

and five hundred clodpoles, bound together by a common interest, form unquestionably a power. Now, the poor gentlemen who have rallied to my flag already exceed a thousand in number. You will admit, monseigneur, I think, that a thousand cavaliers, properly armed and mounted, count for at least as much as the three hundred cuirassiers at your disposal. There, then, is your cavalry annihilated by mine! As for the foot soldiers, you have scarcely five hundred pikemen, ill-paid and ill-fed; and, to sum them up, not very much to be feared. My peasants amount to the very respectable number of three thousand. Now, in good faith, I will ask you whether you think six of my mountaineers are not equal to one of your pikemen? Between us, then, monseigneur—I put the case with extreme modesty—there exists an equality of strength, but now I have to submit to you a scruple which greatly troubles my conscience. I ask you whether it is proper for Monsieur de Maurevert, a gentleman of good ability, as all know, to mix himself up in the affairs of peasants and clodpoles? If my mountaineers had revolted under an honest pretext of religion or politics, I might have seen my way on a pinch; but no, the peasants have taken up arms in the name of Equity, and their avowed purpose is to destroy the privileges of the nobles. That I repeat, troubles my conscience, and I should not be sorry, monseigneur, to learn your opinion on this delicate subject."

"My opinion," replied Monseigneur de Canilhac coldly, "must already be known to you. Remembering that I represent the royal authority in the province of Auvergne, you cannot be in any doubt as to what my view of this rebellion must be."

"But, monseigneur," said De Maurevert, "the moment you seriously act as the governor of this province I withdraw the approbation I gave just now to your refusal to aid the Chevalier Sforzi. If you are his majesty's representative, you can no more support the disobedience of the great than the rebellion of the small. Come, monseigneur de Canilhac, let us throw our cards down upon the table face upward. You find yourself placed between the anvil and the hammer. Will you allow me to extricate you from this unpleasant position? Help me to save the Chevalier Sforzi, and I will rid you of the League of Equity."

"Explain yourself more clearly, captain," said the governor, somewhat eagerly.

"With pleasure, monseigneur, and without pretence. A thousand crowns down, your co-operation to save the life of the Chevalier Sforzi, and a letter stating that, in placing myself at the head of the League of Equity, I only had in view the interests of his majesty; and, on these conditions, I undertake to make such dispositions that it will be the easiest thing in the world for you to cut my clodpoles to pieces."

"Captain de Maurevert," replied Monseigneur de Canilhac, "I will be as frank with you as you have been with me. Your proposition gives me the greatest satisfaction. To two of your conditions I will subscribe with all my heart—that is to say, I will give you the letter and the thousand crowns—but as to taking part against the Marquis de la Tremblais, I cannot. Oh, do not imagine for a moment, captain, that I either love or esteem the marquis; quite the contrary. For a long time his arrogance has weighed heavily upon me; and if I were able to crush him, you should see with what pleasure I would do it."

"Death, monseigneur! If such are your feelings, it is impossible that we should not come to some agreement at last. *Parbleu!*—a mode occurs to me for putting us in accord at once."

"What is it, captain?"

"The simplest! Absent yourself for a few days from Clermont, and leave me in charge of the forces. I hasten to add, that if I fall in my attempt here at or as authorized you to disavow me on your return, and to declare against me with all your might, for what I give you free permission to call my felony and treason."

"Certainly," replied Monseigneur de Canilhac, after reflecting, "this method strikes me as being very ingenious; but it presents a great difficulty."

"So much the better, monseigneur! Every difficulty is for me a subject of triumph."

"Who will guarantee to me the faithful fulfillment of your promises, captain? Who can assure me that you are not laying a trap for me at this moment?"

"Ah, monseigneur, this suspicion shatters all my esteem for you! Monseigneur, if there is one thing universally notorious, it is the respect which I profess for my word. Everybody knows that Captain de Maurevert, culpable as he may have been in some regards, has never failed in his engagements. If the peasants had had the wit to bind me to their cause by a categorical and serious promise, the idea of allowing them to be cut to pieces would never have entered my mind; but, instead of being proud of my loyalty, they have preferred to hold me in suspicion. And for that they will be punished. Monseigneur, if you accept my proposals, I engage myself by oath neither to abuse your confidence, nor to make the smallest infraction from the conditions of our treaty."

"Captain," said the Marquis de Canilhac, after a long pause, "you may consider our treaty as almost concluded—it only remains for me to discuss some necessary details with you. For example, and chief of all, in what manner do you propose to yourself to employ the forces which I may place for the moment at your disposal? You cannot, I imagine, entertain so mad an idea as that of besieging the Château de la Tremblais?"

