

comprised his dignity, has resolved on assassinating his adversary?"

"Exactly. What is the name of this extreme party?"

"Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron."

At this point, De Joyeuse threw himself back in his chair, and gave free vent to his boisterous hilarity.

"Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron," said the Duc d'Epéron, "I had so far taken no part in the conversation. It appears to me that you have not understood either the presumption, nor the insolence of your dangerous replies. Take care that they be not!"

"Monsieur," interrupted De Maurevert, "I take the liberty to remind you that Monsieur le Duc de Joyeuse has guaranteed in your name as well as his own that no harm shall come to me on account of what I have just said. The least violence offered to my person would dishonor Monsieur de Joyeuse; I therefore brave your anger."

"My good friend Epéron," cried De Joyeuse, whose gaiety instantly disappeared and gave place to a serious air, "Monsieur de Maurevert is right: we are bound to him."

"Not at all," said d'Epéron, quickly. "We have given this man no promise, my dear De Joyeuse, to let his lies and calumnies go unpunished. Now, I swear that I have never commissioned him to kill the Chevalier Sforzi."

"It is true, monsieur," replied the captain, coolly, "that it is not to me personally, but to my cousin Epéron, you have given the commission; but in consideration of a sum of money I am to pay him, my cousin has transferred the engagement to me. With me, therefore, rests the task of waylaying and killing the Chevalier Sforzi."

A somewhat protracted silence followed. D'Epéron, tacitly admitting his defeat, was ruminating vengeance. The Duc de Joyeuse was the first to renew the broken conversation.

"Truly d'Epéron," he said, "it would be a pity to spoil the gaiety of this charming interview; will you let me go on with my questions?—Yes; thanks. Dear De Maurevert, the position of things—if I am not mistaken—is this: you have to kill Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron on account of Monsieur Sforzi, and to kill Monsieur Sforzi on account of the Duc d'Epéron?"

"Your statement of the case is rigorously exact, monsieur."

"Very good. Will you now tell us what are your intentions? Do you accept this double mission?"

"Certainly, monsieur."

"So you propose to kill my beloved brother, d'Epéron?"

"I will at least do my best to that end."

"And afterwards you will kill the Chevalier Sforzi?"

"Afterwards or before, according as circumstances may present themselves more or less favorably; but I shall certainly kill him."

"I am astonished greatly, good De Maurevert, that you, who are so prudent and reticent in business, should not yet have thought of one thing."

"I think I have taken everything into consideration, monsieur."

"Not, I think, the penalty of the rack and the wheel, which would crown your double exploit. You would have labored simply for the benefit of the executioner, who would inherit your spoils."

"Oh, no, no, monsieur!" cried De Maurevert, with a cunning smile. "In the first place, whatever may be the friendship felt by his majesty for Monsieur d'Epéron, he would be obliged to behead me, because I am of noble race, and claim the right of axe and block. In the next place, Monsieur d'Epéron once defunct, you cannot suppose that I should amuse myself by strolling about the streets of Paris. The means of flight, which I have already prepared, will enable me to pass without danger into a foreign country; once there, I shall take service, and tranquilly continue to follow the profession of arms. And now, who knows?—perhaps—the thought cuts me to the heart—Monsieur de Guise may one day find himself upon the throne of France! My position would then incontinently be changed from that of exile to that of favorite. Monsieur de Guise would know how to reward me for the death of the Duc d'Epéron. I should be overwhelmed with honors, dignities and offices. I assure you, monsieur, that the more I think of the matter, the more I am convinced that, from all points of view, it is extremely advantageous to me."

"Enough of this absurdity!" interrupted the Duc d'Epéron, very pale. "Captain, you may go."

De Maurevert rose at once, but at a sign made to him by d'Epéron, and which he understood, De Joyeuse recalled him.

"De Maurevert," he said, "come soon to my house. I shall not be sorry to have a bout of fencing with you."

"I will not fail. Will you now permit me to address an observation to you, Monsieur le Duc?"

"What is it?"

"It is that during the present interview you have done me the honor to address me in terms of the kindest familiarity."

"What then?"

"When this happens, I always imagine, in spite of myself, that I am in the presence of a friend."

"And what follows?"

"I have contracted a bad habit of borrowing money of my friends," continued the adventurer, "and I am anxious to excuse myself to you, monsieur, if the impulse should come upon me on the present occasion."

