

THE FAVORITE

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FANCY'S LOOM.

BY MARIE LE BARON.

Weave the bright thoughts to and fro,
Airy threads of wondrous glow;
Faster, faster, shuttle, fly
Through the air, and earth, and sky.

Weave a web of thought-work fine
Through the web of souls divine,
Soul of woman, soul of man,
Weave them by God's perfect plan.

Swiftly flies the shuttle through,
To and fro in heaven's view;
Fancy weaves her rainbow web,
Braiding in life's endless thread.

FEUDAL TIMES:

OR,

TWO SOLDIERS OF FORTUNE.

A Romance of Daring and Adventure.

Translated especially for the FAVORITE from the French of Paul Duplessis.)

CHAPTER XXIII.

THE LAST HOUR.

The market-place of the town of Besse, the chief place in the jurisdiction of the Marquis de Tremblais, presented a spectacle at once picturesque and terrible on the morning fixed for the execution of the Chevalier Sforzi.

Pushing his audacity and bravado to the extreme, the marquis had summoned, by sound of trumpet, all the surrounding villagers to be present at the execution. So great was the fear inspired by this redoubtable feudal tyrant in the minds of his vassals and neighbors, that, from four o'clock in the morning, an immense and compact crowd filled the spot designed for the accomplishment of the sanguinary solemnity.

In the middle of the market-place two sinister and lugubrious objects attracted all eyes. The first was a kind of stone pillar, nearly twelve feet high, surrounded at its base by a narrow stand or platform, reached by five wide stone steps, and furnished, at about a quarter of its height, with a massive iron ring, solidly secured between the joints of the stone. This construction represented the pillory. The second object on which the general attention was fixed was a gibbet of oak, painted black, with a ladder reared against it.

The crowd, contrary to its custom, was grave, silent, and self-restrained. Everybody present was well informed of the conduct of the chevalier at the catastrophe of Taave, and felt both admiration and sympathy for the young man.

At length a shudder ran through the immense circle of spectators gathered about the pillory and the gibbet. The tolling of bells announced the approach of the victim; Raoul, in company with Benoist, in a kind of cart, was coming from the chateau.

Two companies, each of one hundred armed men, preceded and followed the funeral cortege; the marquis, dressed in complete mail and mounted on a war-horse magnificently harnessed, rode with the rear guard.

Scarcely were the gates of his chateau closed behind him, than the marquis raised himself in his stirrups, and looked before him with sustained attention, his eyes having rested on a troop of horsemen coming to meet him. Fearing a surprise or treason, he at once commanded a halt, and then spurred forward with a dozen of his men-at-arms in the direction of the unknown cavaliers. Suddenly a flash of fury darted from his eyes, as he recognized at the head of the advancing troop, Monsieur de Canilhac, the Governor of the Province of Auvergne. In the course of a few seconds the two marquises met.

"It is you, Monsieur de Canilhac, is it?" said the Marquis de la Tremblais. "I did not expect either the pleasure or honor of meeting you this morning."



"I HAVE NOTHING BUT MY DEVOTION TO OFFER YOU."

"Be assured, marquis," replied the Governor, "that great as the pleasure in which I ordinarily feel at meeting you, I would willingly have given a thousand crowns rather than have found myself on your path this morning, constrained as I am to act a most ridiculous part."

"In what way, monseigneur?"

"You can hardly fail to see, marquis, that as Governor for his Majesty of the Province of Auvergne, I cannot, without sacrificing all my duties, suffer the royal authority to be invaded. Now, the execution of this Sforzi constitutes, on your part, the crime of *lèse-majesté*—a violation of all existing laws, so manifest that, if committed with my knowledge, I should be bound to oppose it by all means in my power."

"With your knowledge!" repeated the Marquis de la Tremblais, half in astonishment. "Pardieu!—I do not think I have taken much pains to conceal my intentions: You have only to see for yourself."

"I prefer, on the contrary, to see nothing," replied the Governor, "and that is precisely why I am playing at this moment a highly ridiculous part. It is clear, marquis, that two gentlemen like ourselves would make a very ill figure in coming to hostilities on account of the hanging of a mere nameless adventurer. This being so, to shield my responsibility, and at the same time to avoid interfering with your projects, I last night—under pretext of going on a tour of inspection through the province—left my government. My object in doing this is, in case your proceedings should create any unpleasant excitement at Court, to excuse my inaction on the ground of my being absent from Clermont."

"You are now, then, continuing your journey?"

"Precisely; and I should be glad it—to enable me to increase my distance from the scene of your action—you could make it convenient to delay this Sforzi's execution for the space of an hour. You see it is necessary for me to take a good deal of precaution, to avoid all chance of being suspected at Court."

The marquis reflected awhile before returning any answer.

