

"No, madame; honor has no need to reflect between right and wrong. I beg you, madame, for pity's sake, to put an end to this conversation. Do you not understand, by the blushes of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges, that you are committing a crime against her innocence?"

"God's light, monsieur!" cried the duchess, "this is the first time in my life that any one has dared so to insult me. You drive me out, Monsieur Sforzi? So be it. I will take my revenge. Ah! do not smile with that air of incredulity and contempt. My vengeance will be terrible, as you will one day find to your cost. Good evening, chevalier!"

"Brother—Raoul!" cried Diane, with an outburst of chaste passion, and giving her hand to the chevalier, "your repentance gives you back a sister. Your life is threatened, and we will part no more; if you are killed, we will die together."

Sforzi uttered a cry of delirious delight, and seizing the hand held forth to him by Diane, covered it with kisses and tears.

"A thousand million thunders," muttered De Maurevert, "if I am not becoming a woman! Raoul has committed a horrible blunder in refusing the duchess's challenge; but this gentle little Diane is so agreeable that, in his place, I really believe I should have done the same."

CHAPTER XLV.

A CASE OF CONSCIENCE.

The spontaneous reconciliation of Sforzi and Diane rendered the position of the duchess as false as it was difficult, and left her no pretext for remaining longer in the house of the Dowager Madame Lamirande. It was with a heart full of anger, though with a smile upon her lips, that she departed.

De Maurevert followed her—he alone of the party appearing anxious.

"Captain," said the duchess, as soon as she had taken her place in her chair, "the vexatious termination of my thoughtless proceeding must fill you with satisfaction."

"Will your highness deign to inform me in what respect the vexation she is experiencing should afford me any satisfaction?"

"Do you imagine me to be a woman who will rest under the infliction of such an insult as I have received, Monsieur de Maurevert?"

"Certainly not, madame."

"Do you not suppose, then, that I shall hasten to take a signal revenge for the humiliation I have been subjected to this evening? I shall need your services, captain, and there will be a rich reward for you to gain in serving me."

"Madame," replied the adventurer, gravely, "your highness, I see—and it distresses me greatly—attaches no importance to anything I say. If she had deigned to accord to me a single moment's attention when I treated with her for my devotion, she would now recollect that I dictated a restrictive clause in favor of Monsieur Sforzi. I am bound to that gentleman by an agreement which my loyalty compels me to observe. Not only is it not permitted me to undertake anything against my friend, but, furthermore, I hold myself bound to protect him from any danger to which I may find him exposed."

"Be careful, captain," cried the duchess; "what you are now saying smacks of treason!"

"In the name of my honesty, I protest against the expression your highness has just employed," said the adventurer, coolly. "To betray you, madame, would be to make myself master of your secrets, and afterwards to inform Monsieur Sforzi of your projects; now, I protest to you, on my honor, such has never for a moment been my intention. If your highness had explained to me her designs—which, thank heaven, she has not done!—I should have remained in complete neutrality, though this neutrality might have caused the death of my companion Sforzi. Duty before all things is my favorite maxim, madame."

"So you refuse to assist me in my vengeance, captain?"

"Against Raoul, madame, a thousand times yes; against any other person ten thousand times no!"

"Captain," replied the duchess, after reflecting for a brief space, "I understand and accept the exception you make in favor of your companion, Sforzi. But Diane d'Erlanges—"

"Go on, madame, I beg."

"What agreement have you with her? What consideration restrains you from helping me to punish her impertinence?"

"Her sex, madame! If Mademoiselle d'Erlanges were an Amazon, I should not hesitate to summon her to the Prés Saint-Germain, or any other convenient spot; but can I, in reason, propose to this young girl to draw the sword? Your highness is gifted with a mind too judicious not to see the ridiculousness and uselessness of such a proposition."

"Captain," said the duchess, coldly, "I see that I have grossly deceived myself in regard to you."

"In what way, madame?"

"I believed you to be a man fertile in resources, ready in expedients, of good counsel, cunning, enterprising, active—"

"This portrait, madame, bears a striking resemblance—"

"While you are simply a fighting soldier," continued the duchess—"a common-place duelist—a follower of dull routine—and beyond some skill in the use of sword and dagger, incapable of understanding or inventing anything."

This reproach appeared to affect the adventurer keenly.

