

I will preserve in inviolable secrecy whatever I may see and hear."

Raoul spoke with such firmness, his tone denoted such determined resolution, that the astrologer-physician judged it useless to prolong the discussion.

"I take note of your promise, monsieur," he contented himself with saying. "One question only—have you lived long in Paris? Have you been, or are you often going to Court?"

"I have been in Paris about a fortnight," replied Sforzi, "and I have but once set foot within the Court. Further, I have no motive for concealing my name—I am called the Chevalier Raoul Sforzi."

"The Chevalier Raoul Sforzi!" repeated the astrologer slowly, as if trying to recall something to his mind. "By Jupiter!—was it not you who so roughly handled Monseigneur d'Epéron this morning?"

"I had, indeed, a somewhat warm discussion with Monsieur Lavalette this morning," replied Raoul.

"Oh! then I have no doubt of you," cried the astrologer. "A man who, in defence of his honor, does not fear to brave the anger of the favorite *mignon*, must have his heart in the right place."

"Pardon me one moment, Maitre Bernard," said Raoul, once more staying the hand of the astrologer raised to the knocker, "how have you become aware of my quarrel with Monsieur Lavalette or d'Epéron?"

The physician-astrologer smiled. "The simplicity of this question doubles the esteem I already feel for you," he said. "What, chevalier!—you perform an action, the bravery of which terrifies the Court—you commit an act of temerity which would make the bravest turn pale, and you have no idea that anybody pays any attention to you! Since this morning, your name has been in every one's mouth! You have produced an enormous scandal—have had an immense success!"

"What you tell me fills me with astonishment, Maitre Bernard Albatia," replied Raoul, thoughtfully. "I could never have imagined that an act so simple and natural as that of a gentleman repelling an insult would have so much occupied the attention of the Court of France. Is it the custom, then, at Paris to kiss humbly the hand that strikes you and bow tremblingly before the whip that is raised over your head?"

"The whips of Messieurs de Joyeuse and d'Epéron are as dangerous as the axe of the executioner," said the astrologer. "To attack one of his Majesty's *mignons* is to attack the person of the king—is to be guilty of the crime of *lèse-majesté*!"

"Marie was right," Raoul muttered to himself; "the Valois is unworthy of the Crown."

At that moment the door of the old house opened, and Sibillot appeared on the threshold. At sight of the physician he uttered a cry of joy.

"Ah, here you are at last!" he cried, in a sobbing voice. "Come in quickly—come in, Bernard; my poor Catherine is dying!"

Sibillot drew Maitre Albatia into the house. The chevalier followed the two friends.

They entered a room on the first floor. Raoul paused on the threshold. A sad spectacle met his view. A woman in the pangs of maternity was writhing upon a miserable bed.

Sibillot rushed to her, took her head between his hands, and kissed her with almost delirious fondness.

"My beautiful—my gentle Catherine," he cried, between his sobs—"here is our good friend Maitre Albatia, who has flown to your aid. You know how learned he is; you have nothing more to fear. Courage, my beautiful!—your sufferings will soon be over."

While Sibillot was thus endeavouring to console and reassure his wife, Sforzi examined his dwelling with as much attention as astonishment.

The wife whom Sibillot appeared to love so wildly, and whom he called his beautiful Catherine, presented a very model of ugliness. Her thin and bony face was formed of an assemblage of discordant features, placed as if by accident; her eyes, dull and void of expression, announced an almost entire absence of intelligence; and, with her voice, harsh and guttural, formed as unattractive an *ensemble* as it was possible to imagine.

The chevalier's surprise was still further increased on observing Sibillot spring towards him with threatening gestures, and crying:

"Do not look at my beautiful Catherine! I forbid you! You will be wanting to carry her off from me! Do not look at her, I tell you—or death! I, who have never done harm to living soul, will seek a sword and kill you without mercy!"

Sibillot, whose height did not exceed four feet six inches, was of a constitution so weak and ailing that a breath would almost have overthrown him. In listening to his threats, therefore, Raoul could hardly suppress a smile. But, observing the poor fellow's real distress, he replied quite seriously:

"Monsieur, the respect I feel for the virtue of your wife is equal to the admiration inspired by her incomparable beauty. I am too honest a man to seek to repay with odious treason the confidence you have reposed in me. The moment you tell me you have no further need of me, I will retire. I am your servant."

At the moment Raoul was leaving the room the astrologer-physician called to Sibillot to hand him a potion he had previously ordered to be given to the sufferer. The poor little man immediately began to tear his hair; in his distress he had forgotten to follow the physician's directions.

"This medicament is indispensable to me," said Maitre Albatia. "See—here is the prescription. Go quickly and wake up an apothecary, and return without losing a moment—for moments are precious."

