









# A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE

BEING THE MEMOIRS OF GASTON DE BONNE  
SIEUR DE MARSAC

BY

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IN THREE VOLUMES

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# A GENTLEMAN OF FRANCE.

## CHAPTER XXV.

### TERMS OF SURRENDER.

I STILL had my hand on the trap when a touch on the shoulder caused me to turn, and in a moment apprised me of the imminence of a new peril—a peril of such a kind that, summoning all my resolution, I could scarcely hope to cope with it. Henry was at my elbow. He had taken off his mask, and a single glance at his countenance warned me that that had happened of which I had already felt some fear. The glitter of intense excitement shone in his eyes. His face, darkly flushed and wet with sweat, betrayed overmastering emotion; while his teeth, tight clenched in the effort to restrain the fit of trembling which possessed him, showed

between his lips like those of a corpse. The novelty of the danger which menaced him, the absence of his gentlemen, and of all the familiar faces and surroundings, without which he never moved, the hour, the mean house, and his isolation among strangers, had proved too much for nerves long weakened by his course of living, and for a courage, proved indeed in the field, but unequal to a sudden stress. Though he still strove to preserve his dignity, it was alarmingly plain to my eyes that he was on the point of losing, if he had not already lost, all self-command.

“Open!” he muttered between his teeth, pointing impatiently to the trap with the hand with which he had already touched me. “Open, I say, sir!”

I stared at him, startled and confounded. “But your Majesty,” I ventured to stammer, “forgets that I have not yet ——”

“Open, I say!” he repeated passionately. “Do you hear me, sir? I desire that this door be opened.” His lean hand shook as

with the palsy, so that the gems on it twinkled in the light and rattled as he spoke.

I looked helplessly from him to the women and back again, seeing in a flash all the dangers which might follow from the discovery of his presence there—dangers which I had not before formulated to myself, but which seemed in a moment to range themselves with the utmost clearness before my eyes. At the same time I saw what seemed to me to be a way of escape; and, emboldened by the one and the other, I kept my hand on the trap, and strove to parley with him.

“Nay, but, sire,” I said hurriedly, yet still with as much deference as I could command “I beg you to permit me first to repeat what I have seen. M. de Bruhl is without, and I counted six men whom I believe to be his following. They are ruffians ripe for any crime; and I implore your Majesty rather to submit to a short imprisonment ——”

I paused struck dumb on that word, confounded by the passion which lightened in

the king's face. My ill-chosen expression had indeed applied the spark to his wrath. Predisposed to suspicion by a hundred treacheries, he forgot the perils outside in the one idea which on the instant possessed his mind—that I would confine his person, and had brought him hither for no other purpose. He glared round him with eyes full of rage and fear, and his trembling lips breathed rather than spoke the word “Imprison”?

Unluckily, a trifling occurrence added at this moment to his disorder, and converted it into frenzy. Someone outside fell heavily against the door; this, causing madame to utter a low shriek, seemed to shatter the last remnant of the king's self-control. Stamping his foot on the floor, he cried to me with the utmost wildness to open the door—by which I had hitherto kept my place.

But, wrongly or rightly, I was still determined to put off opening it; and I raised my hands with the intention of making a last appeal to him. He misread the gesture, and

retreating a step, with the greatest suddenness whipped out his sword, and in a moment had the point at my breast, and his wrist drawn back to thrust.

It has always been my belief that he would not have dealt the blow; but that the mere touch of the hilt, awakening the courage which he undoubtedly possessed, and which did not desert him in his last moments, would have recalled him to himself. But the opportunity was not given him; for while the blade yet quivered, and I stood motionless, controlling myself by an effort, my knee half bent and my eyes on his, Mademoiselle de la Vire sprang forward at his back, and with a loud scream clutched his elbow. The king, surprised, and ignorant who held him, flung up his point wildly, and striking the lamp above his head with his blade, shattered it in an instant, bringing down the pottery with a crash, and reducing the room to darkness: while the screams of the women, and the knowledge that we had a madman among

us, peopled the blackness with a hundred horrors.

Fearing above all for Mademoiselle, I made my way as soon as I could recover my wits to the embers of the fire, and regardless of the king's sword, which I had a vague idea was darting about in the darkness, I searched for and found a half-burnt stick, which I blew into a blaze. With this, still keeping my back to the room, I contrived to light a taper that I had noticed standing by the hearth; and then, and then only, I turned to see what I had to confront.

Mademoiselle de la Vire stood in a corner, half-fierce, half-terrified, and wholly flushed. She had her hand wrapped in a kerchief already stained with blood; and from this I gathered that the king in his frenzy had wounded her slightly. Standing before her mistress, with her hair bristling, like a wild cat's fur, and her arms akimbo, was Fanchette, her harsh face and square form instinct with fury and defiance. Madame de Bruhl and

Simon cowered against the wall not far from them; and in a chair, into which he had apparently just thrown himself, sat the king, huddled up and collapsed, the point of his sword trailing on the ground beside him, and his nerveless hand scarce retaining force to grip the pommel.

In a moment I made up my mind what to do; and going to him in silence, I laid my pistols, sword, and dagger on a stool by his side. Then I knelt.

“The door, sire,” I said, “is there. It is for your Majesty to open it when you please. Here, too, sire, are my weapons. I am your prisoner, the Provost-Marshal is outside, and you can at a word deliver me to him. Only one thing I beg, sire,” I continued earnestly, “that your Majesty will treat as a delusion the idea that I meditated for a moment disrespect or violence to your person.”

He looked at me dully, his face pale, his eyes fish-like. “Sanctus, man!” he muttered, “why did you raise your hand?”

“Only to implore your Majesty to pause a moment,” I answered, watching the intelligence return slowly to his face. “If you will deign to listen I can explain in half-a-dozen words, sire. M. de Bruhl’s men are six or seven, the Provost has eight or nine; but the former are the wilder blades; and if M. de Bruhl find your Majesty in my lodgings, and infer his own defeat, he would be capable of any desperate stroke. Your person would hardly be safe in his company through the streets. And there is another consideration,” I went on, observing with joy that the king listened, and was gradually regaining his composure. “That is, the secrecy you desired to preserve, sire, until this matter should be well advanced. M. de Rosny laid the strictest injunctions on me in that respect, fearing an *émeute* in Blois should your Majesty’s plans become known.”

“You speak fairly,” the king answered with returning energy, though he avoided looking at the women. “Bruhl is likely enough to raise one. But how am I to get out, sir?”



he continued, querulously. "I cannot remain here. I shall be missed, man! I am not a hedge-captain, neither sought nor wanted!"

"If your Majesty would trust me?" I said slowly and with hesitation.

"Trust you!" he retorted peevishly, holding up his hands and gazing intently at his nails, of the shape and whiteness of which he was prouder than any woman. "Have I not trusted you? If I had not trusted you, should I have been here? But that you were a Huguenot—God forgive me for saying it!—I would have seen you in hell before I would have come here with you!"

I confess to having heard this testimony to the Religion with a pride which made me forget for a moment the immediate circumstances—the peril in which we stood, the gloomy room darkly lighted by a single candle, the scared faces in the background, even the king's huddled figure, in which dejection and pride struggled for expression. For a moment only; then I hastened to reply, saying that I

doubted not I could still extricate his Majesty without discovery.

“ In heaven’s name do it, then ! ” he answered sharply. “ Do what you like, man ! Only get me back into the Castle, and it shall not be a Huguenot will entice me out again. I am over old for these adventures.”

A fresh attack on the door taking place as he said this induced me to lose no time in explaining my plan, which he was good enough to approve, after again upbraiding me for bringing him into such a dilemma. Fearing lest the door should give way prematurely, notwithstanding the bars I had provided for it, and goaded on by Madame de Bruhl’s face, which evinced the utmost terror, I took the candle and attended his Majesty into the inner room ; where I placed my pistols beside him, but silently reassumed my sword and dagger. I then returned for the women, and indicating by signs that they were to enter, held the door open for them.

Mademoiselle, whose bandaged hand I could

not regard without emotion, though the king's presence and the respect I owed him forbade me to utter so much as a word, advanced readily until she reached the doorway abreast of me. There, however, looking back, and seeing Madame de Bruhl following her, she stopped short, and darting a haughty glance at me, muttered, "And—that lady? Are we to be shut up together, sir?"

"Mademoiselle," I answered quickly, in the low tone she had used herself, "have I ever asked anything dishonourable of you?"

She seemed by a slight movement of the head to answer in the negative.

"Nor do I now," I replied with earnestness. "I entrust to your care a lady who has risked great peril for *us*; and the rest I leave to you."

She looked me very keenly in the face for a second; and then, without answering, she passed on, Madame and Fanchette following her in that order. I closed the door, and turned to Simon; who by my direction had blown the embers of the fire into a blaze, to

partly illumine the room, in which only he and I now remained. The lad seemed afraid to meet my eye, and owing to the scene at which he had just assisted, or to the onslaught on the door, which grew each moment more furious, betrayed greater restlessness than I had lately observed in him. I did not doubt his fidelity, however, or his devotion to Mademoiselle; and the orders I had to give him were simple enough.

“This is what you have got to do,” I said, my hand already on the bars. “The moment I am outside secure this door. After that, open to no one except Maignan. When he applies, let him in with caution, and bid him, as he loves M. de Rosny, take his men as soon as the coast is clear, and guard the King of France to the Castle. Charge him to be brave and wary, for his life will answer for the king’s.”

Twice I repeated this; then, fearing lest the Provost-Marshal should make good his word and apply a ram to the door, I opened the trap. A dozen angry voices hailed my appearance,

and this with so much violence and impatience that it was some time before I could get a hearing ; the knaves threatening me if I would not instantly open, and persisting that I should do so without more words. Their leader at length quieted them, but it was plain that his patience too was worn out. "Do you surrender or do you not?" he said. "I am not going to stay out of my bed all night for you!"

"I warn you," I answered, "that the order you have there has been cancelled by the king!"

"That is not my business," he rejoined hardily.

"No, but it will be when the king sends for you to-morrow morning," I retorted ; at which he looked somewhat moved. "However, I will surrender to you on two conditions," I continued, keenly observing the coarse faces of his following. "First, that you let me keep my arms until we reach the gate-house, I giving you my parole to come with you quietly. That is number one."

“Well,” the Provost-Marshal said, more civilly, “I have no objection to that.”

“Secondly, that you do not allow your men to break into my lodgings. I will come out quietly, and so an end. Your order does not direct you to sack my goods.”

“Tut, tut!” he replied; “I want you to come out. I do not want to go in.”

“Then draw your men back to the stairs,” I said. “And if you keep terms with me, I will uphold you to-morrow. For your orders will certainly bring you into trouble. M. de Retz, who procured it this morning, is away, you know. M. de Villequier may be gone to-morrow. But depend upon it, M. de Rambouillet will be here!”

The remark was well timed and to the point. It startled the man as much as I had hoped it would. Without raising any objection he ordered his men to fall back and guard the stairs; and I on my side began to undo the fastenings of the door.

The matter was not to be so easily con-

cluded, however ; for Bruhl's rascals, in obedience, no doubt, to a sign given by their leader, who stood with Fresnoy on the upper flight of stairs, refused to withdraw ; and even hustled the Provost-Marshal's men when the latter would have obeyed the order. The officer, already heated by delay, replied by laying about him with his staff, and in a twinkling there seemed to be every prospect of a very pretty *mêlée*, the end of which it was impossible to foresee.

Reflecting, however, that if Bruhl's men routed their opponents our position might be made worse rather than better, I did not act on my first impulse, which was to see the matter out where I was. Instead, I seized the opportunity to let myself out, while Simon fastened the door behind me. The Provost-Marshal was engaged at the moment in a wordy dispute with Fresnoy ; whose villanous countenance, scarred by the wound which I had given him at Chizé, and flushed with passion, looked its worst by the light of the

single torch which remained. In one respect the villain had profited by his present patronage, for he was decked out in a style of tawdry magnificence. But I have always remarked this about dress: that while a shabby exterior does not entirely obscure a gentleman, the extreme of fashion is powerless to gild a knave.

Seeing me on a sudden at the Provost's elbow, he recoiled with a change of countenance so ludicrous that that officer was himself startled, and only held his ground on my saluting him civilly and declaring myself his prisoner. I added a warning that he should look to the torch which remained; seeing that if it failed we were both like to have our throats cut in the confusion.

He took the hint promptly, and calling the link-man to his side prepared to descend, bidding Fresnoy and his men, who remained clumped at the head of the stairs, make way for us without ado. They seemed much inclined, however, to dispute our passage, and,



replying to his invectives with rough taunts, displayed so hostile a demeanour that the Provost, between regard for his own importance and respect for Bruhl, appeared for a moment at a loss what to do; and seemed rather relieved than annoyed when I begged leave to say a word to M. de Bruhl.

“If you can bring his men to reason,” he replied testily, “speak your fill to him!”

Stepping to the foot of the upper flight, on which Bruhl retained his position, I saluted him formally. He returned my greeting with a surly, watchful look only, and drawing his cloak more tightly round him affected to gaze down at me with disdain; which ill concealed, however, both the triumph he felt and the hopes of vengeance he entertained. I was especially anxious to learn whether he had tracked his wife hither, or was merely here in pursuance of his general schemes against me; and to this end I asked him, with as much irony as I could compass, to what I was to attribute his presence. “I am afraid I cannot

stay to offer you hospitality," I continued; "but for that you have only your friend M. de Villequier to thank!"

"I am greatly obliged to you," he answered with a devilish smile, "but do not let that affect you. When you are gone I propose to help myself, my friend, to whatever takes my taste."

"Do you?" I retorted coolly—not that I was unaffected by the threat and the villanous hint which underlay the words, but that, fully expecting them, I was ready with my answer. "We will see about that." And therewith I raised my fingers to my lips, and, whistling shrilly, cried "Maignan! Maignan!" in a clear voice.

I had no need to cry the name a third time, for before the Provost-Marshal could do more than start at this unexpected action, the landing above us rang under a heavy tread, and the man I called descending the stairs swiftly, appeared on a sudden within arm's length of M. de Bruhl; who, turning with an oath, saw him, and involuntarily recoiled. At all times

Maignan's hardy and confident bearing was of a kind to impress the strong; but on this occasion there was an added dash of recklessness in his manner which was not without its effect on the spectators. As he stood there smiling darkly over Bruhl's head, while his hand toyed carelessly with his dagger, and the torch shone ruddily on his burly figure, he was so clearly an antagonist in a thousand that, had I sought through Blois, I might not have found his fellow for strength and *sang-froid*. He let his black eyes rove from one to the other, but took heed of me only, saluting me with effusion and a touch of the Gascon, which was in place here, if ever.

I knew how M. de Rosny dealt with him, and followed the pattern as far as I could.

"Maignan!" I said curtly, "I have taken a lodging for to-night elsewhere. When I am gone you will call out your men and watch this door. If anyone tries to force an entrance you will do your duty."

"You may consider it done," he replied.

“ Even if the person be M. de Bruhl here,” I continued.

“ Precisely.”

“ You will remain on guard,” I went on, “ until to-morrow morning if M. de Bruhl remains here ; but whenever he leaves you will take your orders from the persons inside, and follow them implicitly.”

“ Your Excellency’s mind may be easy,” he answered, handling his dagger.

Dismissing him with a nod, I turned with a smile to M. de Bruhl, and saw that between rage at this unexpected check and chagrin at the insult put upon him his discomfiture was as complete as I could wish. As for Fresnoy, if he had seriously intended to dispute our passage, he was no longer in the mood for the attempt. Yet I did not let his master off without one more prick. “ That being settled, M. de Bruhl,” I said pleasantly, “ I may bid you good-evening. You will doubtless honour me at Chaverny to-morrow. But we will first let Maignan look under the bridge !”

## CHAPTER XXVI.

## MEDITATIONS.

EITHER the small respect I had paid M. de Bruhl, or the words I had let fall respecting the possible disappearance of M. Villequier, had had so admirable an effect on the Provost-Marshal's mind that from the moment of leaving my lodgings he treated me with the utmost civility; permitting me even to retain my sword, and assigning me a sleeping-place for the night in his own apartments at the Gate-house.

Late as it was, I could not allow so much politeness to pass unacknowledged. I begged leave, therefore, to distribute a small gratuity among his attendants, and requested him to do me the honour of drinking a bottle of wine with me. This being speedily procured, at such an expense as is usual in these places,

where prisoners pay, according as they are rich or poor, in purse or person, kept us sitting for an hour, and finally sent us to our pallets perfectly satisfied with one another.

The events of the day, however, and particularly one matter, on which I have not dwelt at length, proved as effectual to prevent my sleeping as if I had been placed in the dampest cell below the Castle. So much had been crowded into a time so short that it seemed as if I had had until now no opportunity of considering whither I was being hurried, or what fortune awaited me at the end of this turmoil. From the first appearance of M. d'Agen in the morning, with the startling news that the Provost-Marshal was seeking me, to my final surrender and encounter with Bruhl on the stairs, the chain of events had run out so swiftly that I had scarcely had time at any particular period to consider how I stood, or the full import of the latest check or victory. Now that I had leisure I lived the day over again, and,

recalling its dangers and disappointments, felt thankful that all had ended so fairly.

I had the most perfect confidence in Maignan, and did not doubt that Bruhl would soon weary, if he had not already wearied, of a profitless siege. In an hour at most—and it was not yet midnight—the king would be free to go home; and with that would end, as far as he was concerned, the mission with which M. de Rosny has honoured me. The task of communicating his Majesty's decision to the King of Navarre would doubtless be entrusted to M. de Rambouillet, or some person of similar position and influence; and in the same hands would rest the honour and responsibility of the treaty which, as we all know now, gave after a brief interval and some bloodshed, and one great providence, a lasting peace to France. But it must ever be—and I recognised this night with a bounding heart, which told of some store of youth yet unexhausted—a matter of lasting pride to me that I, whose career but now seemed closed in

failure, had proved the means of conferring so especial a benefit on my country and religion.

Remembering, however, the King of Navarre's warning that I must not look to him for reward, I felt greatly doubtful in what direction the scene would next open to me ; my main dependence being upon M. de Rosny's promise that he would make my fortune his own care. Tired of the Court at Blois, and the atmosphere of intrigue and treachery which pervaded it, and with which I hoped I had now done, I was still at a loss to see how I could recross the Loire in face of the Vicomte de Turenne's enmity. I might have troubled myself much more with speculating upon this point had I not found, in close connection with it, other and more engrossing food for thought in the capricious behaviour of Mademoiselle de la Vire.

To that behaviour it seemed to me that I now held the clue. I suspected with as much surprise as pleasure that only one construction



could be placed upon it—a construction which had strongly occurred to me on catching sight of her face when she intervened between me and the king.

Tracing the matter back to the moment of our meeting in the antechamber at St. Jean d'Angely, I remembered the jest which Mathurine had uttered at our joint expense. Doubtless it had dwelt in Mademoiselle's mind, and exciting her animosity against me had prepared her to treat me with contumely, when, contrary to all probability, we met again, and she found herself placed in a manner in my hands. It had inspired her harsh words and harsher looks on our journey northwards, and contributed with her native pride to the low opinion I had formed of her when I contrasted her with my honoured mother.

But I began to think it possible that the jest had worked in another way as well, by keeping me before her mind and impressing upon her the idea—after my re-appearance at

Chizé more particularly—that our fates were in some way linked. Assuming this, it was not hard to understand her manner at Rosny, when, apprised that I was no impostor, and regretting her former treatment of me, she still recoiled from the feelings which she began to recognise in her own breast. From that time, and with this clue, I had no difficulty in tracing her motives, always supposing that this suspicion, upon which I dwelt with feelings of wonder and delight, were well founded.

Middle-aged and grizzled, with the best of my life behind me, I had never dared to think of her in this way before. Poor and comparatively obscure, I had never raised my eyes to the wide possessions said to be hers. Even now I felt myself dazzled and bewildered by the prospect so suddenly unveiled. I could scarcely, without vertigo, recall her as I had last seen her, with her hand wounded in my defence; nor, without emotions painful in their intensity, fancy myself restored to

the youth of which I had taken leave, and to the rosy hopes and plannings which visit most men once only, and then in early years. Hitherto I had deemed such things the lot of others.

Daylight found me—and no wonder—still diverting myself with these charming speculations ; which had for me, be it remembered, all the force of novelty. The sun chanced to rise that morning in a clear sky, and brilliantly for the time of year ; and words fail me when I look back, and try to describe how delicately this simple fact enhanced my pleasure ! I sunned myself in the beams, which penetrated my barred window ; and tasting the early freshness with a keen and insatiable appetite, I experienced to the full that peculiar aspiration after goodness which Providence allows such moments to awaken in us in youth ; but rarely when time and the camp have blunted the sensibilities.

