

Raoul did not address any question to him, or attempt to stay him.

As soon as he was outside of the Stag's Head, De Maurevert strode away with giant steps, but at no great distance from the hostelry stopped, and, after looking carefully about him, proceeded to conceal himself in a deep doorway.

Nine o'clock was striking as Raoul, in his turn, quitted the Stag's Head. His heart beat violently, and a lively color suffused his face. Hardly had he set foot upon the threshold before a man, disguised in a mask, and wrapped in a large cloak—although the heat was stifling—advanced to meet him, and bowing respectfully, whispered:

"Guise and Italy."

"I am ready, monsieur," answered Raoul, "Will you lead the way?"

"Monsieur," replied the guide, still in a low tone, "allow me, first, to bandage your eyes."

"Give me the bandage; I will tie it on myself," said Raoul.

The guide hesitated.

"Will you give me your word of honor, as a gentleman, that you will bind your eyes fairly?" he asked.

"I give you my word of honor."

The man in the mask handed the chevalier a scarf admirably embroidered, and impregnated with a delicious perfume.

As he had promised, Raoul conscientiously bound the rich tissue about his head.

"Be good enough to give me your hand, and follow me," said the guide.

Although there was nothing, we repeat, extraordinary in such an adventure happening at that period, the chevalier's imagination and curiosity were not the less powerfully excited. He bewildered himself with conjectures and doubts. The fineness and beauty of the tissue with which his eyes were bound, the perfume exhaled from it, the precautions taken by his guide, confirmed him more and more in the conviction that Mademoiselle d'Assy had not been mistaken in assuring him that he had to do with one of the highest and most powerful ladies in the kingdom.

Hardly had Sforzi and his guide gone a hundred paces before De Maurevert quitted his place of concealment, and followed in their steps, with a precaution and address that proved how well used he was to such proceedings.

"By Venus!" he said to himself, "Sforzi is a brave companion! He marches with a pace equally firm to love and battle! If he had had the shade of an idea of my intention to follow him, and watch over his safety, he would have forbidden me point-blank! I am a great rascal, I know; but it is not merely the fear of losing the five hundred crowns he owes me, in the event of anything happening to him, that makes me anxious for his safety."

While the captain was indulging in these reflections, Raoul and his guide reached a spot which had even then for many years been known as the *Tournelles* and since then called the *Marché-aux-chevaux*. This place, little frequented in the daytime, was a desert at night. It was only by taking infinite precautions that De Maurevert was able to follow unperceived, until the man in the mask reached a small house, before which he halted.

The door of this house was almost instantly opened, and the chevalier, accompanied by his guide, disappeared into the interior.

"The affair is evidently not one of throat-cutting," the captain remarked to himself, "Cupid, and not the savage god Mars, reigns over this quiet retreat. What if I were to leave the ground? No; husbands sometimes follow the example of that villainous Comte de Monsoreau, in his Chateau of Couclanciers, to assail with superior forces gallant gentlemen whom their wives have preferred to them. A night is soon passed. The weather is magnificent—the temperature warm. I might almost imagine myself encamped on an Italian plain!"

De Maurevert spread his cloak on the grass, drew his pistols from his pocket, and unsling his sword, which he placed within reach of his hand. These preparations made, he loosened his boots a little, and then stretched himself upon the earth with the air of a man perfectly satisfied with himself.

While the captain, with that practical philosophy which was one of the marked traits of his character, was thus keeping his nocturnal watch, a man who had followed him from the Stag's Head, using similar precautions to avoid detection to those which had been employed by De Maurevert in tracking Raoul and his guide, had carefully concealed himself behind a bush at no great distance.

This man having suddenly lost sight of the captain, and believing himself to be alone, quitted his place of concealment, and advanced quietly in the direction of the small house. Unfortunately for the spy, De Maurevert, to use one of his own expressions, knew how to sleep with his eyes open. Thus, this man had scarcely advanced a dozen paces before the captain's ear had detected his movement, and half raising himself, he had noiselessly cocked his pistols.

"*Pardieu!*" De Maurevert said to himself, "while trying to pierce the darkness before him, 'it is well I determined to *buvoaco* on the field of battle! Messieurs de Monsoreau are prowling in the neighborhood! I feel quite in the mood to cut up half a dozen of them! So one is coming—and by himself! By my faith, I almost pity his fate! Thousand thunders! Why don't the clouds that hide the moon hide themselves! I like day-light to see my prowess and admire my skill!"