"Madame," he replied, "it is painful, when one enjoys antecedents as varied and glorious as mine, to hear oneself spoken of in this manner. Your highness is aware that, especially during the last two years, great ladies have been in the habit of getting rid of their more favored rivals by the aid of steel or poison; I imagined your highness desired to follow the fashion."

"Rid myself of Diane by poison or the poignard!" cried the duchess, with sovereign contempt. "What are you thinking of? That would be to treat her as an equal. No, captain; what I wish to do is to render her for ever abject and despicable in the eyes of Sforzi. Find the means of doing this, Monsieur de Maurevert, and your fortune is made!"

De Maurevert rested for a moment without replying.

"Madame," he said at length, "a fortune sufficient to permit me to live honorably, without troubling myself to do anything but take care of my health, is the dream of my life. There is nothing I would not undertake to realize that dream—nothing, madame—if it is not to burthen my conscience with a disagreeable recollection! I have committed, thanks to my adventurous existence, certain small faults which many people would call abominable actions, but which, nevertheless, do not cost me the slightest remorse. The usages of war and the traditions of camps authorize and lead to the execution of many actions that are reputed odious in ordinary life. At the present moment, I am happy to say, I enjoy a perfect quietude of conscience, to which I attach the highest value."

"A prudent man, madame, must not, while he is in the enjoyment of his full powers, forget that a day will come when the enfeeblement of his faculties will render his mind pusillanimous and timid. He must think beforehand of the tranquility of his old age. Now, I ask myself, madame, whether to conspire with you against the happiness of this young girl, would not be to infringe the contract I have entered into with Sforzi? I admit that, strictly speaking, to attack Diane is not to commit an act of hostility towards Raoul. If I were pleading this in a cause, I should gain the day no doubt; but on the other hand, I see within myself how certainly any distress brought upon Mademoiselle d'Erlanges would fall upon my companion. My perplexity is great; will you allow me to reflect, madame?"

"As you please, captain."

For nearly half an hour De Maurevert followed the duchess' chair in silence.

"Madame," he said at last, approaching the curtain, "I am only the more sorry I cannot accept your highness' proposition, from having discovered a means—ingenious in the extreme—for avenging you on Mademoiselle d'Erlanges."

"You refuse then, captain?"

"Alas, yes, madame! Your highness must attribute my refusal to herself, however."

"To myself, captain! In what way?"

"Your highness was wrong—if she will permit me to say so—to admit her intentions to me. She ought, on the contrary, in the first place, to have assured me she entertained no resentment against Raoul, then persuaded me that Mademoiselle d'Erlanges' misfortunes would turn to the profit of my companion. In this manner she might have attached an intelligent and devoted servant to her cause."

During the rest of the way—that is to say, until the arrival of the duchess' chair in front of the solitary house on the Marché-aux-Chevaux, the mysterious retreat which served her to conceal her political plottings—not another word was exchanged between the Princess de Lorraine and the adventurer. It was not until she had stepped to the ground that Madame de Mompensier broke the silence.

"Captain," she said, "accept this ring as a sign of the particular esteem with which the loyalty of your character has inspired me. I need not, I am sure, recommend absolute discretion to you. While the attention of Sforzi is engaged in securing his safety I shall act against Diane. If the chevalier were to learn that I intend to attack his idol, he would take measures to counteract my designs."

"But madame," cried De Maurevert—

The duchess interrupted him quickly.

"Captain," she said, "to quit the neutrality imposed on you by your double allegiance to the chevalier and me, would be to forfeit your honor!"

"Your highness' logic is sound, and completely irrefutable. I will observe a rigorous neutrality," replied De Maurevert.

"By all the treasures of Plutus!" he said to himself afterwards, on his way back to the Stag's Head, "the duchess is certainly the most generous mistress a man of the sword and mantle could ever serve! She pays me for speaking, and recompenses me for doing nothing. She showers upon me on every occasion crosses and precious stones! What a pity it is I am not twenty years younger!—I might now have lands of my own, male vassals to rule, and young female vassals to marry! Poor little Diane," he sighed, suddenly changing the course of his reflections, "she's in bad way! But what is the use of my pitying her misfortunes before they come to her; when they arrive will be time enough."

On reaching his hostelry he waked up the landlord, and made him serve him with a magnificent and copious supper. Satisfaction at the fruitful results of his day's work expressed itself in the form of a violent appetite. At dawn he was still seated at table. Ten flasks irregularly ranged before him proved with how much conscience he performed the least important actions of his life, and how natural it was that he should at length sleep the sleep of the just.