I had not yet arrived at the stage at which difficulties had to be reckoned up ; and the

chief drawback to the tumult of joy I felt took the shape of regret that my mother no longer lived to feel the emotions proper to the time, and to share in the prosperity which she had so often and so fondly imagined. Nevertheless, I felt myself drawn closer to her. I recalled with the most tender feelings, and at greater leisure than had before been the case, her last days and words, and particularly the appeal she had uttered on Mademoiselle's behalf. And I vowed, if it were possible, to pay a visit to her grave before leaving the neighbourhood, that I might there devote a few moments to the thought of the affection which had consecrated all women in my eyes.

I was presently interrupted in these reflections by a circumstance which proved in the end diverting enough, though far from reassuring at the first blush. It began in a dismal rattling of chains in the passage below and on the stairs outside my room; which were paved, like the rest of the building, with stone.

I waited with impatience and some uneasiness to see what would come of this ; and my surprise may be imagined when, the door being unlocked, gave entrance to a man in whom I recognised on the instant deaf Matthew—the villain whom I had last seen with Fresnoy in the house in the Rue Valois. Amazed at seeing him here, I sprang to my feet in fear of some treachery, and for a moment apprehended that the Provost-Marshal had basely given me over to Bruhl's custody. But a second glance informing me that the man was in irons—hence the noise I had heard—I sat down again to see what would happen.

It then appeared that he merely brought me my breakfast, and was a prisoner in less fortunate circumstances than myself ; but as he pretended not to recognise me, and placed the things before me in obdurate silence, and I had no power to make him hear, I failed to learn how he came to be in durance. The Provost-Marshal, however, came presently to

visit me, and brought me, in token that the good-fellowship of the evening still existed, a pouch of the Queen's herb; which I accepted for politeness sake, rather than from any virtue I found in it. And from him I learned how the rascal came to be in his charge.

It appeared that Fresnoy, having no mind to be hampered with a wounded man, had deposited him on the night of our *mêlée* at the door of a hospital attached to a religious house in that part of the town. The Fathers had opened to him, but before taking him in put, according to their custom, certain questions. Matthew had been primed with the right answers to these questions, which were commonly a form; but, unhappily for him, the Superior by chance or mistake began with the wrong one.

“You are not a Huguenot, my son?” he said.

“In God's name, I am!” Matthew replied with simplicity, believing he was asked if he was a Catholic.

“What?” the scandalised Prior ejaculated, crossing himself in doubt, “are you not a true son of the Church?”

“Never!” quoth our deaf friend; thinking all went well.

“A heretic!” cried the monk.

“Amen to that!” replied Matthew innocently; never doubting but that he was asked the third question, which was, commonly, whether he needed aid.

Naturally after this there was a very pretty commotion; and Matthew, vainly protesting that he was deaf, was hurried off to the Provost-Marshal’s custody. Asked how he communicated with him, the Provost answered that he could not; but that his little godchild, a girl only eight years old, had taken a strange fancy to the rogue, and was never so happy as when talking to him by means of signs, of which she had invented a great number. I thought this strange at the time, but I had proof before the morning was out that it was true enough, and that the two were seldom apart, the little child

governing this grim cut-throat with unquestioned authority.

After the Provost was gone I heard the man's fetters clanking again. This time he entered to remove my cup and plate, and surprised me by speaking to me. Maintaining his former sullenness, and scarcely looking at me, he said abruptly: "You are going out again?"

I nodded assent.

"Do you remember a bald-faced bay horse that fell with you?" he muttered, keeping his dogged glance on the floor.

I nodded again.

"I want to sell the horse," he said. "There is not such another in Blois, no, nor in Paris! Touch it on the near hip with the whip and it will go down as if shot. At other times a child might ride it. It is in a stable, the third from the Three Pigeons, in the Ruelle Amancy. Fresnoy does not know where it is. He sent to ask yesterday, but I would not tell him."

Some spark of human feeling which appeared



in his lowering, brutal visage as he spoke of the horse led me to desire further information. Fortunately, the little girl appeared at that moment at the door in search of her play-fellow; and through her I learned that the man's motive for seeking to sell the horse was fear lest the dealer in whose charge it stood should dispose of it to repay himself for its keep, and he, Matthew, lose it without return.

Still I did not understand why he applied to me, but I was well pleased when I learned the truth. Base as the knave was, he had an affection for the bay, which had been his only property for six years. Having this in his mind, he had conceived the idea that I should treat it well, and should not, because he was in prison and powerless, cheat him of the price.

In the end I agreed to buy the horse for ten crowns, paying as well what was due at the stable. I had it in my head to do something also for the man, being moved to this partly

by an idea that there was good in him, and partly by the confidence he had seen fit to place in me, which seemed to deserve some return. But a noise below stairs diverted my attention. I heard myself named, and for the moment forgot the matter.

## CHAPTER XXVII.

TO ME, MY FRIENDS!

I WAS impatient to learn who had come, and what was their errand with me ; and being still in that state of exaltation in which we seem to hear and see more than at other times, I remarked a peculiar lagging in the ascending footsteps, and a lack of buoyancy, which was quick to communicate itself to my mind. A vague dread fell upon me as I stood listening. Before the door opened I had already conceived a score of disasters. I wondered that I had not inquired earlier concerning the king's safety, and in fine I experienced in a moment that complete reaction of the spirits which is too frequently consequent upon an excessive flow of gaiety.

I was prepared, therefore, for heavy looks, but not for the persons who wore them nor

the strange bearing the latter displayed on entering. My visitors proved to be M. d'Agen and Simon Fleix. And so far well. But the former, instead of coming forward to greet me with the punctilious politeness which always characterised him, and which I had thought to be proof against every kind of surprise and peril, met me with downcast eyes and a countenance so gloomy as to augment my fears a hundredfold; since it suggested all those vague and formidable pains which M. de Rambouillet had hinted might await me in a prison. I thought nothing more probable than the entrance after them of a gaoler laden with gyves and handcuffs; and saluting M. François with a face which, do what I would, fashioned itself upon his, I had scarce composure sufficient to place the poor accommodation of my room at his disposal.

He thanked me; but he did it with so much gloom and so little naturalness that I grew more impatient with each laboured

syllable. Simon Fleix had slunk to the window, and turned his back on us. Neither seemed to have anything to say. But a state of suspense was one which I could least endure to suffer; and impatient of the constraint which my friend's manner was fast imparting to mine, I asked him at once and abruptly if his uncle had returned.

“He rode in about midnight,” he answered, tracing a pattern on the floor with the point of his riding-switch.

I felt some surprise on hearing this, since d'Agen was still dressed and armed for the road, and was without all those prettinesses which commonly marked his attire. But as he volunteered no further information, and did not even refer to the place in which he found me, or question me as to the adventures which had lodged me there, I let it pass, and asked him if his party had overtaken the deserters.

“Yes,” he answered, “with no result.”

“And the king?”

“M. de Rambouillet is with him now,” he rejoined, still bending over his tracing.

This answer relieved the worst of my anxieties, but the manner of the speaker was so distraught and so much at variance with the studied *insouciance* which he usually affected, that I only grew more alarmed. I glanced at Simon Fleix, but he kept his face averted, and I could gather nothing from it; though I observed that he, too, was dressed for the road, and wore his arms. I listened, but I could hear no sounds which indicated that the Provost-Marshal was approaching. Then on a sudden I thought of Mademoiselle de la Vire. Could it be that Maignan had proved unequal to his task?

I started impetuously from my stool under the influence of the emotion which this thought naturally aroused, and seized M. d’Agen by the arm. “What has happened?” I exclaimed. “Is it Bruhl? Did he break into my lodgings last night? What!” I continued, staggering back as I read the

confirmation of my fears in his face. “He did?”

M. d’Agen, who had risen also, pressed my hand with convulsive energy. Gazing into my face, he held me a moment thus embraced, his manner a strange mixture of fierceness and emotion. “Alas, yes,” he answered; “he did, and took away those whom he found there! Those whom he found there, you understand! But M. de Rambouillet is on his way here, and in a few minutes you will be free. We will follow together. If we overtake them—well. If not, it will be time to talk.”

He broke off, and I stood looking at him, stunned by the blow, yet in the midst of my own horror and surprise retaining sense enough to wonder at the gloom on his brow, and the passion which trembled in his words. What had this to do with him? “But Bruhl?” I said at last, recovering myself with an effort—“how did he gain access to the room? I left it guarded.”

“By a ruse, while Maignan and his men were away,” was the answer. “Only this lad of yours was there. Bruhl’s men overpowered him.”

“Which way has Bruhl gone?” I muttered, my throat dry, my heart beating wildly.

He shook his head. “All we know is that he passed through the south gate with eleven horsemen, two women, and six led horses, at daybreak this morning,” he answered. “Maignan came to my uncle with the news, and M. de Rambouillet went at once, early as it was, to the king to procure your release. He should be here now.”

I looked at the barred window, the most horrible fears at my heart; from it to Simon Fleix, who stood beside it, his attitude expressing the utmost dejection. I went towards him. “You hound!” I said in a low voice, “how did it happen?”

To my surprise he fell in a moment on his knees, and raised his arm as though to ward



off a blow. "They imitated Maignan's voice," he muttered hoarsely. "We opened."

"And you dare to come here and tell me!" I cried, scarcely restraining my passion. "You, to whom I entrusted her! You, whom I thought devoted to her! You have destroyed her, man!"

He rose as suddenly as he had cowered down. His thin, nervous face underwent a startling change; growing on a sudden hard and rigid, while his eyes began to glitter with excitement. "I have destroyed her? Ay, mon Dieu! I have!" he cried, speaking to my face, and no longer flinching or avoiding my eye. "You may kill me, if you like. You do not know all. It was I who stole the favour she gave you from your doublet, and then said M. de Rosny had taken it! It was I who told her you had given it away! It was I who brought her to the Little Sisters', that she might see you with Madame de Bruhl! It was I who did all, and destroyed her! Now you know! Do with me what you like!"

He opened his arms as though to receive a blow, while I stood before him astounded beyond measure by a disclosure so unexpected; full of righteous wrath and indignation, and yet uncertain what I ought to do. "Did you also let Bruhl into the room on purpose?" I cried at last.

"I?" he exclaimed, with a sudden flash of rage in his eyes. "I would have died first!"

I do not know how I might have taken this confession; but at the moment there was a trampling of horses outside, and before I could answer him I heard M. de Rambouillet speaking in haughty tones, at the door below. The Provost-Marshal was with him, but his lower notes were lost in the ring of bridles and the stamping of impatient hoofs. I looked towards the door of my room, which stood ajar, and presently the two entered, the Marquis listening with an air of contemptuous indifference to the apologies which the other, who attended at his elbow, was pouring forth. M. de Rambouillet's face reflected none of the

gloom and despondency which M. d'Agen's exhibited in so marked a degree. He seemed, on the contrary, full of gaiety and good-humour, and, coming forward and seeing me, embraced me with the utmost kindness and condescension.

“Ha! my friend,” he said cheerfully, “so I find you here after all! But never fear. I am at this moment from the king with an order for your release. His Majesty has told me all, making me thereby your lasting friend and debtor. As for this gentleman,” he continued, turning with a cold smile to the Provost-Marshal, who seemed to be trembling in his boots, “he may expect an immediate order also. M. de Villequier has wisely gone a-hunting, and will not be back for a day or two.”

Racked as I was by suspense and anxiety, I could not assail him with immediate petitions. It behoved me first to thank him for his prompt intervention, and this in terms as warm as I could invent. Nor could I in justice fail to commend the Provost to him,

representing the officer's conduct to me, and lauding his civility. All this, though my heart was sick with thought and fear and disappointment, and every minute seemed an age.

“Well, well,” the Marquis said with stately good-nature, “we will lay the blame on Villequier then. He is an old fox, however, and ten to one he will go scot-free. It is not the first time he has played this trick. But I have not yet come to the end of my commission,” he continued pleasantly. “His Majesty sends you this, M. de Marsac, and bade me say that he had loaded it for you.”

He drew from under his cloak as he spoke the pistol which I had left with the king, and which happened to be the same M. de Rosny had given me. I took it, marvelling at the careful manner in which he handled it; but in a moment I understood, for I found it loaded to the muzzle with gold pieces, of which two or three fell and rolled upon the floor. Much moved by this substantial mark of the king's gratitude, I was nevertheless for

pocketing them in haste ; but the Marquis, to satisfy a little curiosity on his part, would have me count them, and brought the tale to a little over two thousand livres, without counting a ring set with precious stones which I found among them. This handsome present diverted my thoughts from Simon Fleix, but could not relieve the anxiety I felt on Mademoiselle's account. The thought of her position so tortured me that M. de Rambouillet began to perceive my state of mind, and hastened to assure me that before going to the Court he had already issued orders calculated to assist me.

“ You desire to follow this lady, I understand ? ” he said. “ What with the king, who is enraged beyond the ordinary by this outrage, and François there, who seemed beside himself when he heard the news, I have not got any very clear idea of the position.”

“ She was entrusted to me by—by one, sir, well known to you,” I answered hoarsely. “ My honour is engaged to him and to her.

If I follow on my feet and alone, I must follow. If I cannot save her, I can at least punish the villains who have wronged her."

"But the man's wife is with them," he said in some wonder.

"That goes for nothing," I answered.

He saw the strong emotion under which I laboured, and which scarcely suffered me to answer him with patience; and he looked at me curiously, but not unkindly. "The sooner you are off, the better then," he said nodding. "I gathered as much. The man Maignan will have his fellows at the south gate an hour before noon, I understand. François has two lackeys, and he is wild to go. With yourself and the lad there you will muster nine swords. I will lend you two. I can spare no more, for we may have an *émeute* at any moment. You will take the road therefore eleven in all, and should overtake them some time to-night if your horses are in condition."

I thanked him warmly, without regarding his kindly statement that my conduct on the

previous day had laid him under lasting obligations to me. We went down together, and he transferred two of his fellows to me there and then, bidding them change their horses for fresh ones and meet me at the south gate. He sent also a man to my stable—Simon Fleix having disappeared in the confusion—for the Cid, and was in the act of inquiring whether I needed anything else, when a woman slipped through the knot of horsemen who surrounded us as we stood in the doorway of the house, and, throwing herself upon me, grasped me by the arm. It was Fanchette. Her harsh features were distorted with grief, her cheeks were mottled with the violent weeping in which such persons vent their sorrow. Her hair hung in long wisps on her neck. Her dress was torn and dragged, and there was a great bruise over her eye. She had the air of one frantic with despair and misery.

She caught me by the cloak, and shook me so that I staggered. “I have found you at

last!" she cried joyfully. "You will take me with you! You will take me to her!"

Though her words tried my composure, and my heart went out to her, I strove to answer her according to the sense of the matter. "It is impossible," I said sternly. "This is a man's errand. We shall have to ride day and night, my good woman."

"But I will ride day and night too!" she replied passionately, flinging the hair from her eyes, and looking wildly from me to M. de Rambouillet. "What would I not do for her? I am as strong as a man, and stronger. Take me, take me, I say; and when I meet that villain I will tear him limb from limb!"

I shuddered, listening to her; but remembering that, being country bred, she was really as strong as she said, and that likely enough some advantage might accrue to us from her perfect fidelity and devotion to her mistress, I gave a reluctant consent. I sent one of M. de Rambouillet's men to the stable where the deaf man's bay was standing, bidding him pay



whatever was due to the dealer, and bring the horse to the South-gate ; my intention being to mount one of my men on it, and furnish the woman with a less tricky steed.

The briskness of these and the like preparations, which even for one of my age and in my state of anxiety were not devoid of pleasure, prevented my thoughts dwelling on the future. Content to have M. François' assistance without following up too keenly the train of ideas which his readiness suggested, I was satisfied also to make use of Simon without calling him to instant account for his treachery. The bustle of the streets, which the confirmation of the king's speedy departure had filled with surly, murmuring crowds, tended still further to keep my fears at bay ; while the contrast between my present circumstances, as I rode through them well-appointed and well-attended, with the marquis by my side, and the poor appearance I had exhibited on my first arrival in Blois, could not fail to inspire me with hope that I might surmount

this danger also, and in the event find Mademoiselle safe and uninjured. I took leave of M. de Rambouillet with many expressions of esteem on both sides, and a few minutes before eleven reached the rendezvous outside the South-gate.

M. d'Agen and Maignan advanced to meet me, the former still presenting an exterior so stern and grave that I wondered to see him, and could scarcely believe he was the same gay spark whose elegant affectations had more than once caused me to smile. He saluted me in silence; Maignan with a sheepish air, which ill concealed the savage temper defeat had roused in him. Counting my men, I found we mustered ten only, but the equerry explained that he had despatched a rider ahead to make inquiries and leave word for us at convenient points; to the end that we might follow the trail with as few delays as possible. Highly commending Maignan for his forethought in this, I gave the word to start, and crossing the river by the St. Gervais

Bridge, we took the road for Selles at a smart trot.

The weather had changed much in the last twenty-four hours. The sun shone brightly, with a warm west wind, and the country already showed signs of an early spring which marked that year. If, the first hurry of departure over, I had now leisure to feel the gnawing of anxiety and the tortures inflicted by an imagination which, far outstripping us, rode with those whom we pursued and shared their perils, I found two sources of comfort still open to me. No man who has seen service can look on a little band of well-appointed horsemen without pleasure. I reviewed the stalwart forms and stern faces which moved beside me, and comparing their decent order and sound equipments with the scurvy foulness of the men who had ridden north with me, thanked God, and ceased to wonder at the indignation which Matthew and his fellows had roused in Mademoiselle's mind. My other source of satisfaction the

regular beat of hoofs and ring of bridles continually augmented. Every step took us farther from Blois, farther from the close town and reeking streets; and the Court, which, if it no longer seemed to me shambles, befouled by one great deed of blood—experience had removed that impression—retained an appearance infinitely mean and miserable in my eyes. I hated and loathed its intrigues and its jealousies, the folly which trifled in a closet while rebellion mastered France, and the pettiness which recognised no wisdom save that of balancing party and party. I thanked God that my work there was done, and could have welcomed any other occasion that forced me to turn my back on it, and sent me at large over the pure heaths, through the woods, and under the wide heaven, speckled with moving clouds.

But such springs of comfort soon run dry. M. d'Agen's gloomy rage and the fiery gleam in Maignan's eye would have reminded me, had I been in any danger of forgetting the

errand on which we were bound, and the need, exceeding all other needs, which compelled us to lose no moment that might be used. Those whom we followed had five hours' start. The thought of what might happen in those five hours to the two helpless women whom I had sworn to protect burned itself into my mind ; so that to refrain from putting spurs to my horse and riding recklessly forward taxed at times all my self-control. The horses seemed to crawl. The men rising and falling listlessly in their saddles maddened me. — Though I could not hope to come upon any trace of our quarry for many hours, perhaps for days, I scanned the long, flat heaths unceasingly, searched every marshy bottom before we descended into it, and panted for the moment when the next low ridge should expose to our view a fresh track of wood and waste. The rosy visions of the past night, and those fancies in particular which had made the dawn memorable, recurred to me, as his deeds in the body (so men say) to a hopeless drowning

wretch. I grew to think of nothing but Bruhl and revenge. Even the absurd care with which Simon avoided the neighbourhood of Fanchette, riding anywhere so long as he might ride at a distance from the angry woman's tongue and hand, which provoked many a laugh from the men, and came to be the joke of the company, failed to draw a smile from me.

We passed through Contres, four leagues from Blois, an hour after noon, and three hours later crossed the Cher at Selles, where we stayed awhile to bait our horses. Here we had news of the party before us, and henceforth had little doubt that Bruhl was making for the Limousin—a district in which he might rest secure under the protection of Turenne, and safely defy alike the King of France and the King of Navarre. The greater the necessity, it was plain, for speed; but the roads in that neighbourhood, and forward as far as Valancy, proved heavy and foundrous, and it was all we could do to reach Levroux

with jaded horses three hours after sunset. The probability that Bruhl would lie at Chateauroux, five leagues farther on—for I could not conceive that under the circumstances he would spare the women—would have led me to push forward had it been possible, but the darkness and the difficulty of finding a guide who would venture deterred me from the hopeless attempt, and we stayed the night where we were.

Here we first heard of the plague, which was said to be ravaging Chateauroux and all the country farther south. The landlord of the inn would have regaled us with many stories of it, and particularly of the swiftness with which men and even cattle succumbed to its attacks. But we had other things to think of, and between anxiety and weariness had clean forgotten the matter when we rose next morning.

We started shortly after daybreak, and for three leagues pressed on at tolerable speed. Then, for no reason stated, our guide gave us

the slip as we passed through a wood, and was seen no more. We lost the road, and had to retrace our steps. We strayed into a slough, and extricated ourselves with difficulty. The man who was riding the bay I had purchased forgot the secret which I had imparted to him, and got an ugly fall. In fine, after all these mishaps it wanted little of noon, and less to exhaust our patience, when at length we came in sight of Chateauroux.