De Maurevert had scarcely finished expressing this wish, before the moon, by a not very extraordinary chance, shone out brightly through a

rift in the clouds. Pistol in hand, he sprang instantly upon the spy, whom he observed some eight or ten paces from him, and seized him by the throat.

"Not a word!" he cried, in a low but energetic tone of voice—"not a word, or you are a dead man!"

With such impetuosity was the captain's attack made that the man, even if he had desired to do so, was utterly unable to defend himself.

"Devil's horns!" continued the captain, in the same low tone, "like all jealous husbands, you must be perniciously ugly! Will you oblige me with a sight of your face?"

Without relaxing his grasp upon the throat of his half-strangled victim, De Maurevert twisted him round until the moonlight fell full upon his features. No sooner had he cast his eyes on the visage of his prisoner, than he uttered an exclamation of surprise.

"Is it possible!—you, my brave Lehardy!" he cried.

The old servant of Mademoiselle d'Erlanges made no reply at first—the pressure of the captain's fingers upon his throat having for the moment deprived him of the power of speech. At length, however, the use of his tongue returned to him, and he exclaimed, while the tears poured from his eyes:

"Oh, my poor, dear, good mistress! your presentiments were but too well founded. Monsieur Sforzi is faithless!—a traitor to his vows!"

After giving utterance to these exclamations, and paying no more heed to the presence of the captain than if he had never seen him before, Lehardy rushed from the spot like a madman.

#### CHAPTER XXX.

##### "MARIE."

As soon as the door of the little house on the *Marché-aux-Chevaux* had closed behind them, the chevalier's mysterious guide removed his mask, and informed Raoul that he might now take off the bandage from his eyes.

By the feeble light of a lamp suspended against a wall, Sforzi then saw that he was in a narrow passage, at the end of which was a staircase.

"If you will have the goodness to wait here a moment," said the guide, "I will let my mistress know of your arrival." He went up the stairs, and in a few moments returned and made way for the chevalier.

Raoul, whose curiosity was excited to the utmost stretch, sprang up the stairs and reached a large ante-chamber, the four walls of which were hung with green and gold leather, leaving neither doors nor windows visible.

"Monsieur," said the guide, "my honored mistress, before receiving you, requires your promise that you will allow yourself to be conducted from this place as you were brought to it—with bandaged eyes, and under my care; that after your return to your hostelry, you will not make any attempt to ascertain to what house you have been conducted; and, finally, that you will not repeat to any one in the world anything that passes at the interview she is about to grant you."

"I accept these conditions," answered Raoul. The sound of a key turning in a lock was heard, the wall opened, and Sforzi was overwhelmed with admiration and astonishment at the strange and unexpected spectacle that met his eyes.

He saw before him a boudoir completely draped and furnished with black velvet, mysteriously lighted by the soft rays of a silver-gilt lamp veiled with rose-colored gauze. A heavy Turkey carpet—a luxury almost unknown at that time in France—covered the floor.

In one of the large arm-chairs which Henry III. had recently brought into fashion, and dressed in black, sat the *blonde* who had spoken so boldly from her carriage to Monsieur d'Epernon.

"Monsieur," she said to Raoul, with a charming smile, "I will not compliment you on the courage you have displayed, in accepting my invitation; I expected as much from you." And, with a graceful motion of her head, pointed out to him a folding seat, such as was then used at Court, and which was placed at a short distance from her own chair.

"To clear your mind of all misapprehension as to the character of this interview," she continued, "I will at once inform you, that if you seriously desire to win my esteem and confidence, you must forget the woman, and see in me nothing but a companion. I have a soul high enough placed, and a heart bold enough to deserve this title."

"Madame," replied Raoul in a voice that slightly trembled while he spoke, "I know too well the smallness of my own merit ever to have thought of regarding this rendez-vous in the manner your words suggest. Nor will I hide from you, madame—and I hope my avowal will assure you as to my intentions—that your incomparable and sovereign beauty is to me as if it had no existence; I shall be insensible to it. The adored image of her to whom I have engaged my faith and affianced my soul, is ever present to my eyes. If you had not called my attention to your beauty, madame, I should not have perceived it."

At this reply, which Raoul thought was perfectly sincere, a scarcely perceptible frown passed over the ivory brow of the beautiful unknown. It was in the gentlest tones, however, and with increased amiability of manner, that she again addressed her visitor.

