

which sat a decanter of brandy and glasses. This table was farther from the desk than I. Presently Montluc stepped to the table, and, with his back toward me, took up a glass and filled it from the decanter. That was the moment of his undoing. There lay the pistol upon the desk and I was nearer it than he. In an instant I was on my feet. Never did a tiger spring more lithely than I. The distance between me and the desk was cleared in two bounds, and just as Montluc turned to see what had happened, I levelled the pistol at his head.

"I think my ace will win," I exclaimed, throwing one leg over a corner of the desk, and smiling at him in exultant spirits.

The sudden change of affairs almost caused his collapse.

"Sapristi!" he gasped, and then stood trembling with the glass of brandy still in his hand, and the color of his face changing to a sickly yellow.

But his sang-froid returned immediately, and as a faint smile stole into his countenance to soften the hard lines about his mouth, he held the glass before him, shrugged his shoulders and elevated his brows.

"Have I your permission, monsieur?" he asked, with mock courtesy.

"Drink, if you like, *mon bravo*," I answered. "But if you call out or endeavor in any way to signal to your bandit crew, your life will be the penalty."

"Your health then, monsieur," said he, with mock suavity and tossed off the brandy at a gulp.

"Try another," said I, jocosely, "it may restore your color."

"Humph!" he muttered, looking askance at me. Then putting down the glass he faced me defiantly.

"Well, Monsieur Montluc, what do you think of my ace now?" said I, gloating over his discomfiture. "Shall we play further?"

"Yes," he answered, a little excited from the sudden energy of a new thought; "the game is not yet finished."

He raised his fingers to his lips as if to whistle. I caught the idea, and drew back the hammer of my pistol.

"Make the slightest signal," I cried,

"and I'll send your villainous soul to hell!" He dropped his hand, shrugged deeply, and then smiled.

"And yet the game is not finished," he remarked, doggedly.

"Well," said I, "it is your lead."

There was more energy in his reply than I expected.

"If you are not a coward," he hissed, with a venomous expression of countenance, "you will put down that pistol and take one of these swords; then we shall settle this matter at once and forever."

I was a good swordsman in those days, and had every confidence in myself, so I did not hesitate to accept the challenge.

"I am at your service," I replied, "and I give you the first choice of weapons."

"Good," he cried, and immediately stepping to the shield, took down his own sword and a dagger.

"It is worth while," he added. "A pretty woman and the baron's riches. But first of all, monsieur, tell me on your sacred honor if you are the only obstacle I shall have to meet?"

"I am sole heir," I cried, "if that is what you mean, and you need not fear a vendetta. If you survive me, justice will be your only obstacle."

"Good again," he exclaimed, exultantly. "As for Justice, she is as likely to favor me as anyone else. After I have disposed of you, monsieur, I shall bribe Justice, or else defy her."

"But what of de Carbonneau?" I asked.

"Ah, de Carbonneau," he exclaimed, quickly, and looked over at the desk. "That reminds me; I must have your signature."

"To what, pray?"

"I have written Monsieur de Carbonneau, requesting him to bring all documents to the château. But this is to be over your own signature. Now, monsieur," said he, "pray be good enough to sign the paper which you will find beside you."

I could not help laughing.

"Your audacity is superb," I cried, merrily. "But really, monsieur, I must beg to be excused."

For a moment he eyed me with an ex-