"Again leave my gentle and beautiful Catherine!" cried Sibillot, in terror. "Oh, no—never—never!"

"Take care!" said Maitre Bernard; "the case is urgent—the danger pressing."

Sibillot turned pale, and appeared inclined to go; but turning almost instantly, he flung himself upon his knees by Catherine, seized one of her hands, and in a tone that announced a resolution firmly taken, he cried:

"No, I will not leave my Catherine! If she dies, I will die with her; but I will never leave her!—never!—never!"

This outburst of tenderness was so profound as to do away with all idea of burlesque. Sforzi was touched by it.

"Monsieur," he said, "give me the prescription. I will endeavor, in spite of the lateness of the hour, to obtain the medicament of which your wife is in need."

"Oh, how good you are!—how I love you!" cried Sibillot.

Sforzi took the prescription and hurried out. In less than half an hour he returned.

Whether it was that the drug was efficacious, or that nature had assisted poor Catherine, she had hardly taken the draught before she fell into a sound sleep.

"There is now, no mischance to be feared," said the physician-astrologer. "To-morrow my gossip will embrace the infant she has so long desired. Go to your rest, Sibillot; I repeat, all danger is past!"

On receiving this assurance from Maitre Bernard Albatia, and though fearful of disturbing his wife's repose, Sibillot gave vent to his joy. Then he rushed to the chevalier, seized his hands, and, before the young man suspected his intention, kissed them with an expression of passionate gratitude, crying as he did this:

"We are bound together for life and death! Never shall I be able to repay you for the services you have rendered me! If, by any unlooked-for happiness, chance should one day put me in a position to be useful to you, do not forget, I conjure you, that in me you have a devoted slave!"

Overcome by the intensity of the emotion he had endured, poor Sibillot seated himself on the floor, his head supported against the foot of his wife's bed, and almost immediately fell asleep.

"Maitre Albatia," said Raoul, "I beg of you to excuse the unjust suspicions I have entertained regarding you. I met you under such extraordinary circumstances. Paris is every night witness of such incredible mysteries, that my distrust easily explains itself. It now only remains for me to take my leave of you."

"I beg you will stay, on the contrary. I have a favor to beg of you, a confidence to make to you." He looked fixedly at Raoul for a considerable length of time. "Chevalier Sforzi," he continued, at length, "I have no need to consult the stars, or to make long and learned calculations, to be assured that I may rely on your discretion; but besides that, my interest imperatively commands me to repose this confidence in you. You are ignorant as to who this Sibillot is. He is the jester of Henry III."

"I was very far from expecting this revelation, Maitre Albatia," interrupted Raoul, with profound astonishment. "Throughout France Maitre Chicot is known as the king's jester."

"Yes," replied the physician-astrologer, "Chicot is as popular as Sibillot is obscure; but, nevertheless, the latter enjoys real credit in the eyes of the king. Sibillot, whom you have seen only under entirely exceptional circumstances, is a very singular personage; you would not suspect his originality. Sibillot—which will strike you as hardly compatible with the exercise of his office—scarcely ever speaks. He answers his majesty by his grimaces. And the fact is, that never before did the human face present such mobility of expression. He expresses himself as clearly with the muscles of his features as an orator may express himself by the use of his tongue. The king sometimes passes entire hours in endeavoring to extract a word from his jester, and it is a subject of great triumph to his majesty when he has succeeded."

"The king is persuaded, and perhaps he is right, that Sibillot's instinct in the recognition of good and bad servants is infallible. Thus, when any person of importance comes for the first time to Court, his majesty never fails to say: 'Companion Sibillot, scent me this gentleman, and tell me, yes or no, whether I may trust him.' Whenever Sibillot perceives Messieurs de Guise, he falls into a swoon. But I pass to that which concerns me. Nobody at Court suspects my intimacy with Sibillot; and it is to his good offices that I owe the favor and confidence with which I am honored by his majesty. I will not conceal from you that, to bring about this end, I have been obliged to employ somewhat underhand means."

"I took certain measures by which I learned the fact of the jester's secret marriage. From that time he has been mine, body and soul. Of his grotesque jealousy I need tell you nothing; you have already seen his behavior on that account. So great is this jealousy that rather than avow his marriage, and by so doing obtain assistance from his majesty, he prefers to leave Catherine in poverty. He is persuaded that as soon as his wife comes to be known, all the great seigneurs of the Court will fall in love with her. It is I who act as the intermediary between them. This is what I wished to tell you, chevalier. I too greatly esteem your loyalty to fear that, by abusing a secret of which

you have accidentally become aware, you will unmask my relations with Sibillot—that is to say, the source of my credit with the king. Good-bye, chevalier. Be assured that I am, and always shall be, devoted to your service."