"Monsieur Sforzi," she said, "I thank you for this avowal; your frankness puts me quite at my ease. Without further delay, then, let us come to the subject of our interview. You have

to-day mortally offended Monsieur de la Lavallette. Thé Duc d'Epernon is implacable in his enmities—he never forgives an injury. The power of this favorite is so great, his credit is so firmly established, that the man against whom he declares himself the enemy must perforce succumb. Chevalier, unless by the improbable interposition of a miracle, you must henceforth consider yourself as lost! A heroic resolution alone can save you. Do you feel that you have—I will not say the courage, for that but faintly expresses my thought—but I will say the will, to enter upon an enterprise, greater and more heroic, perhaps, than any of which history has any example to give?"

"Madame," answered Raoul, after a moment's reflection, "is it an alliance you deign to propose to me?"

"An alliance?—no, monsieur," replied the unknown, haughtily. "What I offer you is support."

"Permit me, madame, I beg, to ask you one question. After painting Monsieur d'Epernon as you have painted him—as an enemy the most to be dreaded—have you yet power sufficient to snatch one of his victims from his grasp?"

"Monsieur Sforzi," returned the unknown, "the mystery with which I have surrounded our present interview will have told you that I do not wish to be known to you. If you had been one familiar to the Court, I should have left you to struggle as you best might against the attacks of Monsieur d'Epernon. It is precisely to your ignorance of men and things that you owe—I will not withdraw the word—my protection. If you greatly wish to link a name with my face, call me Marie. You are still absolutely without guarantee from me as to the confidence, or better yet, the devotion, I ask of you. It is for your sagacity, chevalier, to decide, yes or no, whether you will accept my offers. For myself, I think that a look suffices me to appreciate a person. This morning, during your quarrel with D'Epernon, I judged you at a glance. I should be sorry, Monsieur Sforzi, that any ridiculous feeling of complaisance should induce you to accept lightly an engagement which I wish to be serious—irrevocable. Take your time—reflect well before answering me!"

"Madame," replied Raoul, after a short pause, "I recognize in you a superiority of mind so great and so rare as almost to alarm me. I must, before answering you, beg you to assure me on one point: it is, that your designs are not of a nature to render me guilty of the crime of *lèse-majesté*?"

Sforzi was very far from anticipating the effect produced on the unknown by this question.

By a spontaneous movement, as if she had been bitten by the teeth of a reptile, she sprang from her seat; then, with superb countenance, inspired eye, and voice tremulous with passion, she exclaimed, in a tone of withering contempt:

"Truly, Monsieur Sforzi, I could never have believed that provincial prejudices could so have destroyed in a brave spirit all reasonableness, sense, and feeling of greatness! At the bare thought, not of attacking the royal authority, but only of combating its abuses, of revolting against its disgraces, you stand trembling, pale and overcome! Chevalier Sforzi, men who humble themselves, who bow before prejudice, are born to be mastered. Does not the prospect of a degrading servitude terrify your pride? Royalty—heaven preserve me from speaking ill of it, Monsieur Sforzi; but the king is not royalty—he is only a man!"

"You fear to commit the crime of *lèse-majesté*, to attack the rights of the Crown! No rumor of the shameful scandals of the Court has reached your province, then? The rustic squires and bumpkins of the small towns, I can see by your astonishment, know nothing of what is going on in Paris! Well, then, I will tell you, Monsieur Sforzi—and if, after you have heard me, you still persist in your pusillanimity, I will leave you free to go and seek a master, and we shall part never to meet again."

"His Majesty Henry III., Monsieur Sforzi, lives but for Messieurs de Joyeuse and d'Epernon; besides these two *mignons*, nothing exists for him. The people are but a flock of hinds who produce abundant harvests. The nobility, a party of factious persons who cannot be held in too much detestation. Glory, a word signifying fatigue and danger. Would you know how worthily Henry of Valois employs his *leisures*? He busies himself in discussing the quality of this or that perfume, on the more or less taste displayed in this or that new costume. He pleats his wife's starched collars, dresses his *mignons*, combs his spaniels, eats sweetmeats and sucks oranges. Henry of Valois is a great king, chevalier! I can quite understand the admiration with which he inspires you. Such is this king, the honor of France—what am I saying?—of Christianity!"

The beautiful unknown ceased speaking. The flashing fires presently faded from her eyes, the superb smile of disdain passed from her lip, her voice became low and soft, as, after a while, she continued:

"Forget, I beg of you, Chevalier Sforzi, how I have for a moment suffered myself to be carried away. I love justice and glory so passionately that in thinking of the woes and shames endured by this unhappy kingdom of France, I could not repress the cry of indignation and despair that arose from my heart! Let us bring this useless interview to an end; you are not the man I have dreamed of uniting with my glory."

