

preceded by the troop of bandits, dismounted in the courtyard of the Chateau de Tournoll.

It need hardly be said that the entrance of the captain, still retaining his prisoner, produced a strange astonishment in those who witnessed it.

"Hullo!" cried De Maurevert, raising his voice, "some of you go and bring the Seigneur de Tournoll to me."

At these words a short thick-set man, with matted red hair, a mouth that seemed to open from ear to ear, sharp and intelligent eyes, and an abrupt and somewhat rolling gait, separated himself from a group of soldiers, and advanced towards the captain.

"What do you want with the Seigneur de Tournoll?" he demanded.

"The punishment of this cowardly member of his band now hanging like a sack of flour across my saddle-bow. I have too high an esteem for the character of the Seigneur de Tournoll, and take too strong an interest in his glory, not to inform him of the cowardice of one of his servants; for cowardice is commonly traitors."

"Explain yourself," said the red-haired man; "I do not understand you."

In a very few words the captain related what had occurred.

"The Seigneur de Tournoll thanks you, both for the good opinion you have of him personally, and for the service you have rendered him," replied the man with the red hair. "Justice shall be done to this coward."

"You express yourself with remarkable assurance for a simple soldier, friend," remarked De Maurevert, closely examining his interlocutor. "Are you, by chance, the Seigneur de Tournoll himself?"

"Possibly. And you?—who are you, and what motive brings you here?"

Instead of answering, De Maurevert burst into a roar of laughter.

"By Vulcan's nightcap, this is a good joke!" he cried—"a most amusing meeting! What, Seigneur Tournoll, you do not remember me? Death! that would be to have neither memory nor gratitude. Have you forgotten the capture and sack of the Catholic town of Isouire, in 1575, by the brave Huguenot, Captain Merle?"

"I remember the circumstances. What then?"

"Well—I was at that period serving as second under the orders of Captain Merle; my soldiers were about to put a hempen cord about your neck, when I intervened in time to save you."

"In that case you are the Huguenot De Maurevert?"

"I am De Maurevert; but I have ceased to belong to the pretended reformed religion. Grace has descended on me—I have seen the error of my ways—I confess and attend mass; I am cited among Catholics as one of the most fervent! But you, Seigneur de Tournoll, six years ago, at the sacking of Isouire, were as Catholic and as Roman as it was possible to be."

"Is it not always time to repent, and return to the right path?"

"My conversion is a proof."

"My abjuration is another."

The two adventurers looked at each other, smiling; each appreciated the other at his true value, and did full justice to his moral and religious pretensions.

"Captain de Maurevert," the bandit leader went on after a short silence—"and I say captain because I am sure you possess too much intelligence—having changed your religion—not to have advanced a step in rank; Captain de Maurevert, will you take the trouble to follow me? We shall talk more at our ease at table over a bottle of wine and between four walls than in this courtyard, open to all comers. If I am not mistaken, your presence at Tournoll indicates that you have some grave matter you want to talk to me about."

"You are not mistaken."

A few minutes later the Seigneur de Tournoll and De Maurevert were seated before a table covered with bottles, in one of the apartments in the chateau. It was the bandit who led the conversation.

"My dear captain," he said, "you just now addressed to me an unmerited reproach, which I will not conceal from you—touched me to the heart. You accused me of ingratitude; but I have not forgotten anything of the service you rendered me, my dear captain, nor the price which you made me pay for it. You imposed on me a ransom of two hundred crowns! Now, I hold ingratitude in abhorrence, and therefore I frankly assure you, before entering on the business which brings you here, I cannot suffer you to leave the Chateau de Tournoll until you have paid me four hundred crowns."

"Double your own ransom!"

"Exactly; but if you remember, when you taxed me I was only a simple cornet—you are a captain. Besides, there is the interest to be thought of. It is six years since the capture of Isouire; in times of insecurity like these, six years' interest represents at least the double of the original sum. Money's very dear just now; it is useless, therefore, Captain de Maurevert, to haggle over the arrangement. If, as is very probable, you have heard speak of me, you must know that I never alter from a decision I have once taken. Now let us talk about the business that has brought you here, and given me the pleasure of this visit."

From the bandit's manner of expressing himself De Maurevert saw that it would be useless attempting to change his resolution.

"Poor Chevalier Sarzi," he thought; "while you are rejoicing in the idea of my support, here am I a prisoner, and reduced to powerlessness. I know I shall get the four hundred crowns

the end, but too late to be able to fly to your assistance.