Before entering the town we had still an adventure ; for we came at a turn in the road on a scene as surprising as it was at first inexplicable. A little north of the town, in a coppice of box facing the south and west, we happened suddenly on a rude encampment, consisting of a dozen huts and booths, set back from the road, and formed some of branches of evergreen trees laid clumsily together, and some of sacking stretched over poles. A number of men and women of decent appearance lay on the short grass before the booths, idly sunning themselves ; or moved about, cooking and



tending fires, while a score of children raced to and fro with noisy shouts and laughter. The appearance of our party on the scene caused an instant panic. The women and children fled screaming into the wood, spreading the sound of breaking branches farther and farther as they retreated ; while the men, a miserable pale-faced set, drew together, and seeming half inclined to fly also, regarded us with glances of fear and suspicion.

Remarking that their appearance and dress were not those of vagrants, while the booths seemed to indicate little skill or experience in the builders, I bade my companions halt, and advanced alone.

“ What is the meaning of this, my men ? ” I said, addressing the first group I reached. “ You seem to have come a-Maying before the time. Whence are you ? ”

“ From Chateauroux,” the foremost answered sullenly. His dress, now I saw him nearer, seemed to be that of a respectable townsman.

“ Why ? ” I replied. “ Have you no homes ? ”

“Ay, we have homes,” he answered with the same brevity.

“Then why, in God’s name, are you here?” I retorted, marking the gloomy air and down-cast faces of the group. “Have you been harried?”

“Ay, harried by the plague!” he answered bitterly. “Do you mean to say you have not heard? In Chateauroux there is one man dead in three. Take my advice, sir—you are a brave company—turn, and go home again.”

“Is it as bad as that?” I exclaimed. I had forgotten the landlord’s gossip, and the explanation struck me with the force of surprise.

“Ay, is it! Do you see the blue haze?” he continued, pointing with a sudden gesture to the lower ground before us, over which a light pall of summery vapour hung still and motionless. “Do you see it? Well, under that there is death! You may find food in Chateauroux, and stalls for your horses, and a man to take money; for there are still men there. But cross the Indre, and you will see

sights worse than a battle-field a week old! You will find no living soul in house or stable or church, but corpses plenty. The land is cursed—cursed for heresy, some say! Half are dead, and half are fled to the woods! And if you do not die of the plague, you will starve.”

“God forbid!” I muttered, thinking with a shudder of those before us. This led me to ask him if a party resembling ours in number, and including two women, had passed that way. He answered, Yes, after sunset the evening before; that their horses were stumbling with fatigue and the men swearing in pure weariness. He believed that they had not entered the town, but had made a rude encampment half a mile beyond it; and had again broken this up, and ridden southwards two or three hours before our arrival.

“Then we may overtake them to-day?” I said.

“By your leave, sir,” he answered, with grave meaning. “I think you are more likely to meet them.”

Shrugging my shoulders, I thanked him shortly, and left him : the full importance of preventing my men hearing what I had heard, lest the panic which possessed these townspeople should seize on them also, being already in my mind. Nevertheless, the thought came too late, for on turning my horse I found one of the foremost, a long, solemn-faced man, had already found his way to Maignan's stirrup ; where he was dilating so eloquently upon the enemy which awaited us southwards that the countenances of half the troopers were as long as his own, and I saw nothing for it but to interrupt his oration by a smart application of my switch to his shoulders. Having thus stopped him, and rated him back to his fellows, I gave the word to march. The men obeyed mechanically, we swung into a canter, and for a moment the danger was over.

But I knew that it would recur again and again. Stealthily marking the faces round me, and listening to the whispered talk which went on, I saw the terror spread from one to

another. Voices which earlier in the day had been raised in song and jest grew silent. Great reckless fellows of Maignan's following, who had an oath and a blow for all comers, and to whom the deepest ford seemed to be child's play, rode with drooping heads and knitted brows ; or scanned with ill-concealed anxiety the strange haze before us, through which the roofs of the town, and here and there a low hill or line of poplars, rose to plainer view. Maignan himself, the stoutest of the stout, looked grave, and had lost his swaggering air. Only three persons preserved their *sang-froid* entire. Of these, M. d'Agen rode as if he had heard nothing, and Simon Fleix as if he feared nothing ; while Fanchette, gazing eagerly forward, saw, it was plain, only one object in the mist, and that was her mistress's face.

We found the gates of the town open ; and this, which proved to be the herald of stranger sights, daunted the hearts of my men more than the most hostile reception. As we entered, our horses' hoofs, clattering loudly on

the pavement, awoke a hundred echoes in the empty houses to right and left. The main street, flooded with sunshine, which made its desolation seem a hundred times more formidable, stretched away before us, bare and empty; or haunted only by a few slinking dogs, and prowling wretches, who fled, affrighted at the unaccustomed sounds, or stood and eyed us listlessly as we passed. A bell tolled; in the distance we heard the wailing of women. The silent ways, the black cross which marked every second door, the frightful faces which once or twice looked out from upper windows and blasted our sight, infected my men with terror so profound and so ungovernable that at last discipline was forgotten; and one shoving his horse before another in narrow places, there was a scuffle to be first. One, and then a second, began to trot. The trot grew into a shuffling canter. The gates of the inn lay open, nay seemed to invite us to enter; but no one turned or halted. Moved by a single impulse we pushed breathlessly

on and on, until the open country was reached, and we who had entered the streets in silent awe, swept out and over the bridge as if the fiend were at our heels.

That I shared in this flight causes me no shame even now, for my men were at the time ungovernable, as the best-trained troops are when seized by such panics ; and, moreover, I could have done no good by remaining in the town, where the strength of the contagion was probably greater and the inn larder like to be as bare as the hillside. Few towns are without a hostelry outside the gates for the convenience of knights of the road or those who would avoid the dues ; and Chateauroux proved no exception to this rule. A short half-mile from the walls we drew rein before a second encampment raised about a wayside house. It scarcely needed the sound of music mingled with brawling voices to inform us that the wilder spirits of the town had taken refuge here, and were seeking to drown in riot and debauchery, as I have

seen happen in a besieged place, the remembrance of the enemy which stalked abroad in sunshine. Our sudden appearance, while it put a stop to the mimicry of mirth, brought out a score of men and women in every stage of drunkenness and dishevelment, of whom some, with hiccoughs and loose gestures, cried to us to join them, while others swore horribly at being recalled to the present, which, with the future, they were endeavouring to forget. I cursed them in return for a pack of craven wretches, and threatening to ride down those who obstructed us, ordered my men forward; halting eventually a quarter of a mile farther on, where a wood of groundling oaks which still wore last year's leaves afforded fair shelter. Afraid to leave my men myself, lest some should stray to the inn and others desert altogether, I requested M. d'Agen to return thither with Maignan and Simon, and bring us what forage and food we required. This he did with perfect success, though not until after a scuffle, in which Maignan showed



himself a match for a hundred. We watered the horses at a neighbouring brook, and assigning two hours to rest and refreshment—a great part of which M. d'Agen and I spent walking up and down in moody silence, each immersed in his own thoughts—we presently took the road again with renewed spirits.

But a panic is not easily shaken off, nor is any fear so difficult to combat and defeat as the fear of the invisible. The terrors which food and drink had for a time thrust out presently returned with sevenfold force. Men looked uneasily in one another's faces, and from them to the haze which veiled all distant objects. They muttered of the heat, which was sudden, strange, and abnormal at that time of the year. And by-and-by they had other things to speak of. We met a man, who ran beside us and begged of us, crying out in a dreadful voice that his wife and four children lay unburied in the house. A little farther on, beside a well, the corpse of a woman with a child at her breast lay poison-

ing the water ; she had crawled to it to appease her thirst, and died of the draught. Last of all, in a beech-wood near Lotier we came upon a lady living in her coach, with one or two panic-stricken women for her only attendants. Her husband was in Paris, she told me ; half her servants were dead, the rest had fled. Still she retained in a remarkable degree both courage and courtesy, and accepting with fortitude my reasons and excuses for perforce leaving her in such a plight, gave me a clear account of Bruhl and his party, who had passed her some hours before. The picture of this lady gazing after us with perfect good-breeding, as we rode away at speed, followed by the lamentations of her women, remains with me to this day ; filling my mind at once with admiration and melancholy. For, as I learned later, she fell ill of the plague where we left her in the beech-wood, and died in a night with both her servants.

The intelligence we had from her inspired us to push forward, sparing neither spur nor

horseflesh, in the hope that we might overtake Bruhl before night should expose his captives to fresh hardships and dangers. But the pitch to which the dismal sights and sounds I have mentioned, and a hundred like them, had raised the fears of my following did much to balk my endeavours. For a while, indeed, under the influence of momentary excitement, they spurred their horses to the gallop, as if their minds were made up to face the worst; but presently they checked them despite all my efforts, and, lagging slowly and more slowly, seemed to lose all spirit and energy. The desolation which met our eyes on every side, no less than the death-like stillness which prevailed, even the birds, as it seemed to us, being silent, chilled the most reckless to the heart. Maignan's face lost its colour, his voice its ring. As for the rest, starting at a sound and wincing if a leather galled them, they glanced backwards twice for once they looked forwards, and held themselves ready to take to their heels and be gone at the least alarm.

Noting these signs, and doubting if I could trust even Maignan, I thought it prudent to change my place, and falling to the rear, rode there with a grim face and a pistol ready to my hand. It was not the least of my annoyances that M. d'Agen appeared to be ignorant of any cause for apprehension save such as lay before us; and riding on in the same gloomy fit which had possessed him from the moment of starting, neither sought my opinion nor gave his own, but seemed to have undergone so complete and mysterious a change that I could think of one thing only that could have power to effect so marvellous a transformation. I felt his presence a trial rather than a help, and reviewing the course of our short friendship, which a day or two before had been so great a delight to me—as the friendship of a young man commonly is to one growing old—I puzzled myself with much wondering whether there could be rivalry between us.

Sunset, which was welcome to my company, since it removed the haze, which they regarded

with superstitious dread, found us still plodding through a country of low ridges and shadow valleys, both clothed in oak-woods. Its short brightness died away, and with it my last hope of surprising Bruhl before I slept. Darkness fell upon us as we wended our way slowly down a steep hillside, where the path was so narrow and difficult as to permit only one to descend at a time. A stream of some size, if we might judge from the noise it made, poured through the ravine below us, and presently, at the point where we believed the crossing to be, we espied a solitary light shining in the blackness. To proceed farther was impossible, for the ground grew more and more precipitous; and seeing this I bade Maignan dismount, and leaving us where we were, go for a guide to the house from which the light issued.

He obeyed, and plunging into the night, which in that pit between the hills was of an inky darkness, presently returned with a peasant and a lantern. I was about to bid

the man guide us to the ford, or to some level ground where we could picket the horses, when Maignan gleefully cried out that he had news. I asked what news.

“Speak up, *manant!*” he said, holding up his lantern so that the light fell on the man’s haggard face and unkempt hair. “Tell his Excellency what you have told me, or I will skin you alive, little man!”

“Your other party came to the ford an hour before sunset,” the peasant answered, staring dully at us. “I saw them coming, and hid myself. They quarrelled by the ford. Some were for crossing, and some not.”

“They had ladies with them?” M. d’Agen said suddenly.

“Ay, two, your Excellency,” the clown answered, “riding like men. In the end they did not cross for fear of the plague, but turned up the river, and rode westwards towards St. Gaultier.”

“St. Gaultier!” I said. “Where is that? Where does the road to it go to besides?”

But the peasant's knowledge was confined to his own neighbourhood. He knew no world beyond St. Gaultier, and could not answer my question. I was about to bid him show us the way down, when Maignan cried out that he knew more.

“What?” I asked.

“Arnidieu! he heard them say where they were going to spend the night!”

“Ha!” I cried. “Where?”

“In an old ruined Castle two leagues from this, and between here and St. Gaultier,” the equerry answered, forgetting in his triumph both plague and panic. “What do you say to that, your Excellency? It is so, sirrah, is it not?” he continued, turning to the peasant. “Speak, Master Jacques, or I will roast you before a slow fire!”

But I did not wait to hear the answer. Leaping to the ground, I took the Cid's rein on my arm, and cried impatiently to the man to lead us down.

## CHAPTER XXVIII.

## THE CASTLE ON THE HILL.

THE certainty that Bruhl and his captives were not far off, and the likelihood that we might be engaged within the hour, expelled from the minds of even the most timorous among us the vapourish fears which had before haunted them. In the hurried scramble which presently landed us on the bank of the stream, men who had ridden for hours in sulky silence found their voices, and from cursing their horses' blunders soon advanced to swearing and singing after the fashion of their kind. This change, by relieving me of a great fear, left me at leisure to consider our position and estimate more clearly than I might have done the advantages of hastening, or postponing, an attack. We numbered eleven; the enemy, to the best of my belief,



twelve. Of this slight superiority I should have recked little in the daytime; nor, perhaps, counting Maignan as two, have allowed that it existed. But the result of a night attack is more difficult to forecast; and I had also to take into account the perils to which the two ladies would be exposed, between the darkness and tumult, in the event of the issue remaining for a time in doubt.

These considerations, and particularly the last, weighed so powerfully with me, that before I reached the bottom of the gorge I had decided to postpone the attack until morning. The answers to some questions which I put to the inhabitant of the house by the ford as soon as I reached level ground only confirmed me in this resolution. The road Bruhl had taken ran for some distance by the river-side, and along the bottom of the gorge, and, difficult by day, was reported to be impracticable for horses by night. The Castle Bruhl had mentioned lay full two

leagues away, and on the further edge of a tract of rough woodland. Finally, I doubted whether, in the absence of any other reason for delay, I could have marched my men, weary as they were, to the place before day-break.

When I came to announce this decision, however, and to inquire what accommodation the peasant could afford us, I found myself in trouble. Fanchette, Mademoiselle's woman, suddenly confronted me, her face scarlet with rage. Thrusting herself forward into the circle of light cast by the lantern, she assailed me with a virulence and fierceness which said more for her devotion to her mistress than her respect for me. Her wild gesticulations, her threats, and the appeals which she made now to me, and now to the men who stood in a circle round us, their faces in shadow, discomfited as much as they surprised me.

“What!” she cried violently, “you call yourself a gentleman, and lie here and let my mistress be murdered, or worse, within a

league of you! Two leagues? A groat for your two leagues! I would walk them bare-foot if that would shame you. And you, you call yourselves men, and suffer it! It is God's truth you are a set of cravens and sluggards. Give me as many women, and I would ——"

"Peace, woman!" Maignan said in his deep voice. "You had your way and came with us, and you will obey orders as well as another! Be off, and see to the victuals before worse happen to you!"

"Ay, see to the victuals!" she retorted. "See to the victuals, forsooth! That is all you think of—to lie warm and eat your fill! A set of dastardly, drinking, droning guzzlers you are! You are!" she retorted, her voice rising to a shriek. "May the plague take you!"

"Silence!" Maignan growled fiercely, "or have a care to yourself! For a copper-piece I would send you to cool your heels in the water below—for that last word! Begone,

do you hear?" he continued, seizing her by the shoulder, and thrusting her towards the house, "or worse may happen to you. We are rough customers, as you will find if you do not lock up your tongue."

I heard her go wailing into the darkness, and Heaven knows it was not without compunction I forced myself to remain inactive in the face of a devotion which seemed so much greater than mine. The men fell away one by one to look to their horses and choose sleeping-quarters for the night; and presently M. d'Agen and I were left alone standing beside the lantern, which the man had hung on a bush before his door. The brawling of the water as it poured between the banks, a score of paces from us, and the black darkness which hid everything beyond the little ring of light in which we stood—so that for all we could see we were in a pit—had the air of isolating us from all the world.

I looked at the young man, who had not once lisped that day; and I plainly read in

his attitude his disapproval of my caution. Though he declined to meet my eye, he stood with his arms folded and his head thrown back, making no attempt to disguise the scorn and ill-temper which his face expressed. Hurt by the woman's taunts, and possibly shaken in my opinion, I grew restive under his silence, and unwisely gave way to my feelings.

"You do not appear to approve of my decision, M. d'Agen?" I said.

"It is yours to command, sir," he answered proudly.

There are truisms which have more power to annoy than the veriest reproaches. I should have borne in mind the suspense and anxiety which he was suffering, and which had so changed him that I scarcely knew him for the gay young spark on whose toe I had trodden. I should have remembered that he was young and I old, and that it behoved me to be patient. But on my side also there was anxiety, and responsibility as well; and, above

all, a rankling soreness, to which I refrain from giving the name of jealousy, though it came as near to that feeling as the difference in our ages and personal advantages (whereof the balance was all on his side) would permit. This, no doubt, it was which impelled me to continue the argument.

“You would go on?” I said persistently.

“It is idle to say what I would do,” he answered with a flash of anger.

“I asked for your opinion, sir,” I rejoined.

“To what purpose?” he retorted, stroking his small moustache haughtily. “We look at the thing from opposite points. You are going about your business, which appears to be the rescuing of ladies who are—may I venture to say it?—so unfortunate as to entrust themselves to your charge. I, M. de Marsac, am more deeply interested. More deeply interested,” he repeated lamely. “I—in a word, I am prepared, sir, to do what others only talk of—and if I cannot follow otherwise, would follow on my feet!”

“Whom?” I asked curtly, stung by this repetition of my own words.

He laughed harshly and bitterly. “Why explain? or why quarrel?” he replied cynically. “God knows, if I could afford to quarrel with you, I should have done so fifty hours ago. But I need your help; and, needing it, I am prepared to do that which must seem to a person of your calm passions and perfect judgment alike futile and incredible—pay the full price for it.”

“The full price for it!” I muttered, understanding nothing, except that I did not understand.

“Ay, the full price for it!” he repeated. And as he spoke he looked at me with an expression of rage so fierce that I recoiled a step. That seemed to restore him in some degree to himself, for without giving me an opportunity of answering he turned hastily from me, and, striding away, was in a moment lost in the darkness.

He left me amazed beyond measure. I

stood repeating his phrase about "the full price" a hundred times over, but still found it and his passion inexplicable. To cut the matter short, I could come to no other conclusion than that he desired to insult me, and, aware of my poverty and the equivocal position in which I stood towards Mademoiselle, chose his words accordingly. This seemed a thing unworthy of one of whom I had before thought highly; but calmer reflection enabling me to see something of youthful bombast in the tirade he had delivered, I smiled a little sadly, and determined to think no more of the matter for the present, but to persist firmly in that which seemed to me to be the right course.

Having settled this, I was about to enter the house, when Maignan stopped me, telling me that the plague had killed five people in it, leaving only the man we had seen, who had indeed been seized but recovered. This ghastly news had scared my company to such a degree that they had gone as far from the



house as the level ground permitted, and there lighted a fire, round which they were going to pass the night. Fanchette had taken up her quarters in the stable, and the equerry announced that he had kept a shed full of sweet hay for M. d'Agen and myself. I assented to this arrangement, and after supping off soup and black bread, which was all we could procure, bade the peasant rouse us two hours before sunrise; and so, being too weary and old in service to remain awake thinking, I fell asleep, and slept soundly till a little after four.

My first business on rising was to see that the men before mounting made a meal, for it is ill work fighting empty. I went round also and saw that all had their arms, and that such as carried pistols had them loaded and primed. M. François did not put in an appearance until this work was done, and then showed a very pale and gloomy countenance. I took no heed of him, however, and with the first streak of daylight we started in single file and at a

snail's pace up the valley, the peasant, whom I placed in Maignan's charge, going before to guide us, and M. d'Agen and I riding in the rear. By the time the sun rose and warmed our chilled and shivering frames we were over the worst of the ground, and were able to advance at some speed along a track cut through a dense forest of oak-trees.

Though we had now risen out of the valley, the close-set trunks and the undergrowth round them prevented our seeing in any direction. For a mile or more we rode on blindly, and presently started on finding ourselves on the brow of a hill, looking down into a valley, the nearer end of which was clothed in woods, while the farther widened into green sloping pastures. From the midst of these a hill or mount rose sharply up, until it ended in walls of grey stone, scarce to be distinguished at that distance from the native rock on which they stood.

“See!” cried our guide. “There is the Castle!”

Bidding the men dismount in haste, that the chance of our being seen by the enemy—which was not great—might be farther lessened, I began to inspect the position at leisure; my first feeling while doing so being one of thankfulness that I had not attempted a night attack, which must inevitably have miscarried, possibly with loss to ourselves, and certainly with the result of informing the enemy of our presence. The Castle, of which we had a tolerable view, was long and narrow in shape, consisting of two towers connected by walls. The nearer tower, through which lay the entrance, was roofless, and in every way seemed to be more ruinous than the inner one, which appeared to be perfect in both its stories. This defect notwithstanding, the place was so strong that my heart sank lower the longer I looked; and a glance at Maignan's face assured me that his experience was also at fault. For M. d'Agen, I clearly saw, when I turned to him, that he had never until this moment realised what we had to expect; but, regarding our pursuit in

the light of a hunting-party, had looked to see it end in like easy fashion. His blank surprised face, as he stood eyeing the stout grey walls, said as much as this.

“*Arnidieu!*” Maignan muttered, “give me ten men, and I would hold it against a hundred!”

“Tut, man, there is more than one way to Rome!” I answered oracularly, though I was far from feeling as confident as I seemed. “Come, let us descend and view this nut a little nearer.”