Without being completely conscious of all that was passing within him, Raoul felt deeply humiliated. All his instincts of youth and ambition were at once inflamed.

"Madame," he cried, "I will leave to the care of the future the opinion you have formed of me; but, believe me, I, too, love glory with fervor! I, too, have dreamed of glory! The unjust power of the great has weighed but too heavily upon my existence; I have insults to avenge, outrages to punish! Madame, I repeat, declare to me, by your hopes of Paradise, that if I put my will and my entire being at your command, you will never call upon me to draw my sword against the king. I am then yours, body and soul!"

If Sforzi had remarked the smile of triumph and perfidy which passed more rapidly than light over the visage of Marie he would instantly have recalled his rash promise.

"Monsieur Sforzi," she replied, after a brief silence, "I gather, from what you have just said, that your pride must have been cruelly stung, your heart must have suffered terribly."

"You have guessed rightly, madame," replied Raoul. "Brave and loyal gentleman as I am, I have been bound to a pillory, struck in the face by the hand of a hangman, and led out for execution on a gibbet! And that, madame, because I had defended a noble lady infamously persecuted—because I had given a blow to a coward whose sword had shamefully rested in its sheath. You can now understand my hatred of feudality, and why I am the devoted champion of royalty! So long as there remains a drop of blood in my veins, so long as my brain can put together two ideas, I will employ my strength and intelligence in fighting against feudality!"

Marie made no reply to this declaration of the chevalier's, but, after a slight pause, said in a gentle tone:

"It is growing late, Monsieur Sforzi. Instead of occupying ourselves with Monsieur d'Epernon, we have wandered to other subjects. The next time we see each other we will endeavor to arrange some plan of action against our common enemy. You must not remain longer here. The same servant who guided you hither will reconduct you. Now that I know your trustworthiness, I shall not use the same precautions that I have thought it necessary to adopt this evening. I only require your promise that you will not make any attempt to discover who I am, and that you will not return to this place without having been sent for."

"I swear to you, madame!—And this invitation—shall I have long to wait for it?"

"As soon as it appears needful for our projects, I will send for you. We will then regulate the conditions of our alliance. The words 'Guise and Italy,' pronounced in a low voice, and accompanied by three knocks, given at equal intervals, will cause the door to be opened to you. Good night, chevalier."

Raoul bowed silently, and took his departure.

(To be continued.)

#### A MISGUIDED BOOK-AGENT.

A book-agent entered the open door of a snug Pittsfield cottage one day last week, and, nodding to the trim, bright-looking little woman who sat sewing by the window, commenced volubly to descant on the merits of a great work which he was for the first time giving mankind an opportunity to purchase. It was a universal biography, cook-book, dictionary, family physician, short-hand instructor, and contained, besides, a detailed history of every important event that has transpired in the world, from the apple incident and Adam's fall to Credit Mobilier and the fall of Congress. The work contained five thousand chapters, air with running titles. The agent, after talking on the general excellencies of the volume about five minutes, commenced on the headings of those chapters, and as the woman did not say a word to interrupt him, he felt that she shouldn't condescend, and rattled away so that she shouldn't have a chance to say no. It took him nearly half an hour, and as he breathlessly went on the sweat started from his forehead, and he made convulsive gasps at his collar, and when he finished he had hardly strength enough left to put on a bewitching smile, and hand her his ready pen wherewith to subscribe her name to the order-book. She took the pen, but instead of putting her autograph on his list, she lifted a scrap of paper from her work-box, and wrote in plain letters, "I'm deaf and dumb." He said not a word, but the unutterable things that he looked as he turned to the door would fill a library.

A widow who was terribly afraid of thunder and lightning, every time a storm came on would run into her neighbour's house (he was an old bachelor and clasp her little hands, and fly around, till the man was half distracted for fear she would be killed. The consequence was that before three thunder storms rattled over his head he had taken her into his house legally bound to him for his whole life.

Ladies' feet appear to grow in Western countries to a gigantic size, corresponding to their developments of nature—as trees, mountains, and garden products. We infer this from two statements in an Omaha journal. In one column it mentions, as a warning, that the sidewalks of the city are full of holes "the size of a lady's foot;" and a little further on we read that a boy of six years old fell into one of these holes. We are sure they cannot have specially small boys at the West, so we are forced to the above conclusion.