CHAPTER IX.

AN EMBARRASSING POSITION.

Thanks to his adventurous life, De Maurevert possessed a great fund of philosophy; no one knew better than he how to submit to necessity; therefore he accepted frankly, and without discussion, the disagreeable position in which he found himself.

"Captain Croixmore," he said—"for such, if my memory does not betray me, is your name,—I find, on reflexion, I owe you my sincere thanks for the high price at which you have taxed me; it proves to me that you hold me in more than ordinary esteem."

"If I had measured the sum of your ransom according to your merits, captain, it would have equalled the riches of a king."

"Ah, Seigneur de Tournoll, you overwhelm me! Gratitude, I see, has not changed you; you retain all your old amenity and refinement of gallantry! Be sure that, if ever the chances of war should throw you into my hands, I will repay with interest the kind attentions you shower upon me at this moment."

"I do not in the least doubt it, captain. Will it please you now to explain the motive which has brought you to the Chateau de Tournoll?"

"Before entering into the heart of the question, allow me, seigneur, to submit to you certain considerations, very weighty, and well worthy of your attention."

"Nothing hurries us, captain; therefore, pray explain yourself at any length you desire. I well know how methodical you are in business, and listen to you with all interest and attention."

"My dear Croixmore, you have, for two years, steered your bark with incontestable ability; success has so constantly crowned your exertions that you have come to believe yourself safe from all danger; but according to my notion, nothing is more fragile and insecure than your position. A loose stone on your road will suffice to make you stumble and throw you into the abyss. My frankness does not displease you, I hope?"

"Ah, captain! how can you imagine such a thing?"

"I do you an injustice, I see! Yes, you have a soul too highly placed to fear the truth! I continue. Your strength, I will not conceal it from you, rests entirely upon the support given you by the Huguenot party. Let but your Protestants desert you to-morrow and your power disappears. People envious of your glory—and they are many in the camps—would then cry 'infamy—brigandage!' They would without shame, accuse you of intercepting the roads, robbing travellers, imposing black mail on towns—in fact, a whole crowd of misdeeds! There would rise up against you a furious clamor, a general league. You would be overwhelmed by the torrent, carried away by the avalanche. Now the idea that your co-religionists misunderstand the services you have rendered them is neither so imaginary as you may suppose. I have just been through Auvergne, and I will not hide from you that, on all sides, in the castles as well as in the cottages, you are spoken of with an irritation and bitterness that bodes ill."

"What would you have me do, captain? Strong in the purity of my intentions, I despise these fools, who repay my generous devotion by such black ingratitude; and if they carry their perversity to the extent of coming here to rouse me in my humble retreat, I will, God willing, receive them in such a fashion that they will not soon think of repeating their visit."

"Seigneur de Croixmore," said De Maurevert, severely, "I may say without boasting that I have more sins on my conscience than I have hairs on my head. It is not for me, therefore, to be severe on the shortcomings of another man. There is one crime, however, which will always find me inexorable and pitiless, and that is sacrilege. You will infinitely oblige me by not mixing up the name of God with our conversation. This point settled once for all, I proceed with what I was saying. I admit that you have a strong garrison at your disposal, a conveniently fortified castle, and that you are not without military talent; but you forget that if the league with which you are threatened should actually be formed, you will have to make head against the whole nobility of the province, including the Marquis de Candillac, his Majesty's governor of Auvergne. Now I ask you whether it would be possible for you to withstand such an attack? No; a hundred, a thousand times no! Your castle of Tournoll would be taken in the turn of a hand, and you—for your nobility would be disputed—you would be hung as quickly as a galloway could be contrived for you! Well, now, Seigneur de Tournoll, it is from this not very entertaining prospect I wish to save you."

The leader of the bandits of Tournoll remained for a moment silent; he was evidently reflecting on what De Maurevert had said to him.

"Captain," he answered at length, "it appears to me that you greatly exaggerate the dangers that threaten me. To please you, however, I will admit them to be such as you have painted them; but what does it matter to you whether I am hanged or not? Whence comes the great and sudden interest you now manifest for me? I never before suspected you of being so powerfully actuated by motives of friendship."

De Maurevert did not fail to recognize the irony of this remark.

"My dear Urolkmore," he replied, "it is a matter wholly indifferent to me whether you are stabbed, hung, broken on the wheel, quartered, burned alive, or buried living. He quite sure I should not take the least concern in your welfare if my own were not bound up with it."