We began to trail downwards in silence, and as the path led us for a while out of sight of the Castle, we were able to proceed with less caution. We had nearly reached without adventure the farther skirts of the wood, between which and the ruin lay an interval of open ground, when we came suddenly, at the edge of a little clearing, on an old hag, who was so intent upon tying up faggots that she did not see us until Maignan’s hand was on her shoulder. When she did, she screamed out,

and, escaping from him with an activity wonderful in a woman of her age, ran with great swiftness to the side of an old man who lay at the foot of a tree half a bowshot off, and whom we had not before seen. Snatching up an axe, she put herself in a posture of defence before him with gestures and in a manner as touching in the eyes of some among us as they were ludicrous in those of others, who cried to Maignan that he had met his match at last, with other gibes of the kind that pass current in camps.

I called to him to let her be, and went forward myself to the old man, who lay on a rude bed of leaves, and seemed unable to rise. Appealing to me with a face of agony not to hurt his wife, he bade her again and again lay down her axe ; but she would not do this until I had assured her that we meant him no harm, and that my men should molest neither the one nor the other.

“ We only want to know this,” I said speaking slowly, in fear lest my language should be

little more intelligible to them than their *patois* was to me. "There are a dozen horsemen in the old Castle there, are there not?"

The man stilled his wife, who continued to chatter and mow at us, and answered eagerly that there were; adding, with a trembling oath, that the robbers had beaten him, robbed him of his small store of meal, and, when he would have protested, thrown him out, breaking his leg.

"Then how came you here?" I said.

"She brought me on her back," he answered feebly.

Doubtless there were men in my train who would have done all that these others had done; but hearing the simple story told, they stamped and swore great oaths of indignation; and one, the roughest of the party, took out some black bread and gave it to the woman, whom under other circumstances he would not have hesitated to rob. Maignan, who knew all arts appertaining to war, examined the man's leg and made a kind of cradle for it, while I questioned the woman.

“They are there still?” I said. “I saw their horses tethered under the walls.”

“Yes, God requite them!” she answered, trembling violently.

“Tell me about the Castle, my good woman,” I said. “How many roads into it are there?”

“Only one.”

“Through the nearer tower?”

She said yes; and finding that she understood me, and was less dull of intellect than her wretched appearance led me to expect, I put a series of questions to her which it would be tedious to detail. Suffice it that I learned that it was impossible to enter or leave the ruin except through the nearer tower; that a rickety temporary gate barred the entrance, and that from this tower, which was a mere shell of four walls, a narrow square-headed doorway without a door led into the court, beyond which rose the habitable tower of two stories.

“Do you know if they intend to stay there?” I asked.

“Oh, ay, they bade me bring them faggots for their fire this morning, and I should have a handful of my own meal back,” she answered bitterly; and fell thereon into a passion of impotent rage, shaking both her clenched hands in the direction of the Castle, and screaming frenzied maledictions in her cracked and quavering voice.

I pondered awhile over what she had said, liking very little the thought of that narrow square-headed doorway, through which we must pass before we could effect anything. And the gate, too, troubled me. It might not be a strong one, <sup>but</sup> ~~and~~ we had neither powder, nor guns, nor any siege implements, and could not pull down stone walls with our naked hands. By seizing the horses we could indeed cut off Bruhl's retreat; but he might still escape in the night; and in any case our pains would only increase the women's hardships, while adding fuel to his rage. We must have some other plan.

The sun was high by this time; the edge of



the wood scarcely a hundred paces from us. By advancing a few yards through the trees I could see the horses feeding peacefully at the foot of the sunny slope, and even follow with my eyes the faint track that zigzagged up the hill to the closed gate. No one appeared—doubtless they were sleeping off the fatigue of the journey—and I drew no inspiration thence; but as I turned to consult Maignan my eye lit on the faggots, and I saw in a flash that here was a chance of putting into practice a stratagem as old as the hills, yet ever fresh, and not seldom successful.

It was no time for over-refinement. My knaves were beginning to stray forward out of curiosity, and at any moment one of our horses, scenting those of the enemy, might neigh and give the alarm. Hastily calling M. d'Agen and Maignan to me, I laid my plan before them, and satisfied myself that it had their approval; the fact that I had reserved a special part for the former serving to thaw the reserve which had succeeded to

his outbreak of the night before. After some debate Maignan persuaded me that the old woman had not sufficient nerve to play the part I proposed for her, and named Fanchette, who, being called into council, did not belie the opinion we had formed of her courage. In a few moments our preparations were complete: I had donned the old charcoal-burner's outer rags, Fanchette had assumed those of the woman, while M. d'Agen, who was for a time at a loss, and betrayed less taste for this part of the plan than for any other, ended by putting on the jerkin and hose of the man who had served us as guide.

When all was ready I commended the troop to Maignan's discretion, charging him in the event of anything happening to us to continue the most persistent efforts for Mademoiselle's release, and on no account to abandon her. Having received his promise to this effect, and being satisfied that he would keep it, we took up each of us a great faggot, which being borne on the head and shoulders served to hide

the features very effectually; and thus disguised we boldly left the shelter of the trees. Fanchette and I went first, tottering in a most natural fashion under the weight of our burdens, while M. d'Agen followed a hundred yards behind. I had given Maignan orders to make a dash for the gate the moment he saw the last-named start to run.

The perfect stillness of the valley, the clearness of the air, and the absence of any sign of life in the Castle before us—which might have been that of the Sleeping Princess, so fairylike it looked against the sky—with the suspense and excitement in our own breasts, which these peculiarities seemed to increase a hundredfold, made the time that followed one of the strangest in my experience. It was nearly ten o'clock, and the warm sunshine flooding everything about us rendered the ascent, laden as we were, laborious in the extreme. The crisp, short turf, which had scarcely got its spring growth, was slippery and treacherous. We dared not hasten, for

we knew not what eyes were upon us, and we dared as little—after we had gone halfway—lay our faggots down, lest the action should disclose too much of our features.

When we had reached a point within a hundred paces of the gate, which still remained obstinately closed, we stood to breathe ourselves, and balancing my bundle on my head, I turned to make sure that all was right behind us. I found that M. d'Agen, intent on keeping his distance, had chosen the same moment for rest, and was sitting in a very natural manner on his faggot, mopping his face with the sleeve of his jerkin. I scanned the brown leafless wood in which we had left Maignan and our men; but I could detect no glitter among the trees nor any appearance likely to betray us. Satisfied on these points, I muttered a few words of encouragement to Fanchette, whose face was streaming with perspiration; and together we turned and addressed ourselves to our task, fatigue—for we had had no practice in carrying

burdens on the head—enabling us to counterfeit the decrepitude of age almost to the life.

The same silence prevailing as we drew nearer inspired me with not a few doubts and misgivings. Even the bleat of a sheep would have been welcome in the midst of a stillness which seemed ominous. But no sheep bleated, no voice hailed us. The gate, ill hung and full of fissures, remained closed. Step by step we staggered up to it, and at length reached it. Afraid to speak lest my accent should betray me, I struck the forepart of my faggot against it and waited, doubting whether our whole stratagem had not been perceived from the beginning, and a pistol-shot might not be the retort.

Nothing of the kind happened, however. The sound of the blow, which echoed dully through the building, died away, and the old silence resumed its sway. We knocked again, but fully two minutes elapsed before a grumbling voice, as of a man aroused from sleep,

was heard drawing near, and footsteps came slowly and heavily to the gate. Probably the fellow inspected us through a loophole, for he paused a moment, and my heart sank; but the next, seeing nothing suspicious, he unbarred the gate with a querulous oath, and, pushing it open, bade us enter and be quick about it.

I stumbled forward into the cool, dark shadow, and the woman followed me, while the man, stepping out with a yawn, stood in the entrance, stretching himself in the sunshine. The roofless tower, which smelled dank and unwholesome, was empty, or cumbered only with rubbish and heaps of stones; but looking through the inner door I saw in the courtyard a smouldering fire and half-a-dozen men in the act of rousing themselves from sleep. I stood a second balancing my faggot, as if in doubt where to lay it down; and then assuring myself by a swift glance that the man who had let us in still had his back towards us, I dropped it across the inner

doorway. Fanchette, as she had been instructed, plumped hers upon it, and at the same moment I sprang to the door, and taking the man there by surprise, dealt him a violent blow between the shoulders, which sent him headlong down the slope.

A cry behind me, followed by an oath of alarm, told me that the action was observed, and that now was the pinch. In a second I was back at the faggots, and drawing a pistol from under my blouse was in time to meet the rush of the nearest man, who, comprehending all, sprang up, and made for me with his sheathed sword. I shot him in the chest as he cleared the faggots—which, standing nearly as high as a man's waist, formed a tolerable obstacle—and he pitched forward at my feet.

This baulked his companions, who drew back; but unfortunately it was necessary for me to stoop to get my sword, which was hidden in the faggot I had carried. The foremost of the rascals took advantage of this. Rushing at me with a long knife, he

failed to stab me—for I caught his wrist—but he succeeded in bringing me to the ground. I thought I was undone. I looked to have the others swarm over upon us; and so it would doubtless have happened had not Fanchette, with rare courage, dealt the first who followed a lusty blow on the body with a great stick she snatched up. The man collapsed on the faggots, and this hampered the rest. The check was enough. It enabled M. d'Agen to come up, who, dashing in through the gate, shot down the first he saw before him, and running at the doorway, with his sword, with incredible fury and the courage which I had always known him to possess, cleared it in a twinkling. The man with whom I was engaged on the ground, seeing what had happened, wrested himself free with the strength of despair, and dashing through the outer door, narrowly escaped being ridden down by my followers as they swept up to the gate at a gallop, and dismounted amid a whirlwind of cries.



In a moment they thronged in on us pell-mell, and as soon as I could lay my hand on my sword I led them through the doorway with a cheer, hoping to be able to enter the farther tower with the enemy. But the latter had taken the alarm too early and too thoroughly. The court was empty. We were barely in time to see the last man dart up a flight of outside stairs, which led to the first story, and disappear, closing a heavy door behind him. I rushed to the foot of the steps and would have ascended also, hoping against hope to find the door unsecured; but a shot which was fired through a loophole and narrowly missed my head, and another which brought down one of my men, made me pause. Discerning all the advantage to be on Bruhl's side, since he could shoot us down from his cover, I cried a retreat; the issue of the matter leaving us masters of the entrance-tower, while they retained the inner and stronger tower, the narrow court between the two being neutral ground, unsafe for either party.

Two of their men had fled outwards and were gone, and two lay dead ; while the loss on our side was confined to the man who was shot, and Fanchette, who had received a blow on the head in the *mêlée*, and was found, when we retreated, lying sick and dazed against the wall.

It surprised me much, when I came to think upon it, that I had seen nothing of Bruhl, though the skirmish had lasted two or three minutes from the first outcry, and been attended by an abundance of noise. Of Fresnoy, too, I now remembered that I had caught a glimpse only. These two facts seemed so strange that I was beginning to augur the worst, though I scarcely knew why, when my spirits were marvellously raised and my fears relieved by a thing which Maignan, who was the first to notice it, pointed out to me. This was the appearance at an upper window of a white kerchief, which was waved several times towards us. The window was little more than an arrow-slit, and so narrow and high besides

that it was impossible to see who gave the signal; but my experience of Mademoiselle's coolness and resource left me in no doubt on the point. With high hopes and a lighter heart than I had worn for some time I bestirred myself to take every precaution, and began by bidding Maignan select two men, and ride round the hill, to make sure that the enemy had no way of retreat open to him.

## CHAPTER XXIX.

## PESTILENCE AND FAMINE.

WHILE Maignan was away about this business I despatched two men to catch our horses, which were running loose in the valley, and to remove those of Bruhl's party to a safe distance from the Castle. I also blocked up the lower part of the door leading into the courtyard, and named four men to remain under arms beside it, that we might not be taken by surprise—an event of which I had the less fear, however, since the enemy were now reduced to eight swords, and could only escape, as we could only enter, through this doorway. I was still busied with this arrangement when M. d'Agen joined me, and I broke off to compliment him on his courage, acknowledging in particular the service he had done me personally. The heat of the conflict

had melted the young man's reserve, and flushed his face with pride ; but as he listened to me he gradually froze again, and when I ended he regarded me with the same cold hostility.

“ I am obliged to you,” he said, bowing. “ But may I ask what next, M. de Marsac ? ”

“ We have no choice,” I answered. “ We can only starve them out.”

“ But the ladies ? ” he said, starting slightly. “ What of them ? ”

“ They will suffer less than the men,” I replied. “ Trust me, the latter will not bear starving long.”

He seemed surprised, but I explained that with our small numbers we could not hope to storm the tower, and might think ourselves fortunate that we now had the enemy cooped up where he could not escape, and must eventually surrender.

“ Ay, but in the meantime how will you ensure the women against violence ? ” he asked, with an air which showed he was far from satisfied.

“I will see to that when Maignan comes back,” I answered pretty confidently.

The equerry appeared in a moment with the assurance that egress from the farther side of the tower was impossible. I bade him nevertheless keep a horseman moving round the hill, that we might have intelligence of any attempt. The order was scarcely given when a man—one of those I had left on guard at the door of the courtyard—came to tell me that Fresnoy desired to speak with me on behalf of M. de Bruhl.

“Where is he?” I asked.

“At the inner door with a flag of truce,” was the answer.

“Tell him, then,” I said, without offering to move, “that I will communicate with no one except his leader, M. de Bruhl. And add this, my friend,” I continued. “Say it aloud: that if the ladies whom he has in charge are injured by so much as a hair, I will hang every man within these walls, from M. de Bruhl to the youngest

lackey." And I added a solemn oath to that effect.

The man nodded, and went on his errand, while I and M. d'Agen, with Maignan, remained standing outside the gate, looking idly over the valley and the brown woods through which we had ridden in the early morning. My eyes rested chiefly on the latter, Maignan's as it proved on the former. Doubtless we all had our own thoughts. Certainly I had; and for a while, in my satisfaction at the result of the attack and the manner in which we had Bruhl confined, I did not remark the gravity which was gradually overspreading the equerry's countenance. When I did I took the alarm, and asked him in a moment what was the matter.

"I don't like that, your Excellency," he answered, pointing into the valley.

I looked anxiously, and looked, and saw nothing.

"What?" I said in astonishment.

"The blue mist," he muttered, with a shiver.

“I have been watching it this half-hour, your Excellency. It is rising fast.”

I cried out on him for a maudlin fool, and M. d’Agen swore impatiently; but for all that, and despite the contempt I strove to exhibit, I felt a sudden chill at my heart as I recognised in the valley below the same blue haze which had attended us through yesterday’s ride and left us only at nightfall. Involuntarily we both fell to watching it as it rose slowly and more slowly, first enveloping the lower woods, and then spreading itself abroad in the sunshine. It is hard to witness a bold man’s terror and remain unaffected by it; and I confess I trembled. Here, in the moment of our seeming success, was something which I had not taken into account, something against which I could not guard either myself or others!

“See!” Maignan whispered hoarsely, pointing again with his finger. “It is the Angel of Death, your Excellency! Where he kills by ones and twos, he is invisible. But when



he slays by hundreds and by thousands, men see the shadow of his wings !”

“ Chut, fool !” I retorted with anger, which was secretly proportioned to the impression his weird saying made on me. “ You have been in battles ! Did you ever see him there ? or at a sack ? A truce to this folly,” I continued. “ And do you go and inquire what food we have with us. It may be necessary to send for some.”

I watched him go doggedly off, and knowing the stout nature of the man and his devotion to his master, I had no fear that he would fail us ; but there were others, almost as necessary to us, in whom I could not place the same confidence. And these had also taken the alarm. When I turned I found groups of pale-faced men, standing by twos and threes at my back, who, pointing and muttering and telling one another what Maignan had told us, looked where we had looked. As one spoke and another listened, I saw the old panic revive in their eyes. Men who an

hour or two before had crossed the court under fire with the utmost resolution, and dared instant death without a thought, grew pale, and looking from this side of the valley to that with faltering eyes, seemed to be seeking, like hunted animals, a place of refuge. Fear, once aroused, hung in the air. Men talked in whispers of the abnormal heat, and, gazing at the cloudless sky, fled from the sunshine to the shadow; or, looking over the expanse of woods, longed to be under cover and away from this lofty eyrie, which to their morbid eyes seemed a target for all the shafts of death.

I was not slow to perceive the peril with which these fears and apprehensions, which rapidly became general, threatened my plans. I strove to keep the men employed, and to occupy their thoughts as far as possible with the enemy and his proceedings; but I soon found that even here a danger lurked; for Maignan, coming to me by-and-by with a grave face, told me that one of Bruhl's men

had ventured out, and was parleying with the guard, on our side of the court. I went at once and broke the matter off, threatening to shoot the fellow if he was not under cover before I counted ten. But the scared, sulky faces he left behind him told me that the mischief was done, and I could think of no better remedy for it than to give M. d'Agen a hint, and station him at the outer gate with his pistols ready.

The question of provisions, too, threatened to become a serious one; I dared not leave to procure them myself, nor could I trust any of my men with the mission. In fact, the besiegers were rapidly becoming the besieged. Intent on the rising haze and their own terrors, they forgot all else. Vigilance and caution were thrown to the winds. The stillness of the valley, its isolation, the distant woods that encircled us and hung quivering in the heated air, all added to the panic. Despite all my efforts and threats, the men gradually left their posts, and, getting together

in little parties at the gate, worked themselves up to such a pitch of dread that by two hours after noon they were fit for any folly ; and at the mere cry of “ Plague ! ” would have rushed to their horses and ridden in every direction.

It was plain that I could depend for useful service on myself and three others only—of whom, to his credit be it said, Simon Fleix was one. Seeing this, I was immensely relieved when I presently heard that Fresnoy was again seeking to speak with me. I was no longer, it will be believed, for standing on formalities ; but glad to waive in silence the punctilio on which I had before insisted, and anxious to afford him no opportunity of marking the slackness which prevailed among my men, I hastened to meet him at the door of the courtyard, where Maignan had detained him.

I might have spared my pains, however. I had no more than saluted him and exchanged the merest preliminaries before I saw that he was in a state of panic far exceeding that of

my following. His coarse face, which had never been prepossessing, was mottled and bedabbled with sweat; his bloodshot eyes, when they met mine, wore the fierce yet terrified expression of an animal caught in a trap. Though his first word was an oath, sworn for the purpose of raising his courage, the bully's bluster was gone. He spoke in a low voice, and his hands shook; and for a penny-piece I saw he would have bolted past me, and taken his chance in open flight.

I judged from his first words, uttered, as I have said, with an oath, that he was aware of his state. "M. de Marsac," he said, whining like a cur, "you know me to be a man of courage."

I needed nothing after this to assure me that he meditated something of the basest; and I took care how I answered him. "I have known you stiff enough upon occasions," I replied dryly. "And then, again, I have known you not so stiff, M. Fresnoy."

"Only when you were in question," he

muttered with another oath. "But flesh and blood cannot stand this. You could not yourself. Between him and them I am fairly worn out. Give me good terms—good terms, you understand, M. de Marsac!" he whispered eagerly, sinking his voice still lower, "and you shall have all you want."

"Your lives, and liberty to go where you please," I answered coldly. "The two ladies to be first given up to me uninjured. Those are the terms."

"But for me?" he said anxiously.

"For you? The same as the others," I retorted. "Or I will make a distinction for old acquaintance sake, M. Fresnoy; and if the ladies have aught to complain of, I will hang you first."

He tried to bluster and hold out for a sum of money, or at least for his horse to be given up to him. But I had made up my mind to reward my followers with a present of a horse apiece; and I was besides well aware that this was only an afterthought on his part, and

that he had fully decided to yield. I stood firm, therefore. The result justified my firmness, for he presently agreed to surrender on those terms.

“Ay, but M. de Bruhl?” I said, desiring to learn clearly whether he had authority to treat for all. “What of him?”

He looked at me impatiently. “Come and see!” he said, with an ugly sneer.

“No, no, my friend,” I answered, shaking my head warily. “That is not according to rule. You are the surrendering party, and it is for you to trust us. Bring out the ladies, that I may have speech with them, and then I will draw off my men.”

“Nom de Dieu!” he cried hoarsely, with so much fear and rage in his face that I recoiled from him. “That is just what I cannot do.”

“You cannot?” I rejoined, with a sudden thrill of horror. “Why not? why not, man?” And in the excitement of the moment, conceiving the idea that the worst had happened

to the women, I pushed him back with so much fury that he laid his hand on his sword.

“Confound you!” he stuttered, “stand back! It is not that, I tell you! Mademoiselle is safe and sound; and madame, if she had her senses, would be sound too. It is not our fault if she is not. But I have not got the key of the rooms. It is in Bruhl’s pocket, I tell you!”

“Oh!” I made answer dryly. “And Bruhl?”

“Hush, man!” Fresnoy replied, wiping the perspiration from his brow, and bringing his pallid, ugly face near to mine; “he has got the plague!”

