

The marquis was still speaking when a threatening murmur, accompanied with the clanking of swords, was heard in the room. Ashamed of their inaction, the gentlemen present had at length determined to espouse the chevalier's cause.

A sardonic smile played about the lips of the Marquis de la Tremblais. He rose from his chair, and, in an imperious tone of voice, called out:

"Open those doors! These gentlemen appear to be growing somewhat overheated. A little cool air will do them good!"

No sooner were the doors thrown open than the gentlemen perceived a hundred soldiers armed to the teeth, and apparently awaiting a signal from their master. The half-drawn swords returned to their scabbards, and the threatening murmurs ceased.

"Ah!" said the marquis, with a mocking smile, "it must be admitted that the customs of our ancestors were extremely good customs. If I had been obliged to address myself to a Feudal Court, or present a petition to Parliament, to keep myself from being assailed by you, my very dear neighbors, I should, in all probability, have been a dead man at this moment. Gentlemen, I will not detain you any longer. I hope that, recovered from your momentary error, you will plainly see how good a reason I have for punishing this Sforzi, and that you will not entertain any angry feeling towards me for inflicting on him so well-deserved a chastisement."

"So, monsieur," cried Raoul, "the order which you have given, to assassinate me, is serious, irrevocable?"

"Serious and irrevocable, Monsieur Sforzi." "And you imagine, marquis, that a gentleman will submit to the dignity of the pillory, the scourge, and the gibbet?"

"In the first place, Monsieur Sforzi, nothing proves to me that you are a gentleman; and, further—I confess—I am curious to know in what manner you think it possible to escape my justice?"

"In what manner, wretch? See!"

Quicker than thought, the chevalier hurled aside the guards who surrounded him, and with a furious bound, sprang head-foremost towards one of the pillars which supported the massive mantelpiece of one of the two chimneys in the room; but, alas! the cords by which his legs were bound together stopped him in the midst of his course, and he fell heavily on the floor.

"Take him back to his dungeon, and until to-morrow morning let him not be out of sight for one moment," said the marquis, coolly.

CHAPTER XXII.

PRELIMINARIES OF DEATH.

It was five o'clock in the morning. The dull grey light of a bleak and dusky dawn, not unlike the twilight of a winter's night, imperfectly lit the dungeon of the Chevalier Sforzi. The young man, resting against the wall, with his arms hanging by his sides and his head drooped upon his chest, lay sunk in feverish sleep. On either side of him stood, stiff and motionless as a statue, one of the men-at-arms of the Marquis de la Tremblais. The air of unconcern of these two guardians proved how familiar they were with scenes of blood and misery.

Suddenly the door of the dungeon grated on its hinges, and Benoit entered the sombre and lugubrious cell.

The Chief of the Apostles had exchanged the hunting dress he usually wore for a fancy costume of terrible significance. He was now attired in scarlet serge from head to foot, and it was impossible to mistake him for any other than the executioner.

"You may retire, companions," he said, addressing the men-at-arms. "Your watch is ended—my duties begin."

After the departure of the two guards, the Chief of the Apostles advanced to the young man, and placing himself in front of him, examined his features with close and sustained attention. His face expressed rather the terror of a criminal than triumphal delight.

"Beyond all doubt," he muttered to himself, "this young man possesses unconquerable bravery and courage. His conduct has been glorious and loyal, and yet he is about to die, the victim of a frightful injustice, an odious vengeance! Yet, in spite of the calmness of his conscience, his last sleep has been troubled by terrible dreams. He struggles against his position; he cannot submit to his fate. When he wakes he will most likely find in his pride the strength to appear resigned; but I, who have detected the secrets of his sleep, shall not be duped. Oh! if an innocent and brave man is so agitated before the moment of his end, what must a guilty one be? That thought terrifies and unmans me. I see myself at my last hour, abandoned by all, hated by all, alone with the recollection of my offences. Ah! if all the people who tremble at my presence but knew the terror and despair that prey upon my soul, instead of fearing, they would pity me. But now I am too far gone in crime to retrace my steps. Courage!"

He several times passed his hands over his eyes; then, bending down, struck the chevalier on the shoulder.

"Hé! monsieur!" he cried—"get up. You are waited for."

The young man, rudely startled from sleep, could not forbear making a gesture of surprise, and almost of alarm, at sight of the Chief of the Apostles.