"That puts a new face on the whole question, captain; for the moment you serve me with the idea of profit to yourself, I have faith in you. Go on, I beg."

"I say, then, that you are seriously threatened with the latter; but there remains one means of turning the storm aside—one chance of safety."

"Show me what it is."

"It is by opposing the league which is being formed against you by a league created by yourself. Listen to me attentively. My project is ingenious and bold. You are not ignorant, Croixmore, to what a degree of servitude and suffering the lower people are reduced. Mountaineers or inhabitants of the plain, alike crushed beneath the load of taxes imposed on them, dying of hunger—literally dying. These unfortunate creatures do not even own the blood of their blood, for their children even no longer belong to them. Heaven sends them a pretty daughter—a robust son; both are torn from them. The daughter passes to the stranger, the son is incorporated with the huntmen of the lord of the soil. The common people are not so dull-headed as the nobles show themselves to be. They reflect, think, act! Now, I know from a certain source that a combination, which has taken the name of the League of Equity, is at this moment being organized in several provinces, and more particularly in Auvergne."

"I knew all that without your telling, captain."

"So much the better. It will spare me the trouble of entering into long explanations. This is now what remains for you to do: To call together the malcontents, and assure them that, touched by their grievances, sensible of their sufferings, you take their property and persons under your protection."

"Proceed, captain."

"That Catholics and Protestants shall be the same in your eyes, and receive an equal support from you."

"Better and better, captain! Pray go on!"

"That, wishing to give them entire confidence in the loyalty of your intervention, a striking guarantee of your good faith, you will lead them to attack the Chateau de la Tremblais, and aid them to destroy the stronghold of the most dreaded and abhorred noble in the province!"

Once at the head of a formidable party, my dear Croixmore, the nobles will inevitably have to make terms with you; and his Majesty, Henry III., delighted with you for having abetted his superb vassals in Auvergne, will not rest content with merely approving your conduct, but will reward you. I stand as well as possible with the king—almost intimate with him in fact—and will undertake the conduct of this negotiation. I shall be greatly surprised if his Majesty does not raise your Chateau de Tournoll into a county, or a marquisate! Ah! my dear Croixmore, what a charming prospect the future offers you, if you know how to profit by present circumstances. What a difference to the galloway, which, at this moment, bounds your horizon!"

De Maurevert paused and waited for the bandit's reply. For a moment the generally impressive features of the bandit leader underwent a noticeable change; a gleam of sarcasm darted from his blue-grey eyes, while a wicked and cruel smile played about his heavy lips and exposed a double range of teeth like the fangs of a bull-dog.

To hide completely the storm that was raging within him, the Seigneur de Tournoll kept silent for some time before replying; De Maurevert, occupied in draining a second glass of wine, observed nothing of his interlocutor's agitation.

"Captain," the latter said at length, "for a man who has seen so much of the world as you have, you are strangely wanting in craft and address. Perhaps, however, I may attribute to the poor opinion you have conceived of my intelligence the small amount of precaution you take in dealing with me. Now, having too great a contempt for one's enemy, one often runs the risk of defeat, and that is just what has happened to you."

"Why, what raven's song are you singing, my dear Croixmore?" cried De Maurevert, in astonishment. "May the devil fly away with me living if I understand a word of your song!"

The bandit shrugged his shoulders with an air of pity; then, no longer capable of restraining his anger, and keeping up an appearance of coolness, dashed his fist down upon the massive table before him with such force that half the bottles with which it was laden were sent smashing on to the floor.

"Tudieu!" cried De Maurevert, pinching up, "it seems to me, Monsieur ex-Catholic, you are giving way to violence. Softly, I beg,—do not let us lose temper. Death! we are alone, and before you have time to call your vagabonds to your aid, nothing would prevent me, if I were so inclined, breaking you across my knee, or wringing your neck. Be calm, therefore—and above all, polite. I hate ill-manners, Monsieur Croixmore."

De Maurevert's face announced so much determination, and his almost superhuman strength so entirely guaranteed the accomplishment of his threat, that the bandit, after a brief hesitation, resumed his seat without daring to engage in a struggle.

"So," remarked De Maurevert, "the little outbreak is subsiding. A glass of wine, my

dear friend, and it will pass completely away. It has done so already. Let us continue our interrupted conversation. In what have I tried to deceive you? Your conduct presents a mystery beyond my power to fathom it."