I stared at him for a moment in silence, which he was the first to break. “Hush!” he muttered again, laying a trembling hand on my arm; “if the men knew it—and not seeing him they are beginning to suspect it—they would rise on us. The devil himself could not keep them here. Between him and them I am on a razor’s edge. Madame is



with him, and the door is locked. Mademoiselle is in a room upstairs, and the door is locked. And he has the keys. What can I do? What can I do, man?" he cried, his voice hoarse with terror and dismay.

"Get the keys," I said instinctively.

"What? From him?" he muttered, with an irrepressible shudder, which shook his bloated cheeks. "God forbid I should see him! It takes stout men infallibly. I should be dead by night! By God, I should!" he continued, whining. "Now you are not stout, M. de Marsac. If you will come with me I will draw off the men from that part; and you may go in and get the key from him."

His terror, which surpassed all feigning, and satisfied me without doubt that he was in earnest, was so intense that it could not fail to infect me. I felt my face, as I looked into his, grow to the same hue. I trembled as he did and grew sick. For if there is a word which blanches the soldier's cheek and tries his heart more than another, it is the name of the

disease which travels in the hot noonday, and, tainting the strongest as he rides in his pride, leaves him in a few hours a poor mass of corruption. The stoutest and the most reckless fear it; nor could I, more than another, boast myself indifferent to it, or think of its presence without shrinking. But the respect in which a man of birth holds himself saves him from the unreasoning fear which masters the vulgar; and in a moment I recovered myself, and made up my mind what it behoved me to do.

“Wait awhile,” I said sternly, “and I will come with you.”

He waited accordingly, though with manifest impatience, while I sent for M. d’Agen, and communicated to him what I was about to do. I did not think it necessary to enter into details or to mention Bruhl’s state, for some of the men were well in hearing. I observed that the young gentleman received my directions with a gloomy and dissatisfied air. But I had become by this time so used to his moods, and

found myself so much mistaken in his character, that I scarcely gave the matter a second thought. I crossed the court with Fresnoy, and in a moment had mounted the outside staircase and passed through the heavy doorway.

The moment I entered, I was forced to do Fresnoy the justice of admitting that he had not come to me before he was obliged. The three men who were on guard inside tossed down their weapons at sight of me, while a fourth, who was posted at a neighbouring window, hailed me with a cry of relief. From the moment I crossed the threshold the defence was practically at an end. I might, had I chosen or found it consistent with honour, have called in my following and secured the entrance. Without pausing, however, I passed on to the foot of a gloomy stone staircase winding up between walls of rough masonry; and here Fresnoy stood on one side and stopped. He pointed upwards with a pale face, and muttered, "The door on the left."

Leaving him there watching me as I went upstairs, I mounted slowly to the landing, and by the light of an arrow-slit which dimly lit the ruinous place found the door he had described, and tried it with my hand. It was locked, but I heard some one moan in the room, and a step crossed the floor, as if he and another came to the door and listened. I knocked, hearing my heart beat in the silence.

At last a voice quite strange to me cried, "Who is it?"

"A friend," I muttered, striving to dull my voice that they might not hear me below.

"A friend!" the bitter answer came. "Go! you have made a mistake! We have no friends."

"It is I, M. de Marsac," I rejoined, knocking more imperatively. "I would see M. de Bruhl. I must see him."

The person inside, at whose identity I could now make a guess, uttered a low exclamation, and still seemed to hesitate. But on my repeating my demand I heard a rusty

bolt withdrawn ; and Madame de Bruhl, opening the door a few inches, showed her face in the gap. "What do you want?" she murmured jealously.

Prepared as I was to see her, I was shocked by the change in her appearance, a change which even that imperfect light failed to hide. Her blue eyes had grown larger and harder, and there were dark marks under them. Her face, once so brilliant, was grey and pinched ; her hair had lost its golden lustre. "What do you want?" she repeated, eyeing me fiercely.

"To see him," I answered.

"You know?" she muttered. "You know that he ——"

I nodded.

"And you still want to come in? My God! Swear you will not hurt him!"

"Heaven forbid!" I said ; and on that she held the door open that I might enter. But I was not halfway across the room before she had passed me, and was again between me

and the wretched makeshift pallet. Nay, when I stood and looked down at him, as he moaned and rolled in senseless agony, with livid face and distorted features (which the cold grey light of that miserable room rendered doubly appalling), she hung over him and fenced him from me : so that looking on him and her, and remembering how he had treated her, and why he came to be in this place, I felt unmanly tears rise to my eyes. The room was still a prison, a prison with broken mortar covering the floor and loopholes for windows; but the captive was held by other chains than those of force. When she might have gone free, her woman's love, surviving all that he had done to kill it, chained her to his side with fetters which old wrongs and present dangers were powerless to break.

It was impossible that I could view a scene so strange without feelings of admiration as well as pity, or without forgetting for a while, in my respect for Madame de Bruhl's devotion, the risk which had seemed so great to me on

the stairs. I had come simply for a purpose of my own, and with no thought of aiding him who lay here. But so great, as I have noticed on other occasions, is the power of a noble example, that, before I knew it, I found myself wondering what I could do to help this man, and how I could relieve madame in the discharge of offices which her husband had as little right to expect at her hands as at mine. At the mere sound of the word Plague I knew she would be deserted in this wilderness by all, or nearly all; a reflection which suggested to me that I should first remove Mademoiselle to a distance, and then consider what help I could afford here.

I was about to tell her the purpose with which I had come when a paroxysm more than ordinarily violent, and induced perhaps by the excitement of my presence, though he seemed beside himself, seized him, and threatened to tax her powers to the utmost. I could not look on and see her spend herself in vain; and almost before I knew what I was doing I

had laid my hands on him and after a brief struggle thrust him back exhausted on the couch.

She looked at me so strangely after that that in the half-light which the loopholes afforded I tried in vain to read her meaning. "Why did you come?" she cried at length, breathing quickly. "You, of all men? Why did you come? He was no friend of yours, Heaven knows!"

"No, madame, nor I of his," I answered bitterly, with a sudden revulsion of feeling.

"Then why are you here?" she retorted.

"I could not send one of my men," I answered. "And I want the key of the room above."

At the mention of that, the room above, she flinched as if I had struck her, and looked as strangely at Bruhl as she had before looked at me. No doubt the reference to Mademoiselle de la Vire recalled to her mind her husband's wild passion for the girl, which for the moment she had forgotten. Nevertheless, she did not



she speak, though her face turned very pale. She stooped over the couch, such as it was, and searching his clothes, presently stood up, and held out the key to me. "Take it, and let her out," she said with a forced smile. "Take it up yourself, and do it. You have done so much for her it is right that you should do this."

I took the key, thanking her with more haste than thought, and turned towards the door, intending to go straight up to the floor above and release Mademoiselle. My hand was already on the door, which madame, I found, had left ajar in the excitement of my entrance, when I heard her step behind me. The next instant she touched me on the shoulder. "You fool!" she exclaimed, her eyes flashing, "would you kill her? Would you go from him to her, and take the plague to her? God forgive me, it was in my mind to send you. And men are such puppets you would have gone!"

I trembled with horror, as much at my

stupidity as at her craft. For she was right : in another moment I should have gone, and comprehension and remorse would have come too late. As it was, in my longing at once to reproach her for her wickedness and to thank her for her timely repentance, I found no words ; but I turned away in silence, and went out with a full heart.

## CHAPTER XXX.

## STRICKEN.

OUTSIDE the door, standing in the dimness of the landing, I found M. d'Agen. At any other time I should have been the first to ask him why he had left the post which I had assigned to him. But at the moment I was off my balance, and his presence suggested nothing more than that here was the very person who could best execute my wishes. I held out the key to him at arm's length, and bade him release Mademoiselle de la Vire, who was in the room above, and escort her out of the Castle.

“Do not let her linger here,” I continued urgently. “Take her to the place where we found the wood-cutters. You need fear no resistance.”

“But Bruhl?” he said, as he took the key mechanically from me.

“He is out of the question,” I answered in a low voice. “We have done with him. He has the plague.”

He uttered a sharp exclamation. “What of madame, then ?” he muttered.

“She is with him,” I said.

He cried out suddenly at that, sucking in his breath, as I have known men do in pain. And but that I drew back he would have laid his hand on my sleeve. “With him ?” he stammered. “How is that ?”

“Why, man, where else should she be ?” I answered, forgetting that the sight of those two together had at first surprised me also, as well as moved me. “Or who else should be with him ? He is her husband.”

He stared at me for a moment at that, and then he turned slowly away and began to go up ; while I looked after him, gradually thinking out the clue to his conduct. Could it be that it was not Mademoiselle attracted him, but Madame de Bruhl ?

And with that hint I understood it all. I

saw in a moment the conclusion to which he had come on hearing of the presence of madame in my room. In my room at night! The change had dated from that time; instead of a careless, light-spirited youth he had become in a moment a morose and restive churl, as difficult to manage as an unbroken colt. Quite clearly I saw now the meaning of the change, why he had shrunk from me, and why all intercourse between us had been so difficult and so constrained.

I laughed to think how he had deceived himself, and how nearly I had come to deceive myself also. And what more I might have thought I do not know, for my meditations were cut short at this point by a loud outcry below, which, beginning in one or two sharp cries of alarm and warning, culminated quickly in a roar of anger and dismay.

Fancying I recognised Maignan's voice, I ran down the stairs, seeking a loophole whence I could command the scene; but finding none, and becoming more and more alarmed, I

descended to the court, which I found, to my great surprise, as empty and silent as an old battlefield. Neither on the enemy's side nor on ours was a single man to be seen. With growing dismay I sprang across the court and darted through the outer tower, only to find that and the gateway equally unguarded. Nor was it until I had passed through the latter, and stood on the brow of the slope, which we had had to clamber with so much toil, that I learned what was amiss.

Far below me a string of men, bounding and running at speed, streamed down the hill towards the horses. Some were shouting, some running silently, with their elbows at their sides and their scabbards leaping against their calves. The horses stood tethered in a ring near the edge of the wood, and by some oversight had been left unguarded. The foremost runner I made out to be Fresnoy; but a number of his men were close upon him, and then after an interval came Maignan, waving his blade and emitting frantic threats with

every stride. Comprehending at once that Fresnoy and his following, rendered desperate by panic and the prospective loss of their horses, had taken advantage of my absence and given Maignan the slip, I saw I could do nothing save watch the result of the struggle.

This was not long delayed. Maignan's threats, which seemed to me mere waste of breath, were not without effect on those he followed. There is nothing which demoralises men like flight. Troopers who have stood charge after charge while victory was possible will fly like sheep, and like sheep allow themselves to be butchered, when they have once turned the back. So it was here. Many of Fresnoy's men were stout fellows, but having started to run they had no stomach for fighting. Their fears caused Maignan to appear near, while the horses seemed distant; and one after another they turned aside and made like rabbits for the wood. Only Fresnoy, who had taken care to have the start of all, kept on, and, reaching the horses, cut the

rope which tethered the nearest, and vaulted nimbly on its back. Safely seated there, he tried to frighten the others into breaking loose; but not succeeding at the first attempt, and seeing Maignan, breathing vengeance, coming up with him, he started his horse, a bright bay, and rode off laughing along the edge of the wood.

Fully content with the result—for our carelessness might have cost us very dearly—I was about to turn away when I saw that Maignan had mounted and was preparing to follow. I stayed accordingly to see the end, and from my elevated position enjoyed a first-rate view of the race which ensued. Both were heavy weights, and at first Maignan gained no ground. But when a couple of hundred yards had been covered Fresnoy had the ill-luck to blunder into some heavy ground; and this enabling his pursuer, who had time to avoid it, to get within twoscore paces of him, the race became as exciting as I could wish. Slowly and surely Maignan, who had chosen



the Cid, reduced the distance between them to a score of paces—to fifteen—to ten. Then Fresnoy, becoming alarmed, began to look over his shoulder and ride in earnest. He had no whip, and I saw him raise his sheathed sword and strike his beast on the flank. It sprang forward, and appeared for a few strides to be holding its own. Again he repeated the blow—but this time with a different result. While his hand was still in the air, his horse stumbled, as it seemed to me, made a desperate effort to recover itself, fell headlong, and rolled over and over.

Something in the fashion of the fall, which reminded me of the mishap I had suffered on the way to Chizé led me to look more particularly at the horse as it rose trembling to its feet, and stood with drooping head. Sure enough, a careful glance enabled me, even at that distance, to identify it as Matthew's bay—the trick-horse. Shading my eyes, and gazing on the scene with increased interest, I saw Maignan, who had dismounted, stoop

over something on the ground, and again after an interval stand upright.

But Fresnoy did not rise. Nor was it without awe that, guessing what had happened to him, I remembered how he had used this very horse to befool me; how heartlessly he had abandoned Matthew, its owner; and by what marvellous haps—which men call chances—Providence had brought it to this place, and put it in his heart to choose it out of a score which stood ready to his hand!

I was right. The man's neck was broken. He was quite dead. Maignan passed the word to one, and he to another, and so it reached me on the hill. I did not fail to awaken memories both grave and wholesome. I thought of St. Jean d'Angely, of Chizé, of the house in the Ruelle d'Arcy; then in the midst of these reflections I heard voices, and turned to find Mademoiselle, with M. d'Agen behind me.

Her hand was still bandaged, and her dress, which she had not changed since leaving Blois,

was torn and stained with mud. Her hair was in disorder; she walked with a limp. Fatigue and apprehension had stolen the colour from her cheeks, and in a word she looked, when I turned, so wan and miserable that for a moment I feared the plague had seized her.

The instant, however, that she caught sight of me a wave of colour invaded, not her cheeks only, but her brow and neck. From her hair to the collar of her gown she was all crimson. For a second she stood gazing at me, and then, as I saluted her, she sprang forward. Had I not stepped back she would have taken my hands.

My heart so overflowed with joy at this sight, that in the certainty her blush gave me I was fain to toy with my happiness. All jealousy of M. d'Agen was forgotten; only I thought it well not to alarm her by telling her what I knew of the Bruhls. "Mademoiselle," I said earnestly, bowing, but retreating from her, "I thank God for your escape. One of

your enemies lies helpless here, and another is dead yonder."

"It is not of my enemies I am thinking," she answered quickly, "but of God, of whom you rightly remind me; and then of my friends."

"Nevertheless," I answered as quickly, "I beg you will not stay to thank them now, but go down to the wood with M. d'Agen. He will do all that may be possible to make you comfortable."

"And you, sir?" she said, with a charming air of confusion.

"I must stay here," I answered, "for a while."

"Why?" she asked with a slight frown.

I did not know how to tell her, and I began lamely. "Some one must stop with madame," I said without thought.

"Madame!" she exclaimed. "Does she require assistance? I will stop."

"God forbid!" I cried.

I do not know how she understood the

words ; but her face, which had been full of softness, grew hard. She moved quickly towards me ; but, mindful of the danger I carried about me, I drew farther back. “No nearer, Mademoiselle,” I murmured, “if you please.”

She looked puzzled, and finally angry, turning away with a sarcastic bow. “So be it, then, sir,” she said proudly, “if you desire it. M. d’Agen, if you are not afraid of me, will you lead me down ?”

I stood and watched them go down the hill, comforting myself with the reflection that to-morrow, or the next day, or within a few days at most, all would be well. Scanning her figure as she moved, I fancied she went with less spirit as the space increased between us. And I pleased myself with the thought. A few days, a few hours, I thought, and all would be well. The sunset which blazed in the west was no more than a faint reflection of the glow which for a few minutes pervaded my mind, long accustomed to cold prospects and the chill of neglect.

A term was put to these pleasant imaginings by the arrival of Maignan, who, panting from the ascent of the hill, informed me with a shamefaced air that the tale of horses was complete, but that four of our men were missing, and had doubtless gone off with the fugitives. These proved to be M. d'Agen's two lackeys and the two varlets M. de Rambouillet had lent us. There remained besides Simon Fleix only Maignan's three men from Rosny; but the state in which our affairs now stood enabled us to make light of this. I informed the equerry—who visibly paled at the news—that M. de Bruhl lay ill of the plague, and like to die; and I bade him form a camp in the wood below, and sending for food to the house where we had slept the night before, make Mademoiselle as comfortable as circumstances permitted.

He listened with surprise, and when I had done asked with concern what I intended to do myself.

“Some one must remain with Madame de

Bruhl," I answered. "I have already been to the bedside to procure the key of Mademoiselle's room, and I run no further risk. All I ask is that you will remain in the neighbourhood, and furnish us with supplies should it be necessary."

He looked at me with emotion, which, strongly in conflict with his fears as it was, touched me not a little. "But, morbleu! M. de Marsac," he said, "you will take the plague and die."

"If God wills," I answered, very lugubriously I confess, for pale looks in one commonly so fearless could not but depress me. "But if not, I shall escape. Any way, my friend," I continued, "I owe you a quittance. Simon Fleix has an inkhorn and paper. Bid him bring them to this stone and leave them, and I will write that Maignan, the equerry of the Baron de Rosny, served me to the end as a brave soldier and an honest friend. What, *mon ami*?"—I continued, for I saw that he was overcome by this, which was, indeed,

a happy thought of mine,—“why not? It is true, and will acquit you with the baron. Do it, and go. Advise M. d’Agen, and be to him what you have been to me.”

He swore two or three great oaths, such as men of his kind use to hide an excess of feeling, and after some further remonstrance went away to carry out my orders, leaving me to stand on the brow in a strange kind of solitude, and watch horses and men withdraw to the wood, until the whole valley seemed left to me and stillness and the grey evening. For a time I stood in thought. Then reminding myself, for a fillip to my spirits, that I had been far more alone when I walked the streets of St. Jean friendless and threadbare than I was now, I turned, and, swinging my scabbard against my boots for company, stumbled through the dark silent courtyard, and mounted as cheerfully as I could to madame’s room.

To detail all that passed during the next five days would be tedious and in indifferent



taste, seeing that I am writing this memoir for the perusal of men of honour ; for though I consider the offices which the whole can perform for the sick to be worthy of the attention of every man, however well born, who proposes to see service, they seem to be more honourable in the doing than the telling. One episode, however, which marked those days filled me then, as it does now, with the most lively pleasure ; and that was the unexpected devotion displayed by Simon Fleix, who, coming to me, refused to leave, and showed himself at this pinch to be possessed of such sterling qualities that I freely forgave him the deceit he had formerly practised on me. The fits of moody silence into which he still fell at times and an occasional irascibility seemed to show that he had not altogether conquered his insane fancy ; but the mere fact that he had come to me in a situation of hazard, and voluntarily removed himself from Mademoiselle's neighbourhood, gave me good hope for the future.

M. de Bruhl died early on the morning of the second day, and Simon and I buried him at noon. He was a man of courage and address, lacking only principles. In spite of madame's grief and prostration, which were as great as though she had lost the best husband in the world, we removed before night to a separate camp in the woods, and left with the utmost relief the grey ruin on the hill, in which, it seemed to me, we had lived an age. In our new bivouac, where, game being abundant, and the weather warm, we lacked no comfort, except the society of our friends, we remained four days longer. On the fifth morning we met the others of our company by appointment on the north road, and commenced the return journey.

Thankful that we had escaped contagion, we nevertheless still proposed to observe for a time such precautions in regard to the others as seemed necessary, riding in the rear and having no communication with them, though they showed by signs the pleasure

they felt at seeing us. From the frequency with which Mademoiselle turned and looked behind her, I judged she had overcome her pique at my strange conduct, which the others should by this time have explained to her. Content, therefore, with the present, and full of confidence in the future, I rode along in a rare state of satisfaction, at one moment planning what I would do, and at another reviewing what I had done.

The brightness and softness of the day, and the beauty of the woods, which in some places, I remember, were bursting into leaf, contributed much to establish me in this frame of mind. The hateful mist, which had so greatly depressed us, had disappeared, leaving the face of the country visible in all the brilliance of early spring. The men who rode before us, cheered by the happy omen, laughed and talked as they rode, or tried the paces of their horses, where the trees grew sparsely; and their jests and laughter coming pleasantly to our ears as we followed, warmed even madame's sad face to a semblance of happiness.

I was riding along in this state of contentment when a feeling of fatigue, which the distance we had come did not seem to justify, led me to spur the Cid into a brisker pace. The sensation of lassitude still continued, however, and indeed grew worse, so that I wondered idly whether I had over-eaten myself at my last meal. Then the thing passed for a while from my mind, which the descent of a steep hill sufficiently occupied.

But a few minutes later, happening to turn in the saddle, I experienced a strange and sudden dizziness, so excessive as to force me to grasp the cantle, and cling to it, while trees and hills appeared to dance round me. A quick, hot pain in the side followed, almost before I recovered the power of thought; and this increased so rapidly, and was from the first so definite, that, with a dreadful apprehension already formed in my mind, I thrust my hand inside my clothes, and found that swelling which is the most sure and deadly symptom of the plague.