"Ah, monseigneur, is it possible you could en-

tain so mean an opinion of my judgment? To take such a proceeding without your assent would be to abuse your confidence. Be under no sort of apprehension; I will do nothing that can compromise you, and I will so arrange matters that even in the event of my falling, you shall find an easy and plausible pretext for denouncing me as a worthless rogue, who had taken advantage of your trustfulness. One last question, monseigneur. You must, as part of the duties of your office, have certain means of communication with the interior of the Château de la Tremblais?—these you must place at my command."

"Willingly."

"You must also help me to find a means of preventing the Marquis de la Tremblais hanging my friend, the chevalier, in the interior of the château."

"You, who are ordinarily so fertile in expedients, are slow of imagination to-day, captain?"

"As how, monseigneur?"

"The means you seek are ready to your hands. The Seigneur de la Tremblais is proud and disdainful; you only need to excite his pride to obtain the result you require."

"By my faith, monseigneur, I am still at fault!" cried De Maurevert, putting on a look of perplexity.

"I will cause the marquis to be informed this very day that the lower nobility of the province are greatly excited on the subject of the Chevalier Sforzi's execution, and invite him—under pretext of being alarmed for his safety—to have this execution performed within the walls of his château, in secret, and you may be certain that La Tremblais will instantly determine to make the execution as public and striking as possible. He is even capable of specially inviting both the nobility and commonsalty, to prove how much he places himself above public opinion!"

"By the caduceus of the gentle god Mercury!" exclaimed De Maurevert, with admiration, "if you were not governor of the province, monseigneur, you would be worthy to be an adventurer! An excellent *ruse!* But I will no longer enroach on your leisure. I will do myself the honor to call upon you to-night, at Clermont. Will you be good enough to send me a safe-conduct?"

"Here is a ring which serves me for a seal," said the marquis. "That will be sufficient for you."

The governor then took leave of Diane, and only retired from the spot after—striking condescension—having embraced the captain.

"You see, mademoiselle," said the latter, "there are ways of dealing with everybody. You have only to work on men through their interests. I saw the moment when, with your appeals to sentiments of honor, duty, and loyalty, you were leading the conversation directly to the hanging of poor Raoul. Now, all goes well. We are on the eve of a solution of our troubles!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE RIGHT OF THE STRONGER.

On the third day after that on which De Maurevert had sacrificed the League of Equity to save the Chevalier Sforzi, a great gathering of the neighboring nobility filled the reception hall of the Château de la Tremblais.

The marquis, with knit brows, arms crossed upon his chest, and sombre and absorbed bearing, paced the room silently in the midst of the assemblage, without deigning to take notice of the presence of his numerous visitors. In his angrily-clenched hand he crumpled two letters he had recently received. One of these letters—already known to the reader—was from Captain de Maurevert; the other bore the signature of Monseigneur de Canilhac. In fulfillment of the promise given to his new ally, the Governor of the province of Auvergne had notified to the Marquis de la Tremblais that the announced execution of the Chevalier Sforzi was producing a detestable effect on the nobles of the surrounding country, and counselled him to employ the greatest prudence and secrecy in consummating his vengeance.

Suddenly stopping, the marquis roughly addressed himself to a group of gentlemen:

"Parbleu, gentlemen!" he said in a bantering tone, "there is no need to put yourselves to any further inconvenience by talking in whispers. Speak out—I know the subject of your conversation!"

This insolent address caused painful astonishment to the gentlemen who heard it. Some of them, used as they were to the speaker's arrogance, felt that he had this time gone beyond all bearable limits.

"Monsieur le Marquis," replied one of the gentlemen, "one might rather suppose you were speaking as a judge to criminals, than as a gentleman speaking to his equals!"

"You have hit upon the right word, monsieur—'criminals!' interrupte! the marquis, fiercely.

"Death! I am not to be deceived by your airs of astonishment and hypocritical looks! Give over your contemptible mumbling! Have at least the courage of your infamy!"

"Monsieur le Marquis!"

"Silence! I interrupt you at your peril! You want to have an explanation? You shall have it. So, so, my good neighbors! my loyal and faithful allies! you did not expect to find the lion on his guard? You hoped to fall upon him in his sleep? You are strangely mistaken, gentlemen, and may well look so pale and ill at ease. I would lay a wager that at this moment, so thoroughly are you all taken aback, not one

of you remembers the motive with which he did the honor to pay me this visit! I will tell you what it was. You meditated interfering with the course of my justice; you hoped to save a wretch imprisoned in the dungeons of my château. Now, what particular interest have you in his vagabond, that, in his case, you venture to risk drawing down my anger upon yourselves?"