The confidential communication of Maitre Albatia had the effect of keeping Sforzi awake all night. As soon as it was daylight he went straight to Sibillot, whom he found just opening his eyes, and said to him in a solemn tone of voice:

"Maitre Sibillot, you promised me, yesterday, that if ever chance should put you into a position to be of service to me, you would be my devoted slave. I now come to call upon you to fulfil your promise. You must this very day speak of me to the king, and induce his majesty to receive me in his private cabinet."

"I will do my best," answered Sibillot. "And you, Monsieur Sforzi, will you engage yourself on your oath that you will never attempt to approach my gentle and beautiful Catherine?"

"On the faith of a gentleman, I swear it," replied Raoul, gravely.

"Thanks—thanks, my good Sforzi!" cried Sibillot; "my friend Henry shall receive you!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

CAPTAIN DE MAUREVERT'S PRINCIPLES.

It was broad daylight when Raoul got back to the Stag's Head. De Maurevert was already risen and seated before a plentiful breakfast, awaiting his companion's return, and beguiling the time with reflection, as was his wont.

"By Horta, the goddess of youthful virtue!" he remarked to himself, "it is a delightful thing to be twenty years old! Witness this gentle Raoul, whose heart all the women are laying siege to! And yet, on looking coolly at the matter, the solid friendship of a man at my age is an hundred times preferable to the impetuous but fleeting affection of a girl! Good! now, instead of rejoicing in Raoul's success, I am going to be jealous of it! A single thought—and this proves how weak men are at every time of life—casts a shadow over my happiness. Ever since I saw Lehardy, last night, the image of Diane has persistently haunted my mind. I see the poor girl weeping, and a prey to black despair!—Why the deuce did she allow herself to be despoiled of her manor of Tauve? No; I am not doing her justice. It is certain that if she possessed all the riches in Christendom, she would not hesitate a moment to share them with Raoul. But it is none the less certain that she has nothing; and therefore pity must give place to principles, tenderness bow to reason. I love Raoul, and desire to see him happy; but how can he be happy without being opulent? No; all points considered, I shall not tell him of my meeting with Lehardy."

De Maurevert had just arrived at this conclusion when Raoul entered the hostelry. The captain welcomed him with a gracious smile.

"At length you are back, dear companion," he said. "I was beginning to grow uneasy at your prolonged absence. *Tudieu!*—this is what I call entering brilliantly on the campaign."

"I do not understand you, captain," said Raoul, coldly.

"Oh, you are not going to edify me with a new relation of the adventure of Monsieur Joseph, the Egyptian? Dear companion, your cloak still covers your shoulders. Come, come; leave aside all dissimulation—useless to yourself and offensive to me. You do not doubt my discretion or my friendship, I presume? What is the good, then, of all this mystery?"

"Captain," replied Raoul, "I swear to you that you strangely misjudge the issue of my last night's rendezvous, with which gallantry had absolutely nothing whatever to do."

"Horns of Beelzebub!—the lady turned out to be ugly—sixty?"

"Not at all, captain. Marie—for this is the lady's name—is, on the contrary, as seductive a woman as it is possible to dream of. Yet, I pledge you my word of honor as a gentleman, I advance nothing that is not scrupulously true, when I tell you that, during the whole of our interview, her sole object was to detach me from the party of the king."

De Maurevert knit his brows, and remained for a long time without answering.

"My dear friend," he said at length, "what you have told me changes the face of the question entirely. Politics in which a woman mixes may have serious advantages, it is true, but at the same time may present very grave drawbacks. One runs the risk of being paid for one's trouble with smiles, tender avowals, and favors of all sorts—none of which are current coin, I beg you to observe. To stake your head—like Messieurs De la Molle and Coconas, decapitated by the hands of the common executioner—to arrive at what?—to be half-loved by an ambitious coquette. That would be playing an idiotic game. The first thing to be done is to find out the real position occupied by this mysterious Marie of yours."

"Stop, captain," quickly interrupted the chevalier. "I have engaged my honor never to attempt to raise the veil behind which Marie hides her name."

"Yes, but I am not bound by the same obligation, my dear Raoul. I can act with perfect freedom."

"True, captain," replied Sforzi; "but as I will not elude the obligation of my word by an unworthy subterfuge, I shall request your permission to decline to answer any question that might put you in the way to find out the truth."

"As you please, companion," said De Maurevert, adding to himself, "Now that I know of

the existence of the house on the Marché-aux-Chevaux, the devil's in it if I cannot find out who lives there!"