"I was a fool," said Benoit to himself, "to take a such pity on myself. It is fear alone, and

not remorse, that protects a man at his last hour; and fear overpowers the innocent and guilty alike."

The emotion caused to the chevalier by the sight of the Chief of the Apostles scarcely lasted two seconds. He then looked coolly at his inebriated visitor, and, in a calm and assured tone, remarked:

"Your costume, Maître Benoit, tells me the object of your presence. The marquis does things grandly! He loses no means of rendering the execution of his crimes effective. If I am to follow you, lead on!"

"Chevalier," replied Benoit, "you have still one hour to live."

"Then why did you wake me?"

"The Chief of the Apostles hesitated."

"Monsieur le Chevalier," he said at length, with an air of embarrassment, "I thought it would be agreeable to you to be warned a little before-hand. Men condemned to death have ordinary arrangements to make. Have you nothing to bequeath—no remembrances to send—to your family?"

"My family!" repeated the young man sadly. "Alas! I have none."

"But, mademoiselle!"

The chevalier started.

"Silence, wretch!" he exclaimed, in an imperious tone. "Let not the name of her I love pass your lips. Ah, I understand—you perform an execrable mission. You are commanded by the marquis to darken my last moments and weaken my courage; you will fall in your project, Benoit. I have commended my soul to heaven, where I shall meet again her from whom I have been torn on earth."

"Monsieur Sforzi," replied the Chief of the Apostles, after a short silence, "when you were conducted to prison, a belt was found upon you filled with gold pieces. Do you not wish to dispose of this money, which has been placed in the hands of the marquis?"

"Let your master keep it—theft and murder go well together."

"My master is too magnificent and too glorious to profit by your spoils. I am quite sure that at your request he will immediately remit this money to whomsoever you direct."

"And you desire to be that person?"

"Well, chevalier, I will not deny that such generosity would purchase, not only my gratitude and esteem, but all my best attention and respect. It is I who am charmed with your execution. Now, in that there is one detail of which, perhaps, you are ignorant. I will not conceal from you that there are many ways of hanging a man—the cord may be more or less well fastened, he may be more or less roughly swung into the air. I am known throughout the province for my experience as a hangman; I know how to render it with the subject confined to my hands, either ridiculous, piteous, or sublime—to prolong his sufferings or to curtail his agony. Be assured that, in spite of the calculations spread abroad concerning me, I am highly accessible to the feeling of gratitude. For example, if you will bequeath to me your belt-full of golden crowns, I will place the knot in such a manner that you will die as instantly as if you had been struck dead by a thunderbolt. It is the interest solely which I feel for you which induces me to enter into these explanations. I quite admit, between us, that your condemnation is not the most regular, and that your crime is not so monstrous as my master affects to think it. I should be sorry, therefore, knowing you to be half innocent, that any parsimony on your part should compel me to act with severity towards you."

"Like master, like servant," muttered Sforzi, with disgust. "So be it, Maître Benoit; I consent to accept of you for my inheritor."

"Ah, Monsieur le Chevalier, the recollection of your goodness and munificence will live eternally in my memory."

"I put one condition, however, on my generosity," continued the unfortunate young man. "What is the condition?"

"That you procure for me proper linen and habiliments. My dress, horribly torn during the assault on Tauve, is quite unworthy of the charming assembly convoked by your master to be present at my death. I must do honor to my host."

"Be sure, Monsieur le Chevalier, that the marquis will be deeply touched by this delicacy on your part. I hasten to fetch you all that you demand."

"One word more, good and excellent Benoit."

"I am at your orders, monsieur."

"You will have to expend out of my heritage a certain sum, which I shall name, for masses to be said for my soul."

A shadow passed over the apostle's features; but, after a moment's reflection, he said:

"With whom do you wish to arrange for these masses to be performed?"

"To whom can I address myself in my dungeon but yourself, Maître Benoit?"

"I accept the duty with pleasure," replied the Chief of the Apostles, the shadow entirely disappearing from his face.

Scarcely ten minutes had passed since the completion of this hideous bargain before Benoit returned to his patient.

"Here, Monsieur le Chevalier," he said, placing a bundle on the floor, "I have conscientiously fulfilled my engagement. Magnificent linen—clothes almost new! Ah! I had almost forgotten. Will you, first, be so good as to take the trouble to draw up a paper—your last will and testament? I have brought writing materials."

