

placing one hand upon his hip, and eyeing his interlocutor audaciously, and almost provocatively, "that you threaten me, the servant of Messieurs de Guise, with an iniquitous and violent death? Parbleu!—I see I have not been deceived by the intelligence given me that you were their enemy. You have threatened me with the block, Marquis de la Tremblais! I shall not overlook the circumstance. After all, I have no reason to be astonished, for am I not one of the principal officers of the House of Lorraine? It is Messieurs de Guise you wish to strike through me. Your intention is so clear as to leave me no room for doubt. Well, why do you hesitate to send me to prison?"

During the time De Maurevert was speaking, the face of the marquis reflected the violent and contradictory thoughts that were agitating his mind. Several times he appeared on the point of giving way to the promptings of his anger, but prudence each time held the away over his boiling passion.

"Captain," he replied, after a brief hesitation, "such hastiness does not assort with your age. A sensible man listens and reflects before answering. If you had deigned to give the least attention to what I said, you would have spared yourself the trouble of pronouncing a number of altogether useless sentences. I never thought of threatening you. You are here under the guarantee of a safe-conduct, bearing my seal and signature. Your person is in no danger. You are free to retire whenever you please."

"Then I have been mistaken, marquis, in believing that you threatened with death the humble servant of Messieurs de Guise," said De Maurevert, with a counterfeited air of vexation. "I must accept your affirmation. Let us continue our conversation."

De la Tremblais bit his lip, and affected to smile.

"Go on," he said. "I am listening."

"Marquis," continued De Maurevert, "your conduct towards Monsieur le Chevalier Raoul Sforzi is not only contrary to the rights of men, but to all the uses and customs of war. When you carried off the chevalier he was not in any sense bearing arms against you; he was not in an enemy's camp. Nothing, absolutely nothing, warrants you in disposing of his person. Moreover, Monsieur Sforzi is of noble condition. The devil—a gentleman is not to be treated like a peasant! I, therefore, summon you at once to deliver into my hands the Chevalier Raoul Sforzi, unjustly and iniquitously confined in the dungeons of the chateau of La Tremblais."

"Captain," replied the marquis, containing himself with difficulty. "I hold you in too much esteem to use deception towards you. I shall, therefore, be quite frank and to the point in my answer."

"There is nothing I so much delight in as frankness, marquis."

"I know perfectly well that in proceeding to grave extremities towards Monsieur de Sforzi I have placed myself without the pale of the law. I care little for that. If I have not right I have force, which is worth more. If Monsieur de Canillac, Governor for the King in the province of Auvergne, thinks it his duty to oppose the course of my justice, he is quite at liberty to undertake the adventure. I shall receive him in such a manner as will cure him of any fancy for meddling in my affairs for the future. You might offer me the throne of France, captain, in exchange for the liberty of Sforzi, and I should refuse it. I promised to answer you frankly—yet see I have kept my promise."

"May I venture to ask, marquis, what are your intentions with regard to the chevalier?"

"Monsieur de Sforzi will be fastened to the pillory in the public square, flogged à outrance, and then hanged on a gallows."

De Maurevert shuddered, but he allowed no sign of his emotion to appear.

"One question more, if you please."

"Ask it, captain, by all means."

"How is it—since the chevalier has been a fortnight in your power—you have not carried out the charming scheme of execution you have been so obliging as to describe to me?"

"How is it?" cried the marquis, with a terrible expression of hatred; "because the punishment of Monsieur de Sforzi would not have been complete! Diane d'Erlanges—I have proof of it—did not perish in the sack of the Chateau de Tauve; she has fled. Now, Sforzi loves this girl to madness; and I intend that before dying he shall have the satisfaction of knowing that his lady-love has become my mistress."

"Tudieu, marquis!—an Italian vengeance!"

"But gentle in comparison with the insult I have received from him!" cried the marquis, turning pale with fury at this recollection.

De Maurevert affected the utmost astonishment, and with an air, the most simple and natural, replied:

"The chevalier insulted you, marquis? I was wholly unaware of this circumstance.—In your place I should not have had patience to defer my vengeance so long. I should at once have provoked him to single combat. It is useless, then, for me to press you further for his liberation?"

"Wholly useless, captain. By the way, now that we are alone and conversing in friendly terms, allow me to tell you that you were very wrong in refusing me the assistance I sent to ask of you. The taking of Tauve would have been a profitable affair to you."

De Maurevert sighed.

"I know, marquis, that the Chateau de Tauve, having been given up to sack, it would have been better for me to have had the booty than to have lost it; but it was an affair of ill-luck. I had entered into association with the chevalier forty-eight hours before knowing you."

"And does this association still exist?"

"Certainly—the bond is for a year. I guess what you are thinking of—that honor blinds me not to abandon Raoul Sforzi in the extremity to which he is reduced; that it is my duty to attempt, by all possible means, to snatch him from your hands and set him free. Tudieu!—be sure, marquis, that I shall not fall either in my obligations or my duty. All that is humanly possible for me to do to be disagreeable to you I shall do."

"You declare war, then?"