"Monsieur le Marquis, your unjust reproaches!"

"Silence, I say again! My good gentlemen, my excellent neighbors, so much dissimulation is wholly thrown away. Thanks to my power, I am too much above fear to stoop to lying! I have no need to employ the darkness of night in carrying out my designs—I act always in the full light of day! Hello, Bénédict! Let the vagabond Sforzi be brought here; I wish to question him before these friends of his, and pronounce sentence on him in their hearing!"

On receiving this order from his master, a hideous smile overspread the features of the Obier of the Apostles, who hurried from the room.

"Monsieur le Marquis," then said one of the visitors, "you have as much surprised as affronted us by your strange reception. It is necessary that there should be an immediate explanation between us. Do not forget, marquis, that, as well as yourself, we are gentlemen."

The Seigneur de la Tremblais gave vent to a mocking laugh.

"Be content, gentlemen, with my clemency, and do not risk, by imprudences and clumsy explanations, rousing my anger, which, up to the present time, I have been able to keep under control."

At this insolent response the gentlemen remained silent; they saw that to provoke the marquis in his own château was to incur certain destruction. It was plain enough, however, by the paleness of their faces, their fiery looks, and the trembling of their limbs under the influence of suppressed fury, that they only submitted to this outrage with thoughts of future vengeance.

During the five minutes which followed this scene a dull and lugubrious silence reigned throughout the vast room.

Presently one of the side doors opened, and the Chevalier Sforzi appeared surrounded by guards.

The proud and noble countenance of the unfortunate young man, who, with unquelling looks and head thrown proudly back, advanced with firm steps towards the marquis, fixing on him a fiery and audacious gaze, contrasted so magnificently with the paleness of his face, wasted by suffering, his untrimmed beard, his ragged dress, and his hands bound together by a heavy chain, that involuntarily a murmur of admiration and pity rose from the crowd of gentlemen assembled.

The Marquis de la Tremblais hit his upper lip till the blood started from it; then, affecting a calmness and impassibility to which the quivering of the muscles of his cheeks gave the lie, he slowly mounted the three steps of the dais on which his chair of state was placed, and seated himself. Certain that his prey could not escape him, he purposed enjoying the agony of his victim.

"Accused," he said, "I have decided, in my goodness and justice, before irrevocably pronouncing your sentence, to grant you permission to defend yourself. Let us see whether it is possible for you, by explanation of sincere repentance, to lessen the enormity of your crime. I give you full latitude for what I consent to call your justification. Speak; I am listening."

"Marquis de la Tremblais," replied the young man in a clear and sympathetic voice, "I do not quite understand the object of this criminal parody of justice. The office of the hangman is not to try, but to execute the patient handed to him by the law. The assassin does not converse with his victim, but seizes him by the throat and kills him. Hangman and assassin, why do you pretend to try me?"

"Sforzi, I am your judge," said the marquis, affecting great *sang-froid*, for he perceived that if he allowed his passion to carry him away the advantage of the struggle would rest with the chevalier.

"You a judge!" said Raoul, with bitter mockery. "By my faith, a pleasant pretension! A judge! A wretch who, in time of peace, without aggression, without provocation, without motive, does not hesitate to invade the house of a noble widow—a woman without defence—to murder her servants in their sleep, to pillage her riches, and, to crown his infamy, to murder this defenceless lady herself! A judge who still enjoys the bloody gains of his crime, who is not content with—exploit worthy of his courage—murdering the mother, steals the daughter's inheritance! Ah, marquis, your monstrous impudence inspires me almost with pity, for it makes me doubt whether you must not be out of your mind!"

The marquis must have been well assured of his vengeance to have borne as he did the audacious indignation of this language. Determined not to swerve from the part he had arranged with himself to play, he preserved a perfectly unmoved appearance.

"Sforzi," he replied, "my impartiality induces me to observe, in your interest, that your transports and insults can only aggravate the gravity of your position. A man supported by innocence expresses himself with thoughtfulness and dignity. You have not appreciated my conduct. Your part—and it was already sufficiently difficult without being further complicated—was to endeavor to lessen your guilt, and to answer the crime imputed to you. I accuse you, Sforzi, of having taken part with the Dame d'Erlanges,

my rebellious vassal; with having sustained by force of arms the rebellion of the said lady, and of having assisted in the massacre of my servants."