The bandit, conquered by the other's sang-froid, offered no opposition to the discussion.

"Captain," he cried, in a tone still moved by rage, "the cause of my indignation is perfectly natural. The sight of a spy routes me to fury!"

"Touching conformity of feelings—that is exactly like me!" cried De Maurevert. "But where is the spy?"

"The spy is here, captain."

"Here?" repeated De Maurevert, looking round on all sides. "I see no one here besides ourselves."

"You are the spy, captain! Pray keep your seat and listen to me. Captain De Maurevert, you are sent here to me by the Marquis de la Tremblais! Do not interrupt me. I promise presently, if you persist in playing out the part you are acting, to listen to any justification you may attempt. Let me proceed. You know very well, captain, in coming to Tournoll, that I am already at the head of the League of Equity, and that my intention is to attack the Chateau de la Tremblais. For the purpose of inspiring me with confidence, you have feigned to advise me to execute the project which I am already on the eve of executing. I repeat, then, De Maurevert, the trap was too coarsely baited. It would have been cleverer to have said to me, 'Sire de Croixmore, I am short of money, free of engagements, and desirous of occupying my leisure; do what you like with me.' In that case, perhaps, I might have trusted your words, and become the dupe of your artifice. But, no; you would go a roundabout way, and have missed your mark. How it happens that the Marquis de la Tremblais has become acquainted with my designs, I know not; I am not, however, without suspicions on this subject—certain suspicions which I shall very shortly verify. Captain, your position is detestable—the gibbet is waiting for you. A little frankness, then—for that alone can save you. Who is the traitor who has sold me to the marquis, and what are the Seigneur de la Tremblais' intentions?"

De Maurevert's stupefaction was such that for several seconds he was incapable of pronouncing a word. The bandit saw in this indecision a new evidence of his prisoner's culpability. At length the unfortunate captain recovered himself by a great effort, and began his justification.

"Death!" he exclaimed, "this is all a pleasant joke. The idea of hanging me as a spy of the Marquis de la Tremblais! I the spy of the marquis—of my deadly enemy! Why, the least exercise of common sense would make you understand, Croixmore, that if I had accepted such a mission I should have proceeded in a totally different manner. I am as completely innocent of the crime as I am at a loss to defend myself from the accusation of it. Oh, if I were guilty, I should not want for good reasons. I understand clearly that my advice, to put yourself at the head of the League of Equity and besiege the Chateau de la Tremblais, coincides, by some prodigious chance, with the same plan already formed by yourself; but may the devil swallow me if I see my way out of the entanglement into which I have innocently fallen. Whatever comes of it, do not forget, De Croixmore, that I am a king's officer, the friend of Messieurs de Guise, and that any injury done to my person will be severely punished."

An evil smile curled the lips of the bandit, as he replied:

"Oh, the king's power does not greatly awe me. As for you, Captain De Maurevert, taking into consideration the services you have rendered me, and the four hundred crowns you have to pay me, I will consent to—see! Idea strikes me. A meeting of the members of the League of Equity takes place in the mountains this evening; you shall accompany me. Perhaps among all those people there may be someone who can give me information as to your connection with the marquis. Good-bye, captain; when it is time to set out, I will send and let you know."

The leader of the bandits of Tournoll saluted his prisoner, and left him without waiting for a reply. De Maurevert heard him fasten the massive oak door of the room with lock and bolt.

"Death!" he said to himself, "it is pretty clear that my association with Raoul so far from been of more cost than profit to me. Bah! it is no fault of my poor companion. Hang me—me! What an absurd notion! Before they could get possession of my person, I should massacre two-thirds of the garrison. Horrible idea!—if they should leave me to die of hunger!"

In the course of the two hours, during which he was left alone, the captain formed the most gigantic and extravagant projects; but he did not come to any definite resolution.

It was quite dark when he heard heavy steps, accompanied by the clank of iron, sound in the interior of the chateau. Soon afterwards the door of the room which served for his prison was opened, and the bandit Croixmore, with a dozen armed men in attendance on him, presented himself.

"Come, captain," he said, "the hour of the meeting is approaching. We must start."

De Maurevert was about to cross the threshold, when Croixmore stopped him by a gesture.

"Excuse me, captain, but before going with us, you must take off your breastplate."

"What for?"

"Because your cuirass would protect you from the daggers of the two men I have set to