The horror of that moment, in which I saw all those things on the possession of which I had just been congratulating myself, pass hopelessly from me, leaving me in dreadful gloom, I will not attempt to describe in this place. Let it suffice that the world lost in a moment its joyousness, the sunshine its warmth. The greenness and beauty round me, which an instant before had filled me with pleasure, seemed on a sudden no more than a grim and cruel jest at my expense, and I an atom perishing unmarked and unnoticed. Yes, an atom, a mote ; the bitterness of that feeling I well remember. Then, in no long time, being a soldier, I recovered my coolness, and, retaining the power to think, decided what it behoved me to do.

## CHAPTER XXXI.

## UNDER THE GREENWOOD.

To escape from my companions on some pretext, which should enable me to ensure their safety without arousing their fears, was the one thought which possessed me on the subsidence of my first alarm. Probably it answered to that instinct in animals which bids them get away alone when wounded or attacked by disease; and with me it had the fuller play as the pain prevailed rather by paroxysms than in permanence, and, coming and going, allowed intervals of ease, in which I was able to think clearly and consecutively, and even to sit firmly in the saddle.

The moment one of these intervals enabled me to control myself, I used it to think where I might go without danger to others; and at once and naturally my thoughts turned to the

last place we had passed; which happened to be the house in the gorge where we had received news of Bruhl's divergence from the road. The man who lived there alone had had the plague; therefore he did not fear it. The place itself was solitary, and I could reach it, riding slowly, in half an hour. On the instant and without more delay I determined on this course. I would return, and, committing myself to the fellow's good offices, bid him deny me to others, and especially to my friends—should they seek me.

Aware that I had no time to lose if I would put this plan into execution before the pains returned to sap my courage, I drew bridle at once, and muttered some excuse to madame; if I remember rightly, that I had dropped my gauntlet. Whatever the pretext—and my dread was great lest she should observe any strangeness in my manner—it passed with her; by reason, chiefly, I think, of the grief which monopolised her. She let me go, and before anyone else could mark

or miss me I was a hundred yards away on the back-track, and already sheltered from observation by a turn in the road.

The excitement of my evasion supported me for a while after leaving her; and then for another while a paroxysm of pain deprived me of the power of thought. But when this last was over, leaving me weak and shaken, yet clear in my mind, the most miserable sadness and depression that can be conceived came upon me; and, accompanying me through the wood, filled its avenues (which doubtless were fair enough to others' eyes) with the blackness of despair. I saw but the charnel-house, and that everywhere. It was not only that the horrors of the first discovery returned upon me and almost unmanned me; nor only that regrets and memories, pictures of the past and plans for the future, crowded thick upon my mind, so that I could have wept at the thought of all ending here; but in my weakness Mademoiselle's face shone where the wood was



darkest, and, tempting and provoking me to return—were it only to tell her that, grim and dull as I seemed, I loved her—tried me with a subtle temptation almost beyond my strength to resist. All that was mean in me rose in arms, all that was selfish clamoured to know why I must die in the ditch while others rode in the sunshine; why I must go to the pit, while others loved and lived!

And so hard was I pressed that I think I should have given way had the ride been longer or my horse less smooth and nimble. But in the midst of my misery, which bodily pain was beginning to augment to such a degree that I could scarcely see, and had to ride gripping the saddle with both hands, I reached the mill. My horse stopped of its own accord. The man we had seen before came out. I had just strength left to tell him what was the matter, and what I wanted; and then a fresh attack came on, with sickness, and, overcome by vertigo, I fell to the ground.

I have but an indistinct idea what happened after that ; until I found myself inside the house, clinging to a man's arm. He pointed to a box-bed in one corner of the room (which was, or seemed to my sick eyes, gloomy and darksome in the extreme), and would have had me lie down in it. But something inside me revolted against the bed ; and despite the force he used, I broke away, and threw myself on a heap of straw which I saw in another corner.

“Is not the bed good enough for you ?” he grumbled.

I strove to tell him it was not that.

“It should be good enough to die on,” he continued brutally. “There's five have died on that bed, I'd have you know ! My wife one, and my son another, and my daughter another ; and then my son again, and a daughter again. Five ! Ay, five in that bed !”

Brooding in the gloom of the chimney-corner, where he was busied about a black pot, he continued to mutter and glance at me

askance ; but after a while I swooned away with pain.

When I opened my eyes again the room was darker. The man still sat where I had last seen him ; but a noise, the same, perhaps, which had roused me, drew him as I looked to the unglazed window. A voice outside, the tones of which I seemed to know, inquired if he had seen me ; and so carried away was I by the excitement of the moment that I rose on my elbow to hear the answer. But the man was staunch. I heard him deny all knowledge of me, and presently the sound of retreating hoofs and the echo of voices dying in the distance assured me I was left.

Then, at that instant, a doubt of the man on whose compassion I had thrown myself entered my mind. Plague-stricken, hopeless as I was, it chilled me to the very heart ; staying in a moment the feeble tears I was about to shed, and curing even the vertigo, which forced me to clutch at the straw on

which I lay. Whether the thought arose from a sickly sense of my own impotence, or was based on the fellow's morose air and the stealthy glances he continued to cast at me, I am as unable to say as I am to decide whether it was well-founded, or the fruit of my own fancy. Possibly the gloom of the room and the man's surly words inclined me to suspicion; possibly his secret thoughts portrayed themselves in his hang-dog visage. Afterwards it appeared that he had stripped me, while I lay, of everything of value; but he may have done this in the belief that I should die.

All I know is that I knew nothing certain, because the fear died almost as soon as it was born. The man had scarcely seated himself again, or I conceived the thought, when a second alarm outside caused him to spring to his feet. Scowling and muttering as he went, he hurried to the window. But before he reached it the door was dashed violently open, and Simon Fleix stood in the entrance.

There came in with him so blessed a rush of light and life as in a moment dispelled the horror of the room, and stripped me at one and the same time of fear and manhood. For whether I would or no, at sight of the familiar face, which I had fled so lately, I burst into tears; and, stretching out my hands to him, as a frightened child might have done, called on him by name. I suppose the plague was by this time so plainly written on my face that all who looked might read; for he stood at gaze, staring at me, and was still so standing when a hand put him aside, and a slighter, smaller figure, pale-faced and hooded, stood for a moment between me and the sunshine. It was Mademoiselle!

That, I thank God, restored me to myself, or I had been for ever shamed. I cried to them with all the voice I had left to take her away; and calling out frantically again and again that I had the plague and she would die, I bade the man close the door. Nay, regaining something of strength in my fear

for her, I rose up, half-dressed as I was, and would have fled into some corner to avoid her, still calling out to them to take her away, to take her away—if a fresh paroxysm had not seized me, so that I fell blind and helpless where I was.

For a time after that I knew nothing ; until someone held water to my lips, and I drank greedily, and presently awoke to the fact that the entrance was dark with faces and figures all gazing at me as I lay. But I could not see her ; and I had sense enough to know and be thankful that she was no longer among them. I would fain have bidden Maignan begone too, for I read the consternation in his face. But I could not muster strength or voice for the purpose, and when I turned my head to see who held me—ah me ! it comes back to me still in dreams—it was Mademoiselle's hair that swept my forehead and her hand that ministered to me ; while tears that she did not try to hide or wipe away fell on my hot cheek. I could have pushed her

away even then, for she was slight and small ; but the pains came upon me, and with a sob choking my voice I lost all knowledge.

I am told that I lay for more than a month between life and death, now burning with fever, and now in the cold fit ; and that but for the tendance which never failed nor faltered, nor could have been outdone had my malady been the least infectious in the world, I must have died a hundred times, as hundreds round me did die week by week in that year. From the first they took me out of the house (where I think I should have perished quickly, so impregnated was it with the plague poison) and laid me under a screen of boughs in the forest, with a vast quantity of cloaks and horse-cloths cunningly disposed to windward. Here I ran some risk from cold and exposure and the fall of heavy dews ; but, on the other hand, had all the airs of heaven to clear away the humours and expel the fever from my brain.

Hence it was that when the first feeble

beginnings of consciousness awoke in me again, they and the light stole in on me through green leaves, and overhanging boughs, and the freshness and verdure of the spring woods. The sunshine which reached my watery eyes was softened by its passage through great trees, which grew and expanded as I gazed up into them, until each became a verdant world, with all a world's diversity of life. Grown tired of this, I had still long avenues of shade, carpeted with flowers, to peer into; or a little wooded bottom—where the ground fell away on one side—that blazed and burned with red-thorn. Ay, and hence it was that the first sounds I heard, when the fever left me at last, and I knew morning from evening, and man from woman, were the songs of birds calling to their mates.

Mademoiselle and Madame de Bruhl, with Fanchette and Simon Fleix, lay all this time in such shelter as could be raised for them where I lay; M. François and three stout



fellows, whom Maignan left to guard us, living in a hut within hail. Maignan himself, after seeing out a week of my illness, had perforce returned to his master, and no news had since been received from him. Thanks to the timely move into the woods, no other of the party fell ill, and by the time I was able to stand and speak the ravages of the disease had so greatly decreased that fear was at an end.

I should waste words were I to try to describe how the peace and quietude of the life we led in the forest during the time of my recovery sank into my heart; which had known, save by my mother's bedside, little of such joys. To awake in the morning to sweet sounds and scents, to eat with reviving appetite and feel the slow growth of strength, to lie all day in shade or sunshine as it pleased me, and hear women's voices and tinkling laughter, to have no thought of the world and no knowledge of it, so that we might have been, for anything we saw, in

another sphere—these things might have sufficed for happiness without that which added to each and every one of them a sweeter and deeper and more lasting joy. Of which next.

I had not begun to take notice long before I saw that M. François and Madame had come to an understanding—such an one, at least, as permitted him to do all for her comfort and entertainment without committing her to more than was becoming at such a season. Naturally this left Mademoiselle much in my company—a circumstance which would have ripened into passion the affection I before entertained for her, had not gratitude and a nearer observance of her merits already elevated the feeling into the most ardent worship that even the youngest lover ever felt for his mistress.

In proportion, however, as I and my love grew stronger, and Mademoiselle's presence grew more necessary to my happiness—so that were she away but an hour I fell

a-moping—she began to draw off from me, and absenting herself more and more, on long walks in the woods, by-and-by reduced me to such a pitch of misery as bade fair to complete what the fever had left undone.

If this had happened in the world I think it likely that I should have suffered in silence. But here, under the greenwood, in common enjoyment of God's air and earth, we seemed more nearly equal. She was scarce better dressed than a sutler's wife; while recollections of her wealth and station, though they assailed me nightly, lost much of their point in presence of her youth and of that fair and patient gentleness which forest life and the duties of a nurse had fostered.

So it happened that one day, when she had been absent longer than usual, I took my courage in my hand and went to meet her as far as the stream which ran through the bottom by the redt-horn. Here, at a place where there were three stepping-stones, I waited for her; first taking away the stepping-

stones, that she might have to pause, and, being at a loss, might be glad to see me.

She came presently, tripping through an alley in the low wood, with her eyes on the ground, and her whole carriage full of a sweet pensiveness which it did me good to see. I turned my back on the stream before she saw me, and made a pretence of being taken up with something in another direction. Doubtless she espied me soon, and before she came very near; but she made no sign until she reached the brink, and found the stepping-stones were gone.

Then, whether she suspected me or not, she called out to me, not once, but several times. For, partly to tantalise her, as lovers will, and partly because it charmed me to hear her use my name, I would not turn at once.

When I did, and discovered her standing with one small foot dallying with the water, I cried out with well-affected concern; and in a great hurry ran towards her, paying no

attention to her chiding or the pettish haughtiness with which she spoke to me.

“The stepping-stones are all on your side,” she said imperiously. “Who has moved them?”

I looked about without answering, and at last pretended to find them; while she stood watching me, tapping the ground with one foot the while. Despite her impatience, the stone which was nearest to her I took care to bring last—that she might not cross without my assistance. But after all she stepped over so lightly and quickly that the hand she placed in mine seemed scarcely to rest there a second. Yet when she was over I managed to retain it; nor did she resist, though her cheek, which had been red before, turned crimson and her eyes fell, and bound to me by the link in her little hand, she stood beside me with her whole figure drooping.

“Mademoiselle,” I said gravely, summoning all my resolution to my aid, “do you know of what that stream with its stepping-stones reminds me?”

She shook her head, but did not answer.

“Of the stream which has flowed between us from the day when I first saw you at St. Jean,” I said in a low voice. “It has flowed between us, and it still does—separating us.”

“What stream?” she murmured, with her eyes cast down and her foot playing with the moss. “You speak in riddles, sir.”

“You understand this one only too well, Mademoiselle,” I answered. “Are you not young and gay and beautiful, while I am old, or almost old, and dull and grave? You are rich and well thought-of at Court, and I a soldier of fortune, not too successful. What did you think of me when you first saw me at St. Jean? What when I came to Rosny? That, Mademoiselle,” I continued with fervour, “is the stream which flows between us and separates us; and I know of but one stepping-stone that can bridge it.”

She looked aside, toying with a piece of thorn-blossom she had picked. It was not redder than her cheeks.

“That one stepping-stone,” I said, after waiting vainly for any word or sign from her, “is Love. Many weeks ago, Mademoiselle, when I had little cause to like you, I loved you ; I loved you whether I would or not, and, without thought or hope of return, I should have been mad had I spoken to you then. Mad, and worse than mad. But now, now that I owe you my life, now that I have drunk from your hand in fever, and, awaking early and late, have found you by my pillow—now that, seeing you come in and out in the midst of fear and hardship, I have learned to regard you as a woman kind and gentle as my mother—now that I love you, so that to be with you is joy, and away from you grief, is it presumption in me now, Mademoiselle, to think that that stream may be bridged ? ”

I stopped, out of breath, and saw that she was trembling. But she spoke presently. “You said one stepping-stone ? ” she murmured.

“Yes,” I answered hoarsely, trying in vain

to look at her face, which she kept averted from me.

“There should be two,” she said, almost in a whisper. “Your love, sir, and—and mine. You have said much of the one, and nothing of the other. In that you are wrong, for I am proud still. And I would not cross the stream you speak of for any love of yours!”

“Ah!” I cried in sharpest pain.

“But,” she continued, looking up at me on a sudden with eyes that told me all, “because I love you I am willing to cross it—to cross it once and for ever, and live beyond it all my life—if I may live my life with you.”

I fell on my knee and kissed her hand again and again in a rapture of joy and gratitude. By-and-by she pulled it from me. “If you will, sir,” she said, “you may kiss my lips. If you do not, no man ever will.”

After that, as may be guessed, we walked every day in the forest, making longer and longer excursions as my strength came back to me, and the nearer parts grew familiar.



From early dawn, when I brought my love a posy of flowers, to late evening, when Fanchette hurried her from me, our days were passed in a long round of delight; being filled full of all beautiful things—love, and sunshine, and rippling streams, and green banks, on which we sat together under scented limes, telling one another all we had ever thought, and especially all we had ever thought of one another. Sometimes—when the light was low in the evening—we spoke of my mother; and once—but that was in the sunshine, when the bees were humming and my blood had begun to run strongly in my veins—I spoke of my great and distant kinsman, Rohan. But Mademoiselle would hear nothing of him, murmuring again and again in my ear, “I have crossed, my love, I have crossed.”

Truly the sands of that hour-glass were of gold. But in time they ran out. First, M. François, spurred by the restlessness of youth, and convinced that madame would for a while yield no farther, left us, and went back to the

world. Then news came of great events that could not fail to move us. The King of France and the King of Navarre had met in Tours, and embracing in sight of an immense multitude, had repulsed the League with slaughter in the suburb of St. Symphorien. Fast on this followed the tidings of their march northwards with an overwhelming army of fifty thousand men of both religions, bent, rumour had it, on the signal punishment of Paris.

I grew—shame that I should say it—to think more and more of these things; until Mademoiselle, reading the signs, told me one day that we must go. “Though never again,” she added with a sigh, “shall we be so happy.”

“Then why go?” I asked foolishly.

“Because you are a man,” she answered, with a wise smile, “as I would have you to be, and you need something besides love. To-morrow we will go.”

“Whither?” I said in amazement.

“To the camp before Paris,” she answered. “We will go back in the light of day—seeing that we have done nothing of which to be ashamed—and throw ourselves on the justice of the King of Navarre. You shall place me with Madame Catherine, who will not refuse to protect me ; and so, sweet, you will have only yourself to think of. Come, sir,” she continued, laying her little hand in mine, and looking into my eyes, “you are not afraid ?”

“I am more afraid than ever I used to be,” I said trembling.

“So I would have it,” she whispered, hiding her face on my shoulder. “Nevertheless, we will go.”

And go we did. The audacity of such a return in the face of Turenne, who was doubtless in the King of Navarre’s suite, almost took my breath away ; nevertheless, I saw that it possessed one advantage which no other course promised—that, I mean, of setting us right in the eyes of the world, and enabling me to meet in a straightforward manner

such as maligned us. After some consideration I gave my assent, merely conditioning that until we reached the Court we should ride masked, and shun as far as possible encounters by the road.

## CHAPTER XXXII.

## A TAVERN BRAWL.

ON the following day, accordingly, we started. But the news of the two kings' successes, and particularly the certainty which these had bred in many minds that nothing short of a miracle could save Paris, had moved so many gentlemen to take the road that we found the inns crowded beyond example, and were frequently forced into meetings which made the task of concealing our identity more difficult and hazardous than I had expected. Sometimes shelter was not to be obtained on any terms, and then we had to lie in the fields or in any convenient shed. Moreover, the passage of the army had swept the country so bare both of food and forage, that these commanded astonishing prices; and a long day's ride more than once brought us to our destination with-

out securing for us the ample meal we had earned, and required.

Under these circumstances, it was with joy little short of transport that I recognised the marvellous change which had come over my mistress. Bearing all without a murmur, or a frown, or so much as one complaining word, she acted on numberless occasions so as to convince me that she spoke truly—albeit I scarcely dared to believe it—when she said she had but one trouble in the world, and that was the prospect of our coming separation.

For my part, and despite some gloomy moments, when fear of the future overcame me, I rode in Paradise riding by my mistress. It was her presence which glorified alike the first freshness of the morning, when we started with all the day before us, and the coolness of the late evening, when we rode hand-in-hand. Nor could I believe without an effort that I was the same Gaston de Marsac whom she had once spurned and disdained. God knows I was thankful for her love. A thou-

sand times, thinking of my grey hairs, I asked her if she did not repent; and a thousand times she answered No, with so much happiness in her eyes that I was fain to thank God again and believe her.

Notwithstanding the inconvenience of the practice, we made it a rule to wear our masks whenever we appeared in public; and this rule we kept more strictly as we approached Paris. It exposed us to some comment and more curiosity, but led to no serious trouble until we reached Etampes, twelve leagues from the capital; where we found the principal inn so noisy and crowded, and so much disturbed by the constant coming and going of couriers, that it required no experience to predicate the neighbourhood of the army. The great courtyard seemed to be choked with a confused mass of men and horses, through which we made our way with difficulty. The windows of the house were all open, and offered us a view of tables surrounded by men eating and drinking hastily, as the manner of travellers

is. The gateway and the steps of the house were lined with troopers and servants and sturdy rogues ; who scanned all who passed in or out, and not unfrequently followed them with ribald jests and nicknames. Songs and oaths, brawling and laughter, with the neighing of horses and the huzzas of the beggars, who shouted whenever a fresh party arrived, rose above all, and increased the reluctance with which I assisted madame and Mademoiselle to dismount.

Simon was no match for such an occasion as this ; but the stalwart aspect of the three men whom Maignan had left with me commanded respect, and attended by two of these I made a way for the ladies—not without some opposition and a few oaths—to enter the house. The landlord, whom we found crushed into a corner inside, and entirely overborne by the crowd which had invaded his dwelling, assured me that he had not the smallest garret he could place at my disposal ; but I presently succeeded in finding a small



room at the top, which I purchased from the four men who had taken possession of it. As it was impossible to get anything to eat there, I left a man on guard, and myself descended with madame and Mademoiselle to the eating-room, a large chamber set with long boards, and filled with a rough and noisy crew. Under a running fire of observations we entered, and found with difficulty three seats in an inner corner of the room.

I ran my eye over the company, and noticed among them, besides a dozen travelling parties like our own, specimens of all those classes which are to be found in the rear of an army. There were some officers and more horse-dealers; half a dozen forage-agents and a few priests; with a large sprinkling of adventurers, bravos, and led-captains, and here and there two or three whose dress and the deference paid to them by their neighbours seemed to indicate a higher rank. Conspicuous among these last was a party of four who occupied a small table by the door. An attempt had

been made to secure some degree of privacy for them by interposing a settle between them and the room; and their attendants, who seemed to be numerous, did what they could to add to this by filling the gap with their persons. One of the four, a man of handsome dress and bearing, who sat in the place of honour, was masked, as we were. The gentleman at his right hand I could not see. The others, whom I could see, were strangers to me.

Some time elapsed before our people succeeded in procuring us any food, and during the interval we were exposed to an amount of comment on the part of those round us which I found very little to my liking. There were not half-a-dozen women present, and this and our masks rendered my companions unpleasantly conspicuous. Aware, however, of the importance of avoiding an altercation which might possibly detain us, and would be certain to add to our notoriety, I remained quiet; and presently the entrance of a tall,

dark-complexioned man, who carried himself with a peculiar swagger, and seemed to be famous for something or other, diverted the attention of the company from us.