In spite of the irons attached to his wrists, the chevalier contrived to write in tolerably legible characters the desired will.

"Now, Monsieur le Chevalier," Benoit went on, "let us proceed with your toilette. Will you do me the honor to accept my services as valet?"

The chevalier rose, and the Chief of the Apostles, after having taken from the bundle he had brought with him a perfectly white shirt, assisted Sforzi to take off his tattered and dirty garments.

Suddenly the apostle turned pale, and addressed his victim in a trembling voice:

"Monsieur le Chevalier," he said, "you bear, just above the heart, the scar of a dangerous wound. I could never have believed that any one so struck could have lived. How long is it since you were so cruelly wounded?"

"In my earliest youth."

"Ah!—In what country?"

"Here—in Auvergne."

The Chief of the Apostles started and let fall the vestment he was holding ready to place on the chevalier's shoulder.

"Monsieur," he cried, "one more question."

"Leave me in peace. I desire to spend the last few minutes of my life in contemplation and prayer."

"You are wrong to refuse to satisfy my curiosity," continued Benoit. "I do not think I am mistaken in believing that up to the present time the secret of your birth has remained a mystery to you. Well, I was on the point of raising the veil which shrouds your past history."

These words awakened Raoul's whole attention.

"What do you say?" he cried.

"I say, Monsieur Sforzi, that such a scar as you bear is too remarkable to be found in two persons, and is a revelation to me. I know well that at the moment of being hung people generally care little about the alliances they may be quitting on earth; but, on the other hand, I have seen condemned men absorbed in the affairs of their family up to the last moment of their lives."

"Have you known my family, Benoit?"

"I believe so, monsieur. I beg your pardon, I mean chevalier."

"Explain yourself!" cried Sforzi, eagerly, almost forgetful of the horror of his situation.

"It was here, in Auvergne, that you were wounded, you say? How many years ago?"

"Twenty-two."

"The time is exactly right. By whom were you saved?"

"By a troop of free-lances."

"A troop of free-lances did pass through the province of Auvergne at that period. Where did they find you?"

"In a wood. I was, as I have been told, bathed in blood, and no longer gave any sign of life. They thought me dead, and it was only by a miracle of Providence that I could have been saved."

As the unfortunate young man continued to speak, the pallor which had overspread the face of the Chief of the Apostles at the commencement of the conversation augmented in intensity, and by the time Raoul had finished speaking, Benoit had become perfectly livid.

"It is he!" thought the ruffian "and yet I struck with a firm hand and pitilessly! My poignard pierced him up to the hilt! Not my senses are bewildered; I am under the influence of some shameful and puerile weakness! That must be it. This scar, by calling to my memory the scene of the murder, must have unsettled my reason. The child must have died! and the dead never come back from their graves! Yet—this wound, the troop of free-lances, the date of the event, twenty-two years ago! It is he!"

With haggard eyes, and features distorted by terror, Benoit rapidly parted the heavy locks which partly hid the chevalier's face, and gazed at him with ardent curiosity.

"Oh, no!" he went on thinking; "doubt is impossible! How is it I have not sooner observed this likeness to monseigneur! Yes, yes, it is he! What is to be done? Inform the marquis? He would not forgive me the crime of the past. Even supposing he pardoned me—would he allow me to possess a secret dishonouring the memory of his father? No; certainly he would not. He would make sure of my discretion by my death. He acts on the maxim that the dead alone know how to hold their tongues. Besides, how do I know that this revelation would be agreeable to him? The contrary is much more likely, for such a revelation would interfere with his vengeance, and leave unpunished the affront he has sustained. Curse my curiosity! Better to hang the chevalier than to be stabbed or pistolled myself. The cord will complete the work I left unfinished two and twenty years ago. Yes, Sforzi must die!"

While all these confused thoughts were passing through the mind of the Chief of the Apostles, Raoul was clinging with all the energy of his soul to the hope which was dawning upon his mind. If, he argued, it were made manifest that he belonged to a powerful and illustrious family, the marquis would shrink from the accomplishment of his work of death; and he, Raoul, might still escape in safety from the terrible extremity to which he saw himself reduced. It was with painful anxiety, therefore, he further questioned the executioner.

"Well, Benoit?" he demanded in an agitated tone.