"Alas! yes, marquis."

"You are wrong, captain—you are wrong! You would find it more profitable to enter into my interests and aid me, with the assistance of your peasants, to carry off Diane d'Erlanges."

"Ah, marquis! it is not generous of you to show me how much I lose by my engagement with the Chevalier Sforzi, for everybody knows your munificence; I should have served you with unexampled zeal. But you see, honor imperiously commands me to refuse you. Pity me, marquis!"

The two enemies remained for a moment silent.

"Marquis," said De Maurevert at length, "will it please you to put the finishing stroke to the obligingness you have shown me throughout this interview by granting me permission to see the chevalier? Oh, be under no apprehension! I give you my word—and you know to what a degree I am its slave—that I will not give him any advice, or communicate to him any plan of escape. I desire simply to embrace him, and I have no objection to one of your servants being present at the interview. Really, marquis, I shall be very greatly obliged if you will not refuse me this request."

"As you wish," replied the Seigneur de la Tremblais, after a moment's reflection. "Follow me!"

The spectacle which met De Maurevert's sight drew from him a deep sigh.

Half reclining on a little dirty straw, the Chevalier Sforzi was plunged in heavy sleep. An incredible change had been taken place in his appearance. His pale cheeks, his thinness, his untended hair and beard, rendered him unrecognizable; in the course of twelve days he had aged ten years.

"Poor companion!" cried De Maurevert, "how he must have suffered!" He stooped and gently touched the sleeping chevalier on the shoulder.

"Here is your companion in arms, your partner—come to assure you of his friendship and devotion!"

Sforzi opened his eyes and recognized De Maurevert.

"Ah! is it you, captain? I knew you would not abandon me."

"Abandon you before the time fixed in our engagement to each other—never!" cried De Maurevert, warmly. "But it is not without difficulty that I have been able to reach you. The presence of this rascal Benoit, who is listening with so much attention to our conversation, will alas! tell you that I do not bring you your liberty."

"What matters liberty, or even life, to me, captain? Since Diane is dead, I have no other wish than to rejoin her."

"What! is it the death of Diane that has wasted you in this terrible way? In that case, dear companion, you will get back your lost flesh in the twinkling of an eye. The Demoiselle d'Erlanges is not dead; I myself saw her, three days ago, in good health."

"You are not joking, captain? I am not delirious? You are really come to tell me that Diane still lives?"

"Most assuredly. She is somewhat changed, it is true; but, with the exception of her sorrowful looks, I give you my word she is perfectly well."

While De Maurevert was still speaking, Raoul sprang to his feet, and threw his arms about the captain's neck.

"Shame and ignominy!" cried De Maurevert, with rage. "What is that sound of irons? Death!—have they chained you?"

"Diane is living!" repeated Raoul, without thinking of replying to De Maurevert's question. "Dear and excellent captain, is she not even in danger?"

"What a strange thing love is!" muttered De Maurevert. "Here is Raoul, but a minute ago sunk in the lowest depth of despair, bathing now in an ocean of felicity! The devil fly away with me, if I believe he would at this moment exchange his position for that of the King of France! I really must try for once to be in love myself!"

"You do not answer me, captain. Tell me about Diane! Let me know how and by whom she was saved! Where is she? Does she remember me? For pity's sake, speak!"

"I should have much pleasure in satisfying your curiosity, dear Raoul; but, after all, the details you ask for would seem very insignificant. Unfortunately, this rascal Benoit, here, prevents me complying with your wishes. I cannot, as you see, inform him of the place of refuge of the Demoiselle d'Erlanges, which the Marquis de la Tremblais is searching for on all sides."

"The marquis! Ah, that is true! Woo, woo to him!" cried Raoul. "I shall know how to punish his infamous hopes and intentions!"

De Maurevert shrugged his shoulders, his favorite gesture.

"Good!" he cried. "Here you are covered with irons, and buried a hundred feet below ground, in a dungeon with cannon-proof walls, thinking of chastising the marquis! A strange thing love! Let us rather think about you?"

"No, no! Tell me about Diane, captain. Has she not spoken to you of me? Do you think—not that she loves me—that would be too great a happiness—but that, at least, she sometimes thinks of me?"

"Diane is simply mad about you. Good! Now you are going to stifle me!"

"Who told you that she loves me?"

"Do young girls ever make that sort of confession? By Venus! the Demoiselle d'Erlanges, in spite of her ceremonious air, has not been able to hide from me the state of her heart. She is madly in love with you, I tell you; but there is nothing in that to make you so joyous. Where would this love lead you—supposing even you were to recover your liberty? To just nothing at all. You forget that the Demoiselle d'Erlanges has lost her manor of Tauve. She is completely ruined!"

"What care I for her fortune?" cried Raoul.

"The crisis is very severe!" muttered De Maurevert. "I must wait awhile before attempting to talk seriously with him—until the fit has passed."

Abreced in his happiness, Raoul remained silent a considerable time.

"Captain," he exclaimed at length, suddenly, like a man starting from a dream, "I want to get out of this place—to regain my liberty. How is it to be done?"