About the same moment that De Maurevert fell asleep, the Chevalier Sforzi left the house of the Dowager Madame Lamirande, having passed, in company with Diane and Lehardy, a night which had seemed to him to pass as fleetly as an hour. He was intoxicated with happiness. Through the prism of his joy the future appeared under the most gay and resplendent colors.

How much his confidence would have been shaken could he have seen the Duchess de Mompensier given up to all the torments of cruel sleeplessness! The alteration in the features of the Princess of Lorraine, the expression of dark fury reflected in her face; the name of Diane ceaselessly murmured in a threatening tone by her fevered lips, would certainly have made him tremble for the fate of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges.

CHAPTER XLV.

THE TWO COUSINS.

It was one o'clock in the afternoon when Sforzi who had returned to the Stag's Head at daybreak, opened his eyes. He dressed himself quickly, and went to the room occupied by De Maurevert; he was in haste to find some one to whom he might talk of Diane. The landlord apprised him that, though the captain had sat all night at table, he had gone out at six o'clock in the morning.

Raoul resigned himself to await his friend's return, far from suspecting what the captain had been doing in his favor that very morning.

After sleeping for two hours, De Maurevert had waked as fresh and active as if he had passed the entire night in bed.

"Parbleu!" he cried, stretching his sinewy arms; "it is a long while since Monsieur Morphus has sent me such happy dreams. I have not ceased to tread upon gold, and to handle heaps of precious stones. It seems to me that Fortune must have declared herself positively in my favor. When one feels one's self in the vein, one ought not to shut one's self up in his chamber. I'll bet a wager that as soon as I set foot outside the hostelry I run head-first against some profitable adventure."

The captain, as we know, was a man of action; five minutes had not passed since he had formed the project of going in search of some good windfall, before he had marched out of the Stag's Head.

"What a beautiful morning!" he said to himself; "something lucky is sure to happen to me. I have money in my pocket; I feel in high spirits; I supped last night like a bishop—in a word, I am in the best moral and physical condition to be successful. I have done well to associate myself with the chevalier after all. The more his affairs become entangled, the better I come off. Every one of his blunders brings me in a handsome gain. The day he is beheaded or hung I shall become a millionaire!"

De Maurevert had arrived in the Rue Vieille du Temple, at that time one of the worst neighborhoods in Paris. Suddenly he stopped, and, shading his eyes from the rays of the rising sun, muttered:

"Death!—I cannot be mistaken—it is he! No—yes—it is he! The devil!—I should like at this moment to feel a good horse between my knees! But, after all, we are reconciled; and perhaps he does not harbor any ill-will towards me. No, that is not likely; for this dear friend is about the most vindictive person I have ever known. What if I were to turn back? Why not? To retrace one's steps is not to fly; and even if I were to take to flight, there would be no dishonor in it. He is, according to his praiseworthy habit, too well attended for it to be possible for me, if he attacks me, to defend myself with advantage. Yes; I'll go back."

The personage whose appearance seemed to discompose the captain so seriously, was a man of forty years of age. An indescribably evil and impudent expression was in his face, and he had lost his left arm. Under heavy brows, and profoundly set in their orbits, glittered two small, clear gray eyes of extreme restlessness.

At the moment De Maurevert had taken the resolution to avoid a meeting, the stranger raised himself in his stirrups, and cried in a loud, mocking tone:

"Hollo, dear Roland!—do you not recognize me? Come a little nearer, that I may embrace you!"

"Too late!" murmured the adventurer. "It only remains for me to put a good face on the matter;" and with a countenance beaming with smiles, and with all the demonstrations of a sincere joy, he advanced towards the one-armed rider.

"My dear cousin!" he cried, shaking hands heartily, "how happy I am to meet you. *Trudieu*, dear Louviers, how well you are looking—yonger than ever, I pledge you my word."

"Yes, I am very well; if it were not for the pain caused me by the loss of my arm, I should enjoy perfect health. The amputation to which I had to submit will end by doing me an ill-turn, you will see, dear cousin."

"I hope not, dear cousin," interrupted De Maurevert. "It is a great mistake to imagine, as is generally done, that the loss of a limb injures the general health of the body. I have even heard doctors of medicine sustain an exactly opposite opinion. They declare that an amputation skillfully performed is a patent of longevity."

"Really, cousin, in that case I ought to complain of your having acted so shabbily by me. Why have you left me any arm at all? While you were about it, it would not have given you

much trouble to fire a second pot-trinal* at me, or to have given me another sword-thrust, and so insured my living for a century."