"Well," replied the Chief of the Apostles, bowing his head and speaking almost savagely, "I find I was mistaken; you could not be the person I was thinking of. Come; your time is up."

"A little complaisance and courage—the sooner all is over, the better for you. There!

you are now dressed," he added, tying round the chevalier's neck the sleeves of the pourpoint, which the iron on his wrists would not allow to be put on properly over his arms. "I assure you you look charmingly; the women will faint quite comfortably on seeing you. Your execution will be a real triumph for you!"

At that moment the lugubrious sound of the passing bell penetrated the dungeon.

"Will you follow me, Monsieur Sforzi?" said Benoit, coolly; "you are being called."

Sforzi knelt, and for five minutes prayed fervently. He then rose, and his features bore scarcely any trace of emotion; his lips alone gently moved, pronouncing the name of Diane.

"Lead on," he said to Benoit. The victim and the executioner passed from the dungeon together.

(To be continued.)

DESMORO;

OR,

THE RED HAND.

BY THE AUTHOR OF "TWENTY STRAWS," "VOICES FROM THE LUMBER ROOM," "THE HUMMING-BIRD," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER XIX.

Madame Volderbond was transfixed with terror when she was informed that her late husband's remains were about to be exhumed, and an inquest held on them, there being a suspicion that he had not died a natural death.

It was Doctor Durgan himself who made this startling announcement to Olympia, who received it with white cheeks and shifting eyes, and many other gullible demonstrations which she could not hide.

She said she was surprised and distressed to hear that her poor dead husband was not suffered to remain in his grave in peace. How did they imagine he had died? Did he not have a long fit of illness, and did not sick people die? The captain was an old man; and as such, it was the most natural thing in the world that he should take his leave of life. Of course it was very unpleasant and painful for her to think that his body was to be disturbed about such nonsensical rubbish as it pleased a set of idle persons to circulate. Would gold have any power to put a stop to such disgraceful proceedings? If so, she would willingly give Dr. Durgan a thousand pounds to keep Captain Volderbond's vault still closed upon him.

The listener shook his head. Olympia's eager words and scared looks had confirmed his worst suspicions; and she who had once appeared to him lovely and pure as an angel now looked ugly and hideously deformed.

"You don't speak, Dr. Durgan," proceeded she, anxiously, and rapidly changing color. "Can't you contrive to keep the poor old man in his grave? It's scandalous, that it is, that I, his wife, can't prevent you meddling with him! I wish magistrates, and such like plying people would just mind their own business and let mine alone! Dr. Durgan, I will give you a cheque for a thousand pounds this very instant, if you will promise to manage the affair for me. Of course, you can swear that the captain died of the cholera, or of fever, or of any other disease. I'll confirm your statement, whatsoever such may be! Do you hear me, doctor? Answer me—oh, answer me!"

"I am a powerless individual in this matter, madame," he rejoined, stiffly; "and ever were I otherwise, I should refuse to listen to you. The affair is in the hands of the law, and justice will dispose of it."

Olympia looked at the speaker, and her white face grew whiter and whiter. But she struggled with her terrors, and endeavored to overcome them.

Her companion was marking all the changes of her countenance, and he was drawing his own conclusions from what he saw.

Madame Volderbond was wishing that she could fly—fly far away. But whither could she fly to? There was no possible escape for her; she was hemmed in on all sides.

She fixed her lustrous orbs on the doctor's stern face, and, filling her voice with all its melting tones, once more addressed him.

"Doctor, this affair will rouse the tongue of scandal against me, and fairly break my heart! Oh, let me persuade you to stand my friend at this moment! I know that your influence could do much—could do all that I wish! Do you really think that he was poisoned?" she asked, abruptly.

"I am almost certain of the fact, madame!"

"How horrible!" she exclaimed with a well-simulated shudder. "But who could have administered anything injurious to him?" she added, in a tone of assumed innocence, her own guilty soul quailing as she spoke.

He shook his head, and rose to depart. He was now convinced that Captain Volderbond had died by unfair means, and that Olympia was the traitress who had quashed the old man's life.

Doctor Durgan, who hated to look upon her now, turned loathingly away. She held out her hand to him, but he avoided its touch, as if such had been venom-charged; and reaching the door, hastily bowed himself out of the room, never once pausing until he was in the road, mounted on his horse, galloping away.