The new-comer was somewhat of Maignan's figure. He wore a back and breast over a green doublet, and had an orange feather in his cap and an orange-lined cloak on his shoulder. On entering he stood a moment in the doorway, letting his bold black eyes rove round the room, the while he talked in a loud braggart fashion to his companions. There was a lack of breeding in the man's air, and something offensive in his look ; which I noticed produced wherever it rested a momentary silence and constraint. When he moved farther into the room I saw that he wore a very long sword, the point of which trailed a foot behind him.

He chose out for his first attentions the party of four whom I have mentioned ; going up to them and accosting them with a ruffling air, directed especially to the gentleman in

the mask. The latter lifted his head haughtily on finding himself addressed by a stranger, but did not offer to answer. Someone else did, however, for a sudden bellow like that of an enraged bull proceeded from behind the settle. The words were lost in noise, the unseen speaker's anger seeming so overpowering that he could not articulate; but the tone and voice, which were in some way familiar to me, proved enough for the bully, who, covering his retreat with a profound bow, backed out rapidly, muttering what was doubtless an apology. Cocking his hat more fiercely to make up for this repulse, he next proceeded to patrol the room, scowling from side to side as he went, with the evident intention of picking a quarrel with someone less formidable.

By ill-chance his eye lit, as he turned, on our masks. He said something to his companions; and encouraged, no doubt, by the position of our seats at the board, which led him to think us people of small consequence, he came to a stop opposite us.

“What! more dukes here?” he cried scoffingly. “Hallo, you sir!” he continued to me, “will you not unmask and drink a glass with me?”

I thanked him civilly, but declined.

His insolent eyes were busy, while I spoke, with madame’s fair hair and handsome figure, which her mask failed to hide. “Perhaps the ladies will have better taste, sir,” he said rudely. “Will they not honour us with a sight of their pretty faces?”

Knowing the importance of keeping my temper I put constraint on myself, and answered, still with civility, that they were greatly fatigued and were about to retire.

“Zounds!” he cried, “that is not to be borne. If we are to lose them so soon, the more reason we should enjoy their *beaux yeux* while we can. A short life and a merry one, sir. This is not a nunnery, nor, I dare swear, are your fair friends nuns.”

Though I longed to chastise him for this insult, I feigned deafness, and went on with

my meal as if I had not heard him; and the table being between us prevented him going beyond words. After he had uttered one or two coarse jests of a similar character, which cost us less as we were masked, and our emotions could only be guessed, the crowd about us, seeing I took the thing quietly, began to applaud him; but more as it seemed to me out of fear than love. In this opinion I was presently confirmed on hearing from Simon—who whispered the information in my ear as he handed a dish—that the fellow was an Italian captain in the king's pay, famous for his skill with the sword and the many duels in which he had displayed it.

Mademoiselle, though she did not know this, bore with his insolence with a patience which astonished me; while madame appeared unconscious of it. Nevertheless, I was glad when he retired and left us in peace. I seized the moment of his absence to escort the ladies through the room and upstairs to their apartment, the door of which I saw locked and

secured. That done I breathed more freely ; and feeling thankful that I had been able to keep my temper, took the episode to be at an end.

But in this I was mistaken, as I found when I returned to the room in which we had supped, my intention being to go through it to the stables. I had not taken two paces across the floor before I found my road blocked by the Italian, and read alike in his eyes and in the faces of the company—of whom many hastened to climb the tables to see what passed—that the meeting was premeditated. The man's face was flushed with wine ; proud of his many victories, he eyed me with a boastful contempt my patience had perhaps given him the right to feel.

“Ha ! well met, sir,” he said, sweeping the floor with his cap in an exaggeration of respect, now, perhaps your high-mightiness will condescend to unmask ? The table is no longer between us, nor are your fair friends here to protect their *cher ami* !”

“ If I still refuse, sir,” I said civilly, wavering between anger and prudence, and hoping still to avoid a quarrel which might endanger us all, “ be good enough to attribute it to private motives, and to no desire to disoblige you.”

“ No, I do not think you wish to disoblige me,” he answered, laughing scornfully—and a dozen voices echoed the gibe. “ But for your private motives, the devil take them ! Is that plain enough, sir ?”

“ It is plain enough to show me that you are an ill-bred man !” I answered, choler getting the better of me. “ Let me pass, sir.”

“ Unmask !” he retorted, moving so as still to detain me, “ or shall I call in the grooms to perform the office for you ?”

Seeing at last that all my attempts to evade the man only fed his vanity, and encouraged him to further excesses, and that the motley crowd, who filled the room, and already formed a circle round us, had made up their minds to see sport, I would no longer balk them ; I could no longer do it, indeed, with honour. I



looked round, therefore, for some one whom I might enlist as my second, but I saw no one with whom I had the least acquaintance. The room was lined from table to ceiling with mocking faces and scornful eyes, all turned to me.

My opponent saw the look, and misread it; being much accustomed, I imagine, to a one-sided battle. He laughed contemptuously. "No, my friend, there is no way out of it," he said. "Let me see your pretty face, or fight."

"So be it," I said quietly. "If I have no other choice, I will fight."

"In your mask?" he cried incredulously.

"Yes," I said sternly, feeling every nerve tingle with long-suppressed rage. "I will fight as I am. Off with your back and breast, if you are a man. And I will so deal with you that if you see to-morrow's sun you shall need a mask for the rest of your days!"

"Ho! ho!" he answered, scowling at me in surprise, "you sing in a different key now! But I will put a term to it. There is space

enough between these tables, if you can use your weapon ; and much more than you will need to-morrow."

"To-morrow will show," I retorted.

Without more ado he unfastened the buckles of his breastpiece, and relieving himself of it stepped back a pace. Those of the bystanders who occupied the part of the room he indicated—a space bounded by four tables, and not unfit for the purpose, though somewhat confined—hastened to get out of it, and seize instead upon neighbouring posts of vantage. The man's reputation was such, and his fame so great, that on all sides I heard naught but wagers offered against me at odds ; but this circumstance, which might have flurried a younger man and numbed his arm, served only to set me on making the most of such openings as the fellow's presumption and certainty of success would be sure to afford.

The news of the challenge running through the house had brought together by this time so many people as to fill the room from end

to end, and even to obscure the light, which was beginning to wane. At the last moment, when we were on the point of engaging, a slight commotion marked the admission to the front of three or four persons, whose consequence or attendants gained them this advantage. I believed them to be the party of four I have mentioned, but at the time I could not be certain.

In the few seconds of waiting while this went forward I examined our relative positions with the fullest intention of killing the man—whose glittering eyes and fierce smile filled me with a loathing that was very nearly hatred—if I could. The line of windows lay to my right and his left. The evening light fell across us, whitening the row of faces on my left, but leaving those on my right in shadow. It occurred to me on the instant that my mask was actually an advantage, seeing that it protected my sight from the side-light, and enabled me to watch his eyes and point with more concentration.

“You will be the twenty-third man I have killed!” he said boastfully, as we crossed swords and stood an instant on guard.

“Take care!” I answered. “You have twenty-three against you!”

A swift lunge was his only answer. I parried it, and thrust, and we fell to work. We had not exchanged half-a-dozen blows, however, before I saw that I should need all the advantage which my mask and greater caution gave me. I had met my match, and it might be something more; but that for a time it was impossible to tell. He had the longer weapon, and I the longer reach. He preferred the point, after the new Italian fashion, and I the blade. He was somewhat flushed with wine, while my arm had scarcely recovered the strength of which illness had deprived me. On the other hand, excited at the first by the cries of his backers, he played rather wildly; while I held myself prepared, and keeping up a strong guard, waited cautiously for any opening or mistake on his part.

The crowd round us, which had hailed our first passes with noisy cries of derision and triumph, fell silent after a while, surprised and taken aback by their champion's failure to spit me at the first onslaught. My reluctance to engage had led them to predict a short fight and an easy victory. Convinced to the contrary, they began to watch each stroke with bated breath ; or now and again, muttering the name of Jarnac, broke into brief exclamations as a blow more savage than usual drew sparks from our blades, and made the rafters ring with the harsh grinding of steel on steel.

The surprise of the crowd, however, was a small thing compared with that of my adversary. Impatience, disgust, rage, and doubt chased one another in turn across his flushed features. Apprised that he had to do with a swordsman, he put forth all his power. With spite in his eyes he laboured blow on blow, he tried one form of attack after another, he found me equal, if barely equal, to all. And then at last there came a change. The per-

spiration gathered on his brow, the silence disconcerted him; he felt his strength failing under the strain, and suddenly, I think the possibility of defeat and death, unthought of before, burst upon him. I heard him groan, and for a moment he fenced wildly. Then he again recovered himself. But now I read terror in his eyes, and knew that the moment of retribution was at hand. With his back to the table, and my point threatening his breast, he knew at last what those others had felt!

He would fain have stopped to breathe, but I would not let him, though my blows also were growing feeble, and my guard weaker; for I knew that if I gave him time to recover himself he would have recourse to other tricks, and might out-manceuvre me in the end. As it was, my black unchanging mask, which always confronted him, which hid all emotions, and veiled even fatigue, had grown to be full of terror to him—full of blank passionless menace. He could not tell how I fared, or what I thought, or how my strength stood.

A superstitious dread was on him, and threatened to overpower him. Ignorant who I was or whence I came, he feared and doubted, grappling with monstrous suspicions, which the fading light encouraged. His face broke out in blotches, his breath came and went in gasps, his eyes began to protrude. Once or twice they quitted mine for a part of a second, to steal a despairing glance at the rows of on-lookers that ran to right and left of us. But he read no pity there.

At last the end came, more suddenly than I had looked for it, but I think he was unnerved. His hand lost its grip of the hilt, and a parry which I dealt a little more briskly than usual sent the weapon flying among the crowd, as much to my astonishment as to that of the spectators. A volley of oaths and exclamations hailed the event; and for a moment I stood at gaze, eyeing him watchfully. He shrank back; then he made for a moment as if he would fling himself upon me dagger in hand. But seeing my point steady, he recoiled

a second time, his face distorted with rage and fear."

"Go!" I said sternly. "Begone! Follow your sword! But spare the next man you conquer."

He stared at me, fingering his dagger as if he did not understand, or as if in the bitterness of his shame at being so defeated even life were unwelcome. I was about to repeat my words when a heavy hand fell on my shoulder.

"Fool!" a harsh growling voice muttered in my ear. "Do you want him to serve you as Achon served Matas? This is the way to deal with him."

And before I knew who spoke or what to expect a man vaulted over the table beside me. Seizing the Italian by the neck and waist, he flung him bodily, without paying the least regard to his dagger, into the crowd. "There!" the new-comer cried, stretching his arms as if the effort had relieved him, "so much for him! And do you breathe yourself. Breathe yourself, my friend," he continued,



with a vain-glorious air of generosity. "When you are rested and ready, you and I will have a bout. Mon Dieu! what a thing it is to see a man! And by my faith you are a man!"

"But, sir," I said, staring at him in the utmost bewilderment, "we have no quarrel."

"Quarrel?" he cried, in his loud, ringing voice. "Heaven forbid! Why should we? I love a man, however, and when I see one I say to him, 'I am Crillon! Fight me!' But I see you are not yet rested. Patience! There is no hurry. Berthou de Crillon is proud to wait your convenience. In the meantime, gentlemen," he continued, turning with a grand air to the spectators, who viewed this sudden *bouleversement* with unbounded surprise, "let us do what we can. Take the word from me, and cry all, '*Vive le Roi, et vive l'Inconnu!*'"

Like people awaking from a dream, so great was their astonishment the company complied, and with the utmost heartiness. When the shout died away, someone cried in turn, "*Vive*

*Crillon!*” and this was honoured with a fervour which brought the tears to the eyes of that remarkable man, in whom bombast was so strangely combined with the firmest and most reckless courage. He bowed again and again, turning himself about in the small space between the tables, while his face shone with pleasure and enthusiasm. Meanwhile I viewed him with perplexity. I comprehended that it was his voice I had heard from behind the settle; but I had neither the desire to fight him nor so great a reserve of strength after my illness as to be able to enter on a fresh contest with equanimity. When he turned to me, therefore, and again asked, “Well, sir, are you ready?” I could think of no better answer than that I had already made to him: “But, sir, I have no quarrel with you.”

“Tut, tut!” he answered querulously, “if that is all, let us engage.”

“That is not all, however,” I said, resolutely putting up my sword. “I have not only no quarrel with M. de Crillon, but I received at

his hands when I last saw him a considerable service."

"Then now is the time to return it," he answered briskly, and as if that settled the matter.

I could not refrain from laughing. "Nay, but I have still an excuse," I said. "I am barely recovered from an illness, and am weak. Even so, I should be loth to decline a combat with some; but a better man than I may give the wall to M. de Crillon and suffer no disgrace."

"Oh, if you put it that way, enough said," he answered in a tone of disappointment. "And, to be sure, the light is almost gone. That is a comfort. But you will not refuse to drink a cup of wine with me? Your voice I remember, though I cannot say who you are, or what service I did you. For the future, however, count on me. I love a man who is brave as well as modest, and know no better friend than a stout swordsman."

I was answering him in fitting terms—while

the fickle crowd, which a few minutes earlier had been ready to tear me, viewed us from a distance with respectful homage—when the masked gentleman who had before been in his company drew near and saluted me with much stateliness.

“I congratulate you, sir,” he said, in the easy tone of a great man condescending. “You use the sword as few use it, and fight with your head as well as your hands. Should you need a friend or employment, you will honour me by remembering that you are known to the Vicomte de Turenne.”

I bowed low to hide the start which the mention of his name caused me. For had I tried, aye, and possessed to aid me all the wit of M. de Brantome, I could have imagined nothing more fantastic than this meeting; or more entertaining than that I, masked, should talk with the Vicomte de Turenne masked, and hear in place of reproaches and threats of vengeance a civil offer of protection. Scarcely knowing whether I should laugh or tremble,

or which should occupy me more, the diverting thing that had happened or the peril we had barely escaped, I made shift to answer him, craving his indulgence if I still preserved my incognito. Even while I spoke a fresh fear assailed me : lest M. de Crillon, recognising my voice or figure, should cry my name on the spot, and explode in a moment the mine on which we stood.

This rendered me extremely impatient to be gone. But M. le Vicomte had still something to say, and I could not withdraw myself without rudeness.

“You are travelling north, like everyone else ?” he said, gazing at me curiously. “May I ask whether you are for Meudon, where the King of Navarre lies, or for the Court at St. Cloud ?”

I muttered, moving restlessly under his keen eyes, that I was for Meudon.

“Then, if you care to travel with a larger company,” he rejoined, bowing with negligent courtesy, “pray command me. I am for

Meudon also, and shall leave here three hours before noon."

Fortunately he took my assent to his gracious invitation for granted, and turned away before I had well begun to thank him. From Crillon I found it more difficult to escape. He appeared to have conceived a great fancy for me, and felt also, I imagine, some curiosity as to my identity. But I did even this at last, and, evading the obsequious offers which were made me on all sides, escaped to the stables, where I sought out the Cid's stall, and lying down in the straw beside him, began to review the past, and plan the future. Under cover of the darkness sleep soon came to me; my last waking thoughts being divided between thankfulness for my escape and a steady purpose to reach Meudon before the vicomte, so that I might make good my tale in his absence. For that seemed to be my only chance of evading the dangers I had chosen to encounter.

## CHAPTER XXXIII.

## AT MEUDON.

MAKING so early a start from Etampes that the inn, which had continued in an uproar till long after midnight, lay sunk in sleep when we rode out of the yard, we reached Meudon about noon next day. I should be tedious were I to detail what thoughts my mistress and I had during that day's journey—the last, it might be, which we should take together; or what assurances we gave one another, or how often we repented the impatience which had impelled us to put all to the touch. Madame, with kindly forethought, detached herself from us, and rode the greater part of the distance with Fanchette; but the opportunities she gave us went for little; for, to be plain, the separation we dreaded seemed to overshadow us already. We uttered few words,

though those few were to the purpose, but riding hand-in-hand, with full hearts, and eyes which seldom quitted one another, looked forward to Meudon and its perils with such gloomy forebodings as our love and my precarious position suggested.

Long before we reached the town, or could see more of it than the château, over which the lilies of France and the broad white banner of the Bourbons floated in company, we found ourselves swept into the whirlpool which surrounds an army. Crowds stood at all the cross-roads, waggons and sumpter-mules encumbered the bridges; each moment a horseman passed us at a gallop, or a troop of disorderly rogues, soldiers only in name, reeled, shouting and singing, along the road. Here and there, for a warning to the latter sort, a man dangled on a rude gallows; under which sportsmen returning from the chase and ladies who had been for an airing rode laughing on their way.

Amid the multitude entering the town we



passed unnoticed. A little way within the walls we halted to inquire where the Princess of Navarre had her lodging. Hearing that she occupied a house in the town, while her brother had his quarters in the Château, and the King of France at St. Cloud, I stayed my party in a by-road, a hundred paces farther on, and, springing from the Cid, went to my mistress's knee.

“Mademoiselle,” I said formally, and so loudly that all my men might hear, “the time is come. I dare not go farther with you. I beg you, therefore, to bear me witness that as I took you so I have brought you back, and both with your good-will. I beg that you will give me this quittance, for it may serve me.”

She bowed her head and laid her ungloved hand on mine, which I had placed on the pommel of her saddle. “Sir,” she answered in a broken voice, “I will not give you this quittance, nor any quittance from me while I live.” With that she took off her mask before

them all, and I saw the tears running down her white face. "May God protect you, M. de Marsac," she continued, stooping until her face almost touched mine, "and bring you to the thing you desire. If not, sir, and you pay too dearly for what you have done for me, I will live a maiden all my days. And, if I do not, these men may shame me!"

My heart was too full for words, but I took the glove she held out to me, and kissed her hand with my knee bent. Then I waved—for I could not speak—to madame to proceed; and with Simon Fleix and Maignan's men to guard them they went on their way. Mademoiselle's white face looked back to me until a bend in the road hid them, and I saw them no more.

I turned when all were gone, and going heavily to where my sard stood with his head drooping, I climbed to the saddle, and rode at a foot-pace towards the Château. The way was short and easy, for the next turning showed me the open gateway and a crowd

about it. A vast number of people were entering and leaving, while others rested in the shade of the wall, and a dozen grooms led horses up and down. The sunshine fell hotly on the road and the courtyard, and, flashed back by the cuirasses of the men on guard, seized the eye and dazzled it with gleams of infinite brightness. I was advancing alone, gazing at all this with a species of dull indifference which masked for the moment the suspense I felt at heart, when a man, coming on foot along the street, crossed quickly to me and looked me in the face.

I returned his look, and seeing he was a stranger to me, was for passing on without pausing. But he wheeled beside me and uttered my name in a low voice.

I checked the Cid and looked down at him. "Yes," I said mechanically, "I am M. de Marsac. But I do not know you."

"Nevertheless, I have been watching for you for three days," he replied. "M. de Rosny received your message. This is for you."

He handed me a scrap of paper. "From whom?" I asked.

"Maignan," he answered briefly. And with that, and a stealthy look round, he left me, and went the way he had been going before.

I tore open the note, and knowing that Maignan could not write, was not surprised to find that it lacked any signature. The brevity of its contents vied with the curtness of its bearer. "In Heaven's name go back and wait," it ran. "Your enemy is here, and those who wish you well are powerless."

A warning so explicit, and delivered under such circumstances, might have been expected to make me pause even then. But I read the message with the same dull indifference, the same dogged resolve, with which the sight of the crowded gaiety before me had inspired me. I had not come so far and baffled Turenne by an hour to fail in my purpose at the last; nor given such pledges to another to prove false to myself. Moreover, the distant rattle of

musketry, which went to show that a skirmish was taking place on the farther side of the Castle, seemed an invitation to me to proceed; for now, if ever, my sword might earn protection and a pardon. Only in regard to M. de Rosny, from whom I had no doubt that the message came, I resolved to act with prudence; neither making any appeal to him in public nor mentioning his name to others in private.

The Cid had borne me by this time into the middle of the throng about the gateway, who, wondering to see a stranger of my appearance arrive without attendance, eyed me with a mixture of civility and forwardness. I recognised more than one man whom I had seen about the Court at St. Jean d'Angely six months before; but so great is the disguising power of handsome clothes and equipments that none of these knew me. I beckoned to the nearest, and asked him if the King of Navarre was in the Château.

“He has gone to see the King of France at

St. Cloud," the man answered, with something of wonder that anyone should be ignorant of so important a fact. "He is expected here in an hour."

I thanked him, and calculating that I should still have time and to spare before the arrival of M. de Turenne, I dismounted, and taking the rein over my arm, began to walk up and down in the shade of the wall. Meanwhile the loiterers increased in numbers as the minutes passed. Men of better standing rode up, and leaving their horses in charge of their lackeys, went into the Château. Officers in shining corslets, or with boots and scabbards dulled with dust, arrived and clattered in through the gates. A messenger galloped up with letters, and was instantly surrounded by a curious throng of questioners; who left him only to gather about the next comers, a knot of townsfolk, whose downcast visages and glances of apprehension seemed to betoken no pleasant or easy mission.