"Alas! my dear friend, I pledged my word to the Marquis de la Tremblais, when he granted me permission to descend into your dungeon, that I would give you no kind of assistance or advice to aid you in escaping from this place. In spite of my desire, it is absolutely impossible for me to answer your question. All that I am permitted to add is, that I shall do my best to serve your interests. On my honor, as a gentleman, Raoul, I love you with all my heart! I know that this avowal is far from having in your eyes the value of that of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges; and in that respect you are wrong."

The devotion of a robust and adventurous captain is ten times preferable to the love of a ruined demoiselle!—I hope to prove it to you."

"Thanks, good De Maurevert! But, the marquis—since you have seen him—has he informed you what his intentions are with regard to me? What does he want?"

"What does he want, the wretch! Benoit, if you look at me in that insolent way, I shall be under the necessity of knocking you down! What does he want, the scoundrel? Alas! I dare not tell you!"

"Captain, I do not need courage."

"You are right! What is the good of keeping you in suspense? The marquis has shown himself to be a coward. He is now inexorable. He talks of exposing you to the ignominy of the pillory, and of submitting you to the shame of the lash!"

"Put me in the pillory!—flog me!" cried Raoul, giving way to frenzy, as if he hoped to burst the fetters with which he was loaded.

"Impossible! You are joking, captain."

"The moment would be ill-chosen, dear Raoul. Stay!—I have a proposition to make, which will leave you in no doubt of the truth of what I have told you."

"What proposition?"

"I confess I feel a certain embarrassment in explaining myself. The question is a very delicate one. It needs, indeed, all the friendship I feel for you to induce me to enter on the matter."

"Pray do not beat about the bush, captain."

"You would not say that if you knew the terrible conclusion of my discourse. However, no matter. I must make an effort to overcome my feelings. My dear Raoul, lend me your attention. I have, as I have already told you, pledged myself to the marquis not to attempt, during this interview, to release you from your dungeon. It is not a plan of escape I am going to suggest you; nevertheless, my object is to save you from the odious and dishonorable punishment which awaits you, and which, I verily believe, you have no means of avoiding. Chevalier—would you like me to plant my dagger in your heart? Before accepting or refusing my offer, reflect; it is worth the trouble. If I were in your place, I declare to you, on my soul and conscience, I should not hesitate a single moment. I should shout 'Yes' with all the power of my lungs; but all characters are not alike. I have seen a man, condemned to death, who trusted to the coming of a new deluge to escape being broken on the wheel. Do not hurry your decision; I will wait."

"Monsieur de Maurevert," cried the apostle Benoit, who, up to that moment, had been content to listen to the conversation of the two friends without taking any part in it.—"Monsieur de Maurevert, I formally oppose your stabbing the Chevalier Sforzi. He belongs to my master, and nobody else has the right to dispose of him."

Instead of replying to the Chief of the Apostles, De Maurevert placed himself in front of the door.

"Maitre Benoit," he said, "I made no promise in your regard. I have, therefore, a perfect right, if I feel so inclined, to squeeze the life out of your body against my breast-plate, to smash your skull, or drive my poinard up to the hilt into your heart. I admit that in the choice of so many diversions I experience some little hesitation, but it will be of short duration; and you may be assured it will not be in the least to your advantage. If, like all scoundrels with tormenting consciences, you go in fear of death, you had better lose no time in getting into a better frame of mind. Well, dear chevalier, have you determined? I am awaiting your answer."

"Captain," replied Raoul, with deep emotion, "from the bottom of my soul I thank you. You have proved to me how great is your devotion, and I shall hold you in eternal gratitude; but I refuse your offer."

"Very well, chevalier. Who knows?—perhaps there may come another deluge!"

"I cling to my life, captain, because I love Diane, because in my love for Mademoiselle d'Erlanges I shall find strength to bear the ignominious fate which awaits me. Later or sooner, history, which will carry my name down to posterity, will relieve me of the humiliation to which I shall have been subjected, and avenge my wrongs."

"My dear Raoul," replied De Maurevert, after a brief silence, "if it were only a question of the pillory, I should not have pushed my zeal to such a point as I have done; but I have not yet told you all that has passed between me and the marquis: to the scourge and the pillory, he adds the gibbet. Would it not be a hundred thousand times preferable to be tenderly stabbed by the hand of a friend than to be strung up to a gallows by that of a hangman?"

The chevalier remained unmoved by this terrible revelation.

"Captain," he said, in as calm a tone as if he had been pursuing an ordinary conversation, "your explanation does not in the least change my resolution. I see as plainly as yourself that the marquis is too much a coward not to be relentless; he has placed himself already too far beyond the pale of the law not to carry through his sanguinary work to the end; but, in spite of the apparent certainty of my fate, I do not think that my death is near. It seems impossible to me that, blessed with Diane's love, I can be doomed to pass so quickly to the grave. You laugh, perhaps, at my credulity and pride; but I feel within me a strength which no hangman can overcome. I cannot help thinking that I am destined to accomplish great things. No, no, captain; I repeat, I will not die!"