"As your interests are in question," he said, at length, "a little more or less suffering to the adventurer is of no moment. Sforzi can wait."

"A thousand thanks, marquis. By the way," added the Governor, "I must not conceal from you that the noblesse of the province look with anything but favorable eyes on the execution of Sforzi. I therefore, on my own account especially, highly approve of the force you have brought in sight to-day, to insure the accomplishment of your intentions. I should even be glad if you would still increase the strength of your guards. I know that such precautions will lay you open to the suspicion of timidity, but what does that matter, so long as your object is safely attained?"

"Monseigneur!" cried the Marquis de la Tremblais, who had turned pale with rage as he listened to this suggestion of the Governor's, "I am truly sorry not to be able to gratify your wishes. So, because I go abroad accompanied as befits my rank, those clodpoles dare to suspect me of cowardice! Death—I will prove to them that my presence alone is sufficient to reduce them to silence! Not only will I not increase my escort, but I intend to diminish it,

retaining with me only as many men as will be strictly necessary to keep order in the crowd, and preserve a clear space about the gibbet."

"Ah, marquis, you cannot so easily mean to act so imprudently?"

"What I say I do, monseigneur.—Monsieur de Canilhac, I kiss your hands."

The two gentlemen parted.

"Fah!" said the Marquis de Canilhac, as he rode away, "I think I have not ill-played my part in this abominable comedy. I have more than redeemed the promise I made to Captain de Maurevert—to gain an hour's delay of the execution of his companion in arms. The marquis has fallen with wonderful readiness into the trap laid for his pride. Good!—he is sending back three-quarters of his escort, keeping with him hardly fifty men. De Maurevert is a rough antagonist, and—if he only is in time—the fifty men will be no more than a mouthful to him. I would willingly give a couple of thousand crowns to know that the marquis had been completely balked. Such an impudent, haughty, and cowardly ruffian deserves, on all accounts, to receive a severe lesson."

While the Governor was riding away with all speed, so as to avoid compromising his neutrality, Diane d'Aranges and Lehardy, hidden in one of the houses surrounding the market-place, were the prey of deadly anxiety. In vain had Lehardy striven to dissuade his mistress, pointing out to her the terrible consequences to which her temerity might expose her, even imploring her upon his knees to abandon her perilous project. Diane had resisted alike his remonstrances and prayers, and had come to Besse.

At the first stroke of the passing bell she had almost lost consciousness; but, by a supreme effort of will, she had succeeded in conquering her emotion, and when the procession crossed the last drawbridge of the chateau, resolved and mistress of herself, she awaited with the unconquerable courage of despair whatever was to happen. She was dressed in the costume of a peasant. Under his loose and coarse pourpoint Lehardy wore a coat of mail. A well-sharpened poignard was in his belt; and ready to his hand he had a knotty bludgeon hardened in the fire. For fear of arousing suspicion he had not dared to furnish himself with a sword.

Summoned by a loud and imperative knock at the outer door, Lehardy cautiously drew the bolt, and Captain de Maurevert, also dressed in the complete costume of a mountaineer, entered the cottage.

"Well, captain," instantly cried Diane, "the chevalier?"

"Is on his way, and will be here before long." So many conflicting and confused thoughts agitated the mind of Diane, that, for a moment, she was incapable of framing a second question; but her despairing look interrogated the captain.

"Alas! my good demoiselle," said De Maurevert sadly, "things are going ill. I greatly fear that dear Raoul will not meet the fate of my other associates, but will be hanged!"

"Ah, captain, captain!"

"Don't distress yourself so. What is the good of lamenting before the time comes?"

"There is no further hope then?"

"Yes and no. The doubtful point is—will the company of cuirassiers I have got together out of the men put under my command by the Marquis de Canilhac arrive in time?—before the crime is accomplished? I hope, without daring to trust."

"And if this company does not arrive, captain, what will you do?"

"Why, of course, I shall get myself killed, giving as much trouble as I can to the men-at-arms of the Marquis de la Tremblais."

"On the prompt arrival or withholding of this company, then, depends entirely the success of your enterprise?"

"Almost, mademoiselle. I have, it is true, planted some of my most devoted peasants in the crowd, but I place little reliance on their assistance. These people only know how to pillage. And, on your side, what have you done, mademoiselle?"

"Lehardy and I have called together those of the old vassals and persons under obligation to my mother, on whom I thought we could depend, and have distributed them among the crowd."

"With orders to obey me?"

"With orders to obey whoever raises his voice in favor of the Chevalier Sforzi."

De Maurevert shook his head in anything but a satisfied manner.

"All that is not worth much!" he muttered. "Ah!—if I had not set too high a ransom on that scoundrel, De Croixmore, I might now