The person whom the adventurer addressed as Louviers, and treated as his cousin, was no other than the famous De Maurevert of lugubrious memory.

Louviers de Maurevert, a gentleman of Brie, had been reared in the house of the Princes of Lorraine. The governor of the pages having one day chastised him, he killed him, and deserted to the enemy a little before the battle of Renty. After peace was concluded with Spain, De Maurevert found means of re-entering into the good graces of the Guise. As soon as the Parliament had set a price on the head of Admiral Coligny, he offered to carry out the sentence; then, having received in advance part of the shameful salary which was to be paid him for this sanguinary mission, he passed over to the party of the Princes, and showed himself very zealous for reformed religion.

The better to secure himself against suspicions, he poured forth invectives against the Guise, pretending that they had treated him very badly. After having failed in several attempts to kill the admiral, and seeing clearly all the difficulties presented by the work of assassination, he bribed himself in the bonds of a close friendship with the Seigneur de Morny, who, after Coligny, held the first rank in the army of the confederates. Finding himself one day alone with this noble and high-minded gentleman, in a garden, he traitorously killed him and fled upon a horse which he owed to the generosity of the murdered man. Some time afterwards, publicly pardoned, and even handsomely rewarded by the Court, De Maurevert reappeared at Paris.

From that moment, assured of impunity, De Maurevert equipped a band of scoundrels, and, for money, played a great part in the private and sanguinary quarrels of the Court and city. There was a shout of joy when, three years before the commencement of the present story, it became known that Captain Roland de Maurevert, insulted and attacked by his cousin, had run him twice through the body and broken one of his arms with a pot-trinal shot. Unfortunately, Louviers de Maurevert, after remaining for several months between life and death, recovered from his wounds.

Such were the terms which—apart from relationship—existed between the two cousins. The discontent and apprehension felt by the captain, on finding himself face to face with his relative, were thoroughly well-founded therefore.

"Dear cousin," he said, quickly, with the view of turning the conversation from the dangerous track it was following, "if I was not mistaken, I saw you come out of this palace?"

"Yes, beloved Roland."

"The palace of Monsieur d'Epéron?"

"Yes, my most cherished cousin."

"My dear Louviers, you answer me in a somewhat mocking tone, which is very little to my liking. Are you thinking of having me massacred by your escort? What advantage would you derive from that exploit?—to be split on the spot; for the devil fly away with me if, at the first suspicious word you pronounce, I do not run my sword through your body! Take my word for it, dear relative, it will be better for you and me to live in good intelligence with one another. It is not possible for me to give you back your arm, is it? One word more: I must tell you, excellent Louviers, that I am on the best footing with Madame de Mompensier—to add the name of the duchess to an already long list of your enemies would be an act of egregious folly. Take my advice, and let bygones be bygones."

"But, cousin," said the assassin of the Seigneur de Morny, with an embarrassment that did not escape the notice of his sagacious interlocutor, "I assure you utterly mistake my intentions towards you. In regard to the little scene that passed between us, I have harbored no feelings of anger or hatred against you. In proof of what I say, I am at this moment disposed to take you into an excellent affair I have on hand."

"Thanks, dear cousin!—I expected no less of your good sense and generosity. Be assured that, on my side, I am quite ready to accept your conditions, so that they are only reasonable."

"Are you in funds, cousin?"

"To a surprising degree."

"So that you will require to be dearly paid."

"Not at all, excellent friend; I repeat that the pleasure of being agreeable to you makes me extremely accommodating. Your sortie from the hotel of Monsieur d'Epéron has, doubtless, something to do with the affair of which you have spoken?"

"It has a great deal to do with it, dear cousin. Your keenness and perspicuity are truly admirable."

"You are too complimentary, excellent friend."

"Ah!" replied the old page of the Guise, "the expedition to which I have alluded is of no great importance; so that I propose, not to engage you to take part in it, but to turn it over to you wholly."

"What is the nature of it?"

"To get rid, as soon as possible, of a small country squire, who has committed the unpardonable clumsiness of displeasing Monsieur d'Epéron."

"By Job's tatters!" cried De Maurevert, "that offers but a poor prospect. What is to be the reward, dear cousin?"

* A firearm much in use in the sixteenth century; so named from its requiring to be rested on the chest (*poitrine*) when fired. The pot-trinal was something between the pistol and the arquebuse in size.