"What is the use of this ridiculous scene, De la Tremblais?" demanded Raoul. Would it not be simpler to settle the question by saying: 'Chevalier Sforzi, you inflicted on me a deadly injury, and my sword remained in its sheath; I cannot forgive either my own cowardice or my dishonor! By treason I have got you into my power—you shall die!' This language, De la Tremblais, might in some degree excuse the crime you meditate; for impudence pushed so far becomes a sort of courage! But no; you prefer to this striking justice a false and hypocritical show of legality! Marquis de la Tremblais, I put it to the loyalty of the gentlemen here present, to say whether your conduct presents the shadow of an excuse. Come, gentlemen!" he added, casting a rapid glance at the assembled gentlemen, "which of you agrees with the Marquis de la Tremblais?"

The gentlemen one and all bowed their heads and remained silent.

"You see, marquis," cried Raoul, "your friends, or accomplices—for if these men had been honest they would long ago have taken sword in hand and come to my rescue—your accomplices themselves shrink from the responsibility of your infamy!"

"Sforzi!" muttered the marquis, hoarsely; "for the last time, I repeat, you have not to occupy yourself with my conduct, but only to defend yourself from the terrible charge of rebellion which weighs upon you."

The young man paused for a moment, and then, in a tone no longer ironical or indignant, but full of nobility and dignity, replied:

"So be it, marquis. I consent to enter into the explanations you solicit, not that I desire to exculpate myself—I seek only to show how abominable your conduct towards the Dame d'Erlanges has been, and to make all the gentlemen here present participants in your crime. You talk of rebellion, marquis. In what respect, I pray, was the Dame d'Erlanges under susserisanship? The châtelines have never owed faith and homage to the Seigneurs de la Tremblais; but an old feudal custom, as the Dame d'Erlanges told me, imposed on their fortified house a tax or *tax* measures of corn to the marquise of La Tremblais. Supposing this tax to have been left unpaid, and to have been demanded by you and refused by the châteline of Tauve, was there not the Fendal Court to pronounce on your demand and its refusal? A judgment would have established your position, as well as that of the Dame d'Erlanges? You must be blinded by your pride to venture to talk of rebellion! I know but of two sorts—rebellion against the law, and rebellion against the commands of his Majesty, Henry III. of France. Beyond this, there may be disputes between the weak and the strong, the commoner and the gentleman, the tenant and the landlord—nothing else. In these cases the law speak as the sovereign, and justice follows in its steps."

"A last word, marquis. In entering upon this long explication, I have sought to prove that nothing, absolutely nothing, could justify the murder of the Dame d'Erlanges, the massacre of her servants, and the spoliation of her domain. Therefore I, the Chevalier Raoul Sforzi, noble by birth, a gentleman as you are, a subject and officer of the King of France, your equal in all respects, declare, with my hand upon my heart, in the name of my honor, that you, Marquis de la Tremblais, have been a coward, a scoundrel, an assassin, and a thief; I declare that every man—noble or commoner—who shall support you, or countenance your conduct, will be a coward, a scoundrel, an assassin, and a thief; that in attacking my person you render yourself guilty of *lèse-majesté*; and, finally I declare that you have outrageously offended against the law of honor, since, having been struck full in the face by me, I repeat, your sword rested in its sheath!"

The gentlemen looked at each other with an air of mingled shame and indignation. It was evident that the odious conduct of the marquis, and the courage displayed by Raoul, inclined them to oppose by force the accomplishment of the new crime meditated by the Seigneur de la Tremblais.

Such was the fury of the latter that for nearly a minute he was unable to utter a single word. The threatening looks of his visitors goaded him to instant action. By a sign he called to him the Chief of the Apostles, and, after giving some order to him in a low voice, turned and addressed the chevalier.

"Sforzi," he said, "you must have observed, by my patience, how much I desired to see you justify yourself. Your indecorable insolence makes it impossible for me to listen to you any further. I intend to use the same rights and prerogatives that were possessed by my ancestors. Tribunals and parliament were not made for the Seigneurs de la Tremblais. From time immemorial the right of execution has belonged to my marquisate; and this right shall not die out in my hands. Therefore, Sforzi, sentenced of your rebellion against my authority and of your outrage against my person, I condemn you to be exposed on the pillory, flogged with a rod, and then hanged upon a gallows. That nobody may remain in ignorance of my justice, the execution will take place in the public market-place of Besse, the chief town in my jurisdiction. This very day the sentence pronounced against you will be published throughout the extent of my domain, by sound of trumpet, and to-morrow at dawn it will be carried into execution!"