While this conversation was passing between Raoul and De Maurevert, a scene, in which the chevalier was deeply concerned, was occurring in the garden of an hotel in the Rue de Paon, in the faubourg Saint-Germain. Diane d'Erlanges, a prey to violent despair, and her face bathed in tears, was seated on a bench. Before her, hat in hand, stood her faithful servant Lehardy, trying in vain to restore her somewhat to calmness.

"I have done wrong to tell you of the chevalier's faithlessness," he cried; "and even in using the word 'faithlessness,' I am deceived, perhaps. At first sight, Monsieur Sforzi appears culpable; but perhaps, if, instead of rushing to you, I had waited to question him, he might have exculpated himself completely. Before being condemned, he ought to be allowed to make his defence. Permit me, my good and honored mistress, for the first time in my life, to disobey your orders, and go and tell the chevalier of your safe arrival in Paris."

"No, Lehardy," cried Diane, warmly. "Do not for a moment think of doing such a thing, which would overwhelm me with shame. Do which would distress on my account. You see that I weep no more—that I am calm and resigned. I have nothing to reproach Monsieur Sforzi with. I alone have been to blame by attaching a serious import to words which the gallantry of a well-bred man induced him to address to me. I was blinded by my happiness—mad, proud, credulous to folly. It is only just that I should pay the penalty of my weakness and credulity."

"Alas! my good and honored mistress, it is in vain that you try to change the resolution of your heart," said Lehardy, with a sigh. "You know that Monsieur Sforzi loved you; and suffer me to add, you love him still with all the strength of your soul."

"You think so!" she cried, in a passionate outburst; but almost instantly her face was suffused with a deep blush, and fixing on her servant a severe look, she continued in a sincere and mingled tone: "Lehardy, I owe it to your sincere attachment, devotion, and to the signal services you have rendered me, to treat you as a friend. Yes, Lehardy, you have guessed truly. I still love Monsieur Sforzi; I think even that, since his cruel treachery, my attachment to him has become redoubled in strength. You see, Lehardy, how frank I am with you; you may trust me, therefore, to the unshakable resolution I have taken—of never forgiving Monsieur Sforzi. I do not hide from myself," she continued, "that I shall have to suffer much before coming victoriously out of the struggle; but, thank heaven, my venerated and valiant father has transmitted to me, with his blood, his pride and courage! I may sink beneath the weight of the task I have imposed upon myself; but I shall not falter in my resolve. If sorrow kills me, I shall die with a smile upon my lips. And now, my good Lehardy, in return for the confidence I have placed in you, I look for absolute obedience from you. I request you will never again utter the chevalier's name—never again make any allusion to the past; and, most of all, I desire you will never again hold any intercourse with Monsieur Sforzi. This interview has exhausted my strength. I have need of repose. Do not forget, my good Lehardy, that to disobey my wishes will be to lose my friendship."

Lehardy, scarcely less affected than his young mistress, bowed lowly to her, and silently left her presence. As soon as he found himself alone, the recollection of the suffering she was obviously enduring weighed heavily upon his judgment, and set him reflecting. He was haunted with the idea that Sforzi might be able to exculpate himself; and that, by his precipitation, he might have been the means of forever destroying the happiness of his beloved mistress. At last he determined to incur the risk of her displeasure by seeking the chevalier, and immediately set off in search of him.

At the moment when he reached the door of the hostelry, the sight of the captain made him change his resolution. He thought that as the adventurer was completely disinterested in the matter, he might be able to obtain from Raoul's distinct information on the subject of the chevalier's conduct.

"By Bacchus!" cried De Maurevert, gaily. "I am delighted to see you, Lehardy. Is your noble and charming mistress in Paris, then? I hope she is quite well."

"My mistress," replied Lehardy, sadly—"is in a truly pitiable state of health."

"Grieving for the loss of her most estimable mother, no doubt."

"And on account of the faithlessness of Monsieur Sforzi," replied Lehardy, fixing a penetrating look upon the captain; "enough, indeed, to send her to the grave."

"What!" cried De Maurevert, starting. "Is the condition of mademoiselle really so serious?"

"Yes, captain; but, between us, I must add the chevalier could succeed in explaining away the enormity of his offence against her, she would recover her health as by enchantment."

De Maurevert hesitated. To bring Raoul and Diane together again would be to expose the chevalier to marry a fortuneless girl; on the other hand, to accuse Raoul of being faithless would reduce Mademoiselle d'Erlanges to despair.

"Bah!" he muttered to himself; "sensibly is a bad counsellor! Principles before everything!" Then, affecting an air of distress, and lowering his voice, he said: "Alas, my good Lehardy, never speak to me of the chevalier!"