Watching many of these enter and dis-

appear, while only the humbler sort remained to swell the crowd at the gate, I began to experience the discomfort and impatience which are the lot of the man who finds himself placed in a false position. I foresaw with clearness the injury I was about to do my cause by presenting myself to the king among the common herd; and yet I had no choice save to do this; for I dared not run the risk of entering, lest I should be required to give my name, and fail to see the King of Navarre at all.

As it was I came very near to being foiled in this way; for I presently recognised, and was recognised in turn, by a gentleman who rode up to the gates, and, throwing his reins to a groom, dismounted with an air of immense gravity. This was M. Forget, the king's secretary, and the person to whom I had on a former occasion presented a petition. He looked at me with eyes of profound astonishment, and saluting me stiffly from a distance, seemed in two minds whether he

should pass in or speak to me. On second thoughts, however, he came towards me, and again saluted me with a peculiarly dry and austere aspect.

“I believe, sir, I am speaking to M. de Marsac?” he said, in a low voice, but not impolitely.

I replied in the affirmative.

“And that, I conclude, is your horse?” he continued, raising his cane, and pointing to the Cid, which I had fastened to a hook in the wall.

I replied again in the affirmative.

“Then take a word of advice,” he answered, screwing up his features, and speaking in a dry sort of way. “Get upon its back without an instant’s delay, and put as many leagues between yourself and Meudon as horse and man may.”

“I am obliged to you,” I said, though I was greatly startled by his words. “And what if I do not take your advice?”

He shrugged his shoulders. “In that case



look to yourself!" he retorted. "But you will look in vain!"

He turned on his heel as he spoke, and in a moment was gone. I watched him enter the Château, and in the uncertainty which possessed me whether he was not gone—after salving his conscience by giving me warning—to order my instant arrest, I felt, and I doubt not I looked, as ill at ease for the time being as the group of trembling townsfolk who stood near me. Reflecting that he should know his master's mind, I recalled with depressing clearness the repeated warnings the King of Navarre had given me that I must not look to him for reward or protection. I bethought me that I was here against his express orders: presuming on those very services which he had given me notice he should repudiate. I remembered that Rosny had always been in the same tale. And in fine I began to see that Mademoiselle and I had together decided on a step which I should never have presumed to take on my own motion.

I had barely arrived at this conclusion when the trampling of hoofs and a sudden closing in of the crowd round the gate announced the King of Navarre's approach. With a sick heart I drew nearer, feeling that the crisis was at hand; and in a moment he came in sight, riding beside an elderly man, plainly dressed and mounted, with whom he was carrying on an earnest conversation. A train of nobles and gentlemen, whose martial air and equipments made up for the absence of the gewgaws and glitter to which my eyes had become accustomed at Blois, followed close on his heels. Henry himself wore a suit of white velvet, frayed in places and soiled by his armour; but his quick eye and eager, almost fierce, countenance could not fail to win and keep the attention of the least observant. He kept glancing from side to side as he came on; and that with so cheerful an air and a carriage so full at once of dignity and good-humour that no one could look on him and fail to see that here was a leader and

a prince of men, temperate in victory and unsurpassed in defeat.

The crowd raising a cry of "*Vive Navarre!*" as he drew near, he bowed, with a sparkle in his eye. But when a few by the gate cried "*Vivent les Rois!*" he held up his hand for silence, and said in a loud, clear voice, "Not that, my friends.— There is but one king in France. Let us say instead, '*Vive le Roi!*' "

The spokesman of the little group of town-folk, who, I learned, were from Arcueil, and had come to complain of the excessive number of troops quartered upon them, took advantage of the pause to approach him. Henry received the old man with a kindly look, and bent from his saddle to hear what he had to say. While they were talking I pressed forward, the emotion I felt on my own account heightened by my recognition of the man who rode by the King of Navarre—who was no other than M. de la Noüe. No Huguenot worthy of the name could look

on the veteran who had done and suffered more for the cause than any living man without catching some of his stern enthusiasm; and the sight, while it shamed me, who a moment before had been inclined to prefer my safety to the assistance I owed my country, gave me courage to step to the king's rein, so that I heard his last words to the men of Arcueil.

“Patience, my friends,” he said kindly. “The burden is heavy, but the journey is a short one. The Seine is ours; the circle is complete. In a week Paris must surrender. The king, my cousin, will enter, and you will be rid of us. For France's sake one week, my friends.”

The men fell back with low obeisances, charmed by his good-nature; and Henry, looking up, saw me before him. On the instant his jaw fell. His brow, suddenly contracting above his eyes, which flashed with surprise and displeasure, altered in a moment the whole aspect of his face, which grew dark and stern

as night. His first impulse was to pass by me; but seeing that I held my ground, he hesitated, so completely chagrined by my appearance that he did not know how to act, or in what way to deal with me. I seized the occasion, and bending my knee with as much respect as I had ever used to the King of France, begged to bring myself to his notice, and to crave his protection and favour.

“This is no time to trouble me, sir,” he retorted, eyeing me with an angry side-glance. “I do not know you. You are unknown to me, sir. You must go to M. de Rosny.”

“It would be useless, sire,” I answered, in desperate persistence.

“Then I can do nothing for you,” he rejoined peevishly. “Stand on one side, sir.”

But I was desperate. I knew that I had risked all on the event, and must establish my footing before M. de Turenne’s return, or run the risk of certain recognition and vengeance. I cried out, caring nothing who heard, that I was M. de Marsac, that I had come back to

meet whatever my enemies could allege against me.

“*Ventre Saint Gris!*” Henry exclaimed, starting in his saddle with well-feigned surprise. “Are you that man?”

“I am, sire,” I answered.

“Then you must be mad!” he retorted, appealing to those behind him. “Stark, staring mad to show your face here! *Ventre Saint Gris!* Are we to have all the ravishers and plunderers in the country come to us?”

“I am neither the one nor the other!” I answered, looking with indignation from him to the gaping train behind him.

“That you will have to settle with M. de Turenne!” he retorted, frowning down at me, with his whole face turned gloomy and fierce. “I know you well, sir, now. Complaint has been made that you abducted a lady from his Castle of Chizé some time back.”

“The lady, sire, is now in charge of the Princess of Navarre.”

“She is?” he exclaimed, quite taken aback.

“And if she has aught of complaint against me,” I continued with pride, “I will submit to whatever punishment you order or M. de Turenne demands. But if she has no complaint to make, and avows that she accompanied me of her own free-will and accord, and has suffered neither wrong nor displeasure at my hands, then, sire, I claim that this is a private matter between myself and M. de Turenne.”

“Even so I think you will have your hands full,” he answered grimly. At the same time he stopped by a gesture those who would have cried out upon me, and looked at me himself with an altered countenance. “Do I understand that you assert that the lady went of her own accord?” he asked.

“She went and has returned, sire,” I answered.

“Strange!” he ejaculated. “Have you married her?”

“No, sire,” I answered. “I desire leave to do so.”

“Mon Dieu! she is M. de Turenne’s ward,” he rejoined, seeming dumbfounded by my audacity.

“I do not despair of obtaining his assent, sire,” I said patiently.

“*Saint Gris!* The man is mad!” Henry cried, wheeling his horse and facing his train, with a gesture of the utmost wonder. “It is the strangest story I ever heard.”

“But somewhat more to the gentleman’s credit than the lady’s!” one said with a smirk and a smile.

“A lie!” I cried, springing forward on the instant with a boldness which astonished myself. “She is as pure as your Highness’s sister! I swear it. That man lies in his teeth, and I will maintain it.”

“Sir!” the King of Navarre cried, turning on me with the utmost sternness, “you forget yourself in my presence. Silence, and beware another time how you let your tongue run on those above you. You have enough trouble, let me tell you, on your hands already.”



“Yet the man lies!” I answered doggedly, remembering Crillon and his ways. “And if he will do me the honour of stepping aside with me, I will convince him of it!”

“*Ventre Saint Gris!*” Henry replied, frowning, and dwelling on each syllable of his favourite oath. “Will you be silent, sir, and let me think? Or must I order your instant arrest?”

“Surely that at least, sire,” a suave voice interjected. And with that a gentleman pressed forward from the rest, and gaining a place of vantage by the king’s side, shot at me a look of extreme malevolence. “My lord of Turenne will expect no less at your Highness’s hands,” he continued warmly. “I beg you will give the order on the spot, and hold this person to answer for his misdeeds. M. de Turenne returns to-day. He should be here now. I say again, sire, he will expect no less than this.”

The king, gazing at me with gloomy eyes, tugged at his moustaches. Someone had

motioned the common herd to stand back out of hearing; at the same time the suite had moved up out of curiosity and formed a half-circle; in the midst of which I stood fronting the king, who had La Noüe and the last speaker on either hand. Perplexity and annoyance struggled for the mastery in his face as he looked darkly down at me, his teeth showing through his beard. Profoundly angered by my appearance, which he had taken at first to be the prelude to disclosures which must detach Turenne at a time when union was all important, he had now ceased to fear for himself; and perhaps saw something in the attitude I adopted which appealed to his nature and sympathies.

“If the girl is really back,” he said at last, “M. d’Aremburg, I do not see any reason why I should interfere—at present, at any rate.”

“I think, sire, M. de Turenne will see reason,” the gentleman answered drily.

The king coloured. “M. de Turenne,” he began—

“Has made many sacrifices at your request, sire,” the other said with meaning. “And buried some wrongs, or fancied wrongs, in connection with this very matter. This person has outraged him in the grossest manner, and in M. le Vicomte’s name I ask, nay I press upon you, that he be instantly arrested, and held to answer for it.”

“I am ready to answer for it now!” I retorted, looking from face to face for sympathy, and finding none save in M. de la Noüe’s, who appeared to regard me with grave approbation. “To the Vicomte de Turenne, or the person he may appoint to represent him.”

“Enough!” Henry said, raising his hand, and speaking in the tone of authority he knew so well how to adopt. “For you, M. d’Aremburg, I thank you. Turenne is happy in his friend. But this gentleman came to me of his own free will, and I do not think it consistent with my honour to detain him without warning given. I grant him an hour to remove himself from my neighbourhood. If he be

found after that time has elapsed," he continued solemnly, "his fate be on his own head. Gentlemen, we are late already. Let us on."

I looked at him as he pronounced this sentence, and strove to find words in which to make a final appeal to him. But no words came; and when he bade me stand aside, I did so mechanically, remaining with my head bared to the sunshine while the troop rode by. Some looked back at me with curiosity, as at a man of whom they had heard a tale, and some with a jeer on their lips; a few with dark looks of menace. When they were all gone, and the servants who followed them had disappeared also, and I was left to the inquisitive glances of the rabble, who stood gaping after the sight, I turned and went to the Cid, and loosed the horse.

With a feeling of bitter disappointment, the plan which Mademoiselle had proposed and I had adopted in the forest by St. Gaultier—when it seemed to us that our long absence

and the great events of which we heard must have changed the world and opened a path for our return—had failed utterly. Things were as they had been; the strong was still strong, and friendship under bond to fear. Plainly we should have shown ourselves wiser had we taken the lowlier course, and, obeying the warnings given us, waited the King of Navarre's pleasure or the tardy recollection of Rosny. I had not then stood, as I now stood, in instant jeopardy, nor felt the keen pangs of a separation which bade fair to be lasting. She was safe, and that was much; but I, after long service and brief happiness, must go out again alone, with only memories to comfort me.

It was Simon Fleix's voice which awakened me from this unworthy lethargy—as selfish as it was useless—and, recalling me to myself, reminded me that precious time was passing while I stood inactive. To get at me he had forced his way through the curious crowd, and his face was flushed. He plucked me

by the sleeve, regarding the varlets round him with a mixture of anger and fear.

“*Nom de Dieu!* do they take you for a rope-dancer?” he muttered in my ear. “Mount, sir, and come. There is not a moment to be lost.”

“You left her at Madame Catherine’s?” I said.

“To be sure,” he answered impatiently. “Trouble not about her. Save yourself, M. de Marsac. That is the thing to be done now.”

I mounted mechanically, and felt my courage return as the horse moved under me. I trotted through the crowd, and without thought took the road by which we had come. When we had ridden a hundred yards, however, I pulled up. “An hour is a short start,” I said sullenly. “Whither?”

“To St. Cloud,” he answered promptly. “The protection of the King of France may avail for a day or two. After that, there will still be the League, if Paris have not fallen.”

I saw there was nothing else for it, and assented, and we set off. The distance which separates Meudon from St. Cloud we might have ridden under the hour, but the direct road runs across the Scholars' Meadow, a wide plain north of Meudon. This lay exposed to the enemy's fire, and was, besides, the scene of hourly conflicts between the horse of both parties, so that to cross it without an adequate force was impossible. Driven to make a circuit, we took longer to reach our destination, yet did so without mishap; finding the little town, when we came in sight of it, given up to all the bustle and commotion which properly belong to the Court and camp.

It was, indeed, as full as it could be, for the surrender of Paris being momentarily expected, St. Cloud had become the rendezvous as well of the few who had long followed a principle as of the many who wait upon success. The streets, crowded in every part, shone with glancing colours, with steel and

velvet, the garb of fashion and the plumes of war. Long lines of flags obscured the eaves and broke the sunshine, while, above all, the bells of half-a-dozen churches rang merry answer to the distant crash of guns. Everywhere on flag and arch and streamer I read the motto, "*Vive le Roi!*"—words written, God knew then, and we know now, in what a mockery of doom!



## CHAPTER XXXIV.

"TIS AN ILL WIND."

WE had made our way slowly and with much jostling as far as the principal street, finding the press increase as we advanced, when I heard, as I turned a corner, my name called, and, looking up, saw at a window the face of which I was in search. After that half a minute sufficed to bring M. d'Agen flying to my side, when nothing, as I had expected, would do but I must dismount where I was and share his lodging. He made no secret of his joy and surprise at sight of me, but pausing only to tell Simon where the stable was, haled me through the crowd and up his stairs with a fervour and heartiness which brought the tears to my eyes, and served to impress the company whom I found above with a more than sufficient sense of my importance.

Seeing him again in the highest feather and in the full employment of all those little arts and graces which served as a foil to his real worth, I took it as a great honour that he laid them aside for the nonce ; and introduced me to the seat of honour and made me known to his companions with a boyish directness and a simple thought for my comfort which infinitely pleased me. He bade his landlord, without a moment's delay, bring wine and meat and everything which could refresh a traveller, and was himself up and down a hundred times in a minute, calling to his servants for this or that, or railing at them for their failure to bring me a score of things I did not need. I hastened to make my excuses to the company for interrupting them in the midst of their talk ; and these they were kind enough to accept in good part. At the same time, reading clearly in M. d'Agen's excited face and shining eyes that he longed to be alone with me, they took the hint, and presently left us together.

“Well,” he said, coming back from the door,

to which he had conducted them, “what have you to tell me, my friend? She is not with you?”

“She is with Mademoiselle de la Vire at Meudon,” I answered, smiling. “And for the rest, she is well and in better spirits.”

“She sent me some message?” he asked.

I shook my head. “She did not know I should see you,” I answered.

“But she—she has spoken of me lately?” he continued, his face falling.

“I do not think she has named your name for a fortnight,” I answered, laughing. “There’s for you! Why, man,” I continued, adopting a different tone, and laying my hand on his shoulder in a manner which reassured him at least as much as my word, “are you so young a lover as to be ignorant that a woman says least of that of which she thinks most? Pluck up courage! Unless I am mistaken, you have little to be afraid of except the past. Only have patience.”

“You think so?” he said gratefully.

I assured him that I had no doubt of it; and on that he fell into a reverie, and I to watching him. Alas for the littleness of our natures! He had received me with open arms, yet at sight of the happiness which took possession of his handsome face I gave way to the pettiest feeling which can harbour in a man's breast. I looked at him with eyes of envy, bitterly comparing my lot with that which fate had reserved for him. He had fortune, good looks, and success on his side, great relations, and high hopes; I stood in instant jeopardy, my future dark, and every path which presented itself so hazardous that I knew not which to adopt. He was young, and I past my prime; he in favour, and I a fugitive.

To such reflections he put an end in a way which made me blush for my churlishness. For, suddenly awaking out of his pleasant dream, he asked me about myself and my fortunes, inquiring eagerly how I came to be in St. Cloud, and listening to the story of my

adventures with a generous anxiety which endeared him to me more and more. When I had done—and by that time Simon had joined us, and was waiting at the lower end of the room—he pronounced that I must see the king.

“ There is nothing else for it,” he said.

“ I have come to see him,” I answered.

“ Mon Dieu, yes !” he continued, rising from his seat, and looking at me with a face of concern. “ No one else can help you.”

I nodded.

“ Turenne has four thousand men here. You can do nothing against so many.”

“ Nothing,” I said. “ The question is, will the king protect me ?”

“ It is he or no one,” M. d’Agen answered warmly. “ You cannot see him to-night : he has a Council. To-morrow at daybreak you may. You must lie here to-night, and I will set my fellows to watch, and I think you will be safe. I will away now and see if my uncle will help. Can you think of anyone else who would speak for you ?”

I considered, and was about to answer in the negative, when Simon, who had listened with a scared face, suggested M. de Crillon.

“Yes, if he would,” M. d’Agen exclaimed, looking at the lad with approbation. “He has weight with the king.”

“I think he might,” I replied slowly. “I had a curious encounter with him last night.” And with that I told M. d’Agen of the duel I fought at the inn.

“Good!” he said, his eyes sparkling. “I wish I had been there to see. At any rate we will try him. Crillon fears no one, not even the king.”

So it was settled. For that night I was to keep close in my friend’s lodging, showing not even my nose at the window.

When he had gone on his errand, and I found myself alone in the room, I am fain to confess that I fell very low in my spirits. M. d’Agen’s travelling equipment lay about the apartment, but failed to give any but an untidy air to its roomy bareness. The light was

beginning to wane, the sun was gone. Outside, the ringing of bells and the distant muttering of guns, with the tumult of sounds which rose from the crowded street, seemed to tell of joyous life and freedom, and all the hopes and ambitions from which I was cut off.

Having no other employment, I watched the street, and keeping myself well retired from the window, saw knots of gay riders pass this way and that through the crowd, their corslets shining and their voices high. Monks and ladies, a cardinal and an ambassador, passed under my eyes, these and an endless procession of townsmen and beggars, soldiers and courtiers, Gascons, Normans and Picards. Never had I seen such a sight or so many people gathered together. It seemed as if half Paris had come out to make submission, so that while my gorge rose against my own imprisonment, the sight gradually diverted my mind from my private distresses, by bidding me find compensation for them in the speedy and glorious triumph of the cause.

Even when the light failed the pageant did not cease, but, torches and lanterns springing into life, turned night into day. From every side came sounds of revelry or strife. The crowd continued to perambulate the streets until a late hour, with cries of "*Vive le Roi!*" and "*Vive Nararre!*" while now and again the passage of a great noble with his suite called forth a fresh outburst of enthusiasm. Nothing seemed more certain, more inevitable, more clearly predestinated, than that twenty-four hours must see the fall of Paris.

Yet Paris did not fall.

When M. d'Agen returned a little before midnight, he found me still sitting in the dark, looking from the window. I heard him call roughly for lights, and apprised by the sound of his voice that something was wrong, I rose to meet him. He stood silent awhile, twirling his small moustaches, and then broke into a passionate tirade, from which I was not slow to gather that M. de Rambouillet declined to serve me.



“Well,” I said, feeling for the young man’s distress and embarrassment, “perhaps he is right.”

“He says that word respecting you came this evening,” my friend answered, his cheeks red with shame, “and that to countenance you after that would only be to court certain humiliation. I did not let him off too easily, I assure you,” M. d’Agen continued, turning away to evade my gaze; “but I got no satisfaction. He said you had his good-will, and that to help you he would risk something, but that to do so under these circumstances would be only to injure himself.”

“There is still Crillon,” I said, with as much cheerfulness as I could assume. “Pray Heaven he be there early! Did M. de Rambouillet say anything else?”

“That your only chance was to fly as quickly and secretly as possible.”

“He thought my situation desperate, then?”

My friend nodded; and scarcely less depressed on my account than ashamed on his

own, evinced so much feeling that it was all I could do to comfort him ; which I succeeded in doing only when I diverted the conversation to Madame de Bruhl. We passed the short night together, sharing the same room and the same bed, and talking more than we slept—of Madame and Mademoiselle, the castle on the hill, and the camp in the woods, of all old days in fine, but little of the future. Soon after dawn Simon, who lay on a pallet across the threshold, roused me from a fitful sleep into which I had just fallen ; and a few minutes later, I stood up dressed and armed, ready to try the last chance left to me.

M. d'Agen had dressed stage for stage with me, and I had kept silence. But when he took up his cap, and showed clearly that he had it in his mind to go with me, I withstood him. “No,