"He has, to his own share, as much wit as a whole company of free-lances, this dear captain!" cried De Joyeuse, laughing heartily. "Here is my purse, De Maurevert. I don't know how much it contains; but as I shall still continue to treat you as a friend, if you find the sum insufficient, you, on your side, will not hesitate to address me as a reliable friend."

The duke's purse contained two hundred crowns in gold. De Joyeuse justly passed as the most generous and magnificent of all the nobles of the Court of Henry III.

CHAPTER XLVII.

THE ASTROLOGER'S PREDICTION.

On quitting the cabinet of the Duc d'Epéron, De Maurevert passed with majestic step through the vast rooms crowded with suitors, and cast a look of pity on these hungry creatures, attracted thither by the great credit of the *mignon*.

"Monsieur," he said, addressing the tattered Gascon who had found a valet to announce him on his arrival, "two words with you, if you please."

"Twenty, monsieur!" replied the Gascon, bowing to the ground.

Followed by the poor fellow, De Maurevert continued his way until he was outside of the palace.

"Monsieur," he said, "the dishonesty of the man who robbed you has not greatly profited him, for I have found two more of your stolen crowns. Here they are."

The son of the Garonne once more overwhelmed De Maurevert for his generosity, and continued to pour forth his thanks long after the captain was out of hearing range.

"Morbieu!" cried the adventurer, "I am pleased with myself. At bottom I am an excellent fellow, as this sudden impulse of charity testified; for indeed what interest have I to serve in giving two crowns to this Gascon? None! I have simply given way to a good movement of my heart. The idea that this Gascon, who is an entire stranger to me, may be enabled to pass a pleasant day is agreeable to me. Yes, I am decidedly a thousand times better than I am reputed to be. But now let me reflect a little on the present situation of things. Does my double-dealing with d'Epéron constitute a trait of genius or an act of consummate dunniness? I know not. In any case, I was boldly inspired. That I made the proud Lavalette afraid is beyond doubt; he was certainly very much afraid. The question is whether his fears will be favorable or prejudicial to the chevalier's interests."

"Believing himself to be in danger, d'Epéron will now employ in his own defence—at least I hope so—the resources he had intended to use against Sforzi. That, at all events, will make a useful diversion. Besides, I have not yet said my last word. When the proud *mignon* sends me an ambassador, as he will, I will go to the bottom of the question. I will undertake to abandon my imaginary project, on his reimbursing me the pretended sum I expect to receive for killing him, and the five hundred crowns which my honored cousin has agreed to give me for the death of Raoul. Yes, yes; I foresee that I shall succeed in coming to an arrangement with Monsieur d'Epéron. He is vindictive, but he is utterly wanting in stoicism. Yes, yes; I shall certainly make a handsome gain out of my friendship for Raoul!"

De Maurevert lightly stroked the ends of his long moustaches, and started forward at such a rapid pace that a trotting horse would have had some difficulty in keeping up with him.

While the captain was busy with the means of bringing to a successful end the project which had entered his mind, Messieurs the Duc de Joyeuse and d'Epéron were engaged in serious conversation.

"My dear d'Epéron," said d'Arques, "I owe it to the unalterable friendship by which we are united, not to withhold any portion of the truth from you. Your unfortunate rencounter with this accursed Sforzi has made a great noise. People are astonished that you have allowed the deadly insult to which you have been subjected by this vagabond to go unpunished. I will not conceal from you that a part of the blame excited by your doubtful conduct, by your want of presence of mind, falls back upon the king and upon your very humble servant. It is openly said that the Quéluses, the Maugrions, and others, have no successors—that our swords are as patient as theirs were hasty! People affect to doubt. You know how we are envied, and consequently detested, by the mob. People, I say, affect to doubt the solidity of our courage! Death and carnage!—the thought made me so furious that for two days I have been seeking everywhere a cause of quarrel. Somebody I must kill!"

"Calm yourself, dear brother," interrupted d'Epéron, coolly; "our position is too highly raised for calumny to reach us. What matters to us the prattle of the crowd?"

"Morbieu!—dear d'Epéron, nobody holds their ill opinion in greater contempt than myself, since, after all, it is a portion of the homage rendered to our power. Have I not twenty times, to show how little I fear them, paid out of my own purse the authors of the pasquinades and satires published against us? But this time, unfortunately, it is not only a question of the opinion of the court and the city; the king also is concerned."

"The king!—in what way?"

"Beloved d'Epéron, our brother Henry is dissatisfied. Have you not observed that since your adventure with Sforzi he exhibits towards us a certain coldness? I allow that your favor

has nothing to dread from this slight cloud; the affection entertained for you by Henry is unquestionably solid; but it is not the less true that he is mortified—pained. You know what Henry is, dear brother. The idea that we may be killed in single combat makes him turn pale and tremble; but though sorrow for our loss were to carry him to his grave, he would never forbid us to fight. Henry is excessively touchy on the point of honor. Nobody better than he understands the duties of a gentleman."

"So," answered d'Epéron, thoughtfully, "you are of opinion that a meeting between me and this Sforzi is necessary?"

"In good faith, my dear friend, yes."

"What!—you would have me descend to the level of this adventurer? You must be mad, De Joyeuse! I have often observed the facility with which you compromise our dignity. Dear brother, if you and I occupy a post so elevated that princes themselves envy us, it is not because chance has aided us, but because we are greatly superior to all by whom we are surrounded. I fight with this, Sforzi!—Oh! That would be too good a joke! The inequality of the stakes makes the game impossible. Where I have been wrong is in not having killed the fellow on the spot. Within twenty-four hours I will repair my fault."

"Take care what you do, d'Epéron? Reflect well before acting. It will be said that you have had recourse to assassination because you have wanted courage to fight."

"People may say what they like!" cried d'Epéron, violently; "but they shall see that, at least, those who dare to insult me—die!"

"May I tell you one thing, beloved d'Epéron?" asked De Joyeuse, after a moment's silence. "It is that I feel sure Sforzi will come out of all this with advantage. I do wrong, perhaps, in telling you this. A few days ago, I consulted the astrologer, Albatia concerning you."

"Oh!—he has gone back to the practice of sorcery, has he?"

"Do not speak lightly of astrology," replied De Joyeuse, gravely; "it is an infallible science. Albatia is never wrong."

"And what has the infallible Albatia predicted of me?"

"He has predicted that if you obstinately persist in pursuing a young man of whom he gave me a description—and that description tallies in an extraordinary manner with Sforzi—you will die by the stroke of a poisoned sword! Now, Albatia knows no more about Sforzi than he does about the projects of De Maurevert. Does not that at least strike you as being very singular? I admit that hearing thatascal just now confess to you, with the splendid impudence which belongs to him alone, his sinister projects against your person, I felt a shudder pass through my body. This De Maurevert is a cunning and determined fellow, a rough swordsman. He is moreover endowed—it must in justice be admitted—with unequalled modesty; he makes no attempt to push himself forward, and never sings his own praises; therefore, when he advances anything, it may be taken for certain."

"If the constellations take part against me," replied d'Epéron, affecting a gaiety which was completely contradicted by the pallor of his visage, "there remains for me nothing but to mount my horse and fly as fast I can out of the kingdom."

"You do wrong to jest, beloved brother; but I have done my duty. I came this morning to warn you, and I have warned you; my conscience is now at rest. Good day, brother; I must now return to Henry."

The Duc de Joyeuse, after embracing d'Epéron, was about taking his departure when the latter called him back.

"You are going to see De Maurevert shortly?" he asked, with an air of embarrassment.

"Yes, dear friend. Have you any proposition to make to him?"

"I treat with the captain as equal to equal? You are out of your senses! But though I attach no importance to his threats, I think it will be convenient to me to get rid of him; he might impede me in the course of my vengeance. Whatever you promise him, I will agree to; whatever you engage to do, I will carry out."

CHAPTER XLVIII.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

It was almost two o'clock in the afternoon. Raoul, fearing to disturb the rest of which Diane, who had not slept the night before, stood so greatly in need, had not ventured to return to the young girl's side. But, conquered at length by impatience, he was preparing to go out, when he saw De Maurevert enter the door of the Stag's Head.

"Parbleu!—I am back just in time," cried the captain. "A little later, and dear Raoul would have trusted himself alone in the streets of Paris."

"I do not understand you, De Maurevert."

"These lovers are never for conversation! To speak more clearly, then, after an attempt on your life which so nearly succeeded last night, it is necessary for you to take precautions. For the future, you must not go out except in my company?"

"You are jesting, captain?"

De Maurevert shrugged his shoulders without replying, and contented himself with following the young man.

On reaching the street, Sforzi perceived, in front of the hostelry, a troop composed of fifteen horsemen perfectly armed, drawn up in battle array.

"Who are these men, and what do they want?" he inquired of De Maurevert in an undertone.

"These people are your servants, and they desire to see that you are allowed to pass along in peace!" replied the captain. "There is no necessity for you to open so wide your eyes, and to torture your brain to understand. I have spent the greater part of this morning in recruiting this troop of brave fellows. It is agreed that I am to pay each two francs a day, in addition to feeding for themselves and horses, and that they are to obey all my orders strictly. It is a costly bargain, but necessary. You will give me an undertaking to reimburse me my outlay in your defence, will you not, my dear Raoul? But, into the saddle! I long to see myself at the head of my troop! By all the treasures of Pluto!—we shall make a brave appearance! We shall be taken for high and mighty seigneurs! Who knows?—this may help me to conclude a brilliant marriage! As to my dear and honored cousin—let him take it into his head to be otherwise than civil, should we chance to meet again! Mount, chevalier!—Mademoiselle d'Erlanges is waiting for you!"

The moment would have been ill-chosen to address any remonstrance to the captain; de-ferring all he was impelled to say, therefore, Raoul mounted his horse. De Maurevert instantly turned to his army, and, in a ringing voice, cried:

"Attention!—march!"

The escort moved forward at a trot.

As soon as the two companions reached Diane's house, De Maurevert dismounted, and, with a superb air, threw the bridle of his horse to one of his men. As to Raoul, before the captain had even crossed the threshold of the door, he was in the presence of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges.

At the outset the conversation of the lovers was of an utterly disconnected kind—they were so happy to see each other again, they had so much to say to each other, so many explanations to ask! After listening for awhile, and not without giving signs of impatience, to the charming talk in which the two young people appeared to find so great a delight, De Maurevert determined at length to give the conversation a more ordinary character.

"Chevalier Sforzi, and you, Mademoiselle d'Erlanges," he said, "pray cease your childish discourse. The position in which we are placed is grave enough to occupy our most serious attention."

"Mademoiselle Diane has generously forgiven me—what more have I to desire?" cried Raoul. "Can anything be wanting to my happiness?"

"What is wanting to your happiness?" repeated the captain, in an ironical tone, and shrugging his shoulders, "something essential—its stability, its duration. Morbleu!—does it strike you as being pleasant to pass along a road lined with assassins and studded with daggers? To observe your mad security, and hear your gay talk, one would imagine that everybody was striving to render himself as pleasant as possible to you—that everybody was bent on helping you to your felicity! By the helmet of Madame Minerva!—it is not in the least so—quite otherwise. Let us not be blinded by pleasure, but see things as they are in reality, and not as you look at them, through the prism of love. I begin with you, chevalier; presently I will deal with Mademoiselle d'Erlanges."

"Madame de Montpensier, the most vindictive woman in France; Monsieur le Duc d'Epéron, the most powerful man of the day; and, finally, the Marquis de la Tremblais, a knave of the worst sort—all desire your death! You have neither more nor less than roused the houses of Valois and Lorraine against you. What defence have you against the forces of your enemies? Remarkable imprudence, a great deal of temerity, and the friendship of bold Captain de Maurevert. Your imprudence is beyond question, your temerity would bring you to destruction, and were it not for the devotion of that valiant and knowing De Maurevert, I should already advise you to consider yourself as no longer belonging to earth."

"Alas, captain, you are right!" cried Diane, pale and trembling. "Oh! I conjure you, do not abandon Monsieur Sforzi. You alone are capable of getting him out of this horrible position!"

"That is true, mademoiselle," replied De Maurevert, coolly; "but to attain this happy and difficult result, it is necessary that the chevalier should blindly follow my advice."

"He will follow it, captain."

"I doubt it. But, in any case, I shall have done my duty, and secured my conscience against remorse, which is all-important."

"Speak, captain—speak!"

"The simplest common sense will point out to Raoul the means he must employ. The first thing for him to do is to get into the good graces of Monsieur d'Epéron. Diane!—I admit that the task is difficult, but it is not, I think, impossible. Monsieur is not free from apprehension as to projects of the chevalier's relating to him. If Raoul, by some public and conspicuous act, were to humiliate himself before the haughty *mignon*, and requested of him forgiveness of the past, it is probable—nay, certain, that Monsieur d'Epéron would not rest insensible to this advance. His self-love satisfied, his pusillanimity reassured—for, between you and us he it said, the duke is a little wanting in courage—Raoul would end by gaining his cause."

"Captain," interrupted Sforzi, warmly, "do you take me for a coward that you venture to propose such shameful means to me?"