, Benoist."

"Why?"

"Because I should betray the confidence of the king, my master."

"And I—at your entreaty only—am to betray the confidence of my master, the Marquis de la Tremblais! Where is the difference in our positions? Abandon the interest of his majesty;—and I will betray to you those of my majesty; remain faithful to your duty, and I remain faithful to mine! That is my last word! No, not quite my last. I am under apprehension for my safety as far as you are concerned, you, I am well assured, can do nothing against me. You think I am mad; oh, no! I enjoy the full use of my reason—and that tells me that whenever I appear before the Commissioners, my most powerful defender will be Monsieur le Chevalier Sforzi!"

"You must have lost your senses, Benoist."

"Not at all, chevalier; but fortunately for me, I have several strings to my bow—especially the knowledge of an important secret. Oh!—not concerning Mademoiselle d'Erlanges!"

Raoul, filled with astonishment at these enigmatical words, was reflecting what to do, when the door of the room opened, and De Maurevert entered.

A glance was sufficient to inform the new Grand Prévôt of Auvergne as to the position of the two interlocutors, to assure him that, in the combat which was taking place, the advantage was not with Raoul.

"Get back to your dungeon, gallows-bird!" he cried, pushing the apostle roughly before him; "you will hardly have time to study your part in the very serious entertainment preparing for you. Reflect, that your office of hangman imposes on you the necessity of dying not only with courage, but with grace and politeness of manner. You smile, amiable Benoist! Very good!—that is bearing yourself bravely! Do you know what I should do, if I had the misfortune to be in your place? While they were pressing me—for you will have to be pressed, while they were breaking me on the wheel—for you will be broken on the wheel, I should sing either a drinking or a love song; and have a prodigious success. You will sing, will you not, gentle Benoist?"

The Chief of the Apostles shrugged his shoulders, and replied mockingly:

"I thank you infinitely for your good advice, captain; but, alas! it is not possible for me to profit by it."

"You have not a singing voice? Well then, instead of singing you shall declaim; the effect produced by your gracefulness of action will be all the greater. I will send you a choice of modern poetry to your dungeon to-morrow, amiable Benoist; and, if you take my advice, you will select something from either Maitre Bail or Maitre Ronsard."

"Benoist will not need to avail himself of your advice, captain," said Sforzi; "he is not going to die, he says."

"Not going to die!" repeated De Maurevert, pretending the greatest astonishment.

"He declares," continued Raoul, "that he possesses a secret which ensures him impunity."

"A secret!" cried the captain, with affected commiseration; "unhappy man, how could you act so indiscreetly? Did it not occur to you that, from the moment your indiscretions are of a kind to compromise a gentleman of honor, you would be executed privately, in secret, in your dungeon? What a triumph you have spoiled!—your poetical declamation would have had such a beautiful effect!"

The wretch's blood ran cold as he listened to the ironical address of the new Grand Prévôt of the province of Auvergne.

"Monseigneur," continued De Maurevert, bowing lowly to Sforzi, "if it is your excellency's wishes that this good fellow Benoist, should not appear before the Commissioners, there is no time to lose. The execution must be proceeded with to-night. If your lordship would leave the matter with me, I will to-morrow inform any one who may take the trouble to inquire about him, that he anticipated the fate preparing for him by a voluntary death."

"Let him be taken back to his dungeon," replied Sforzi; "I will determine between now and to-morrow what shall be done with him."

De Maurevert seized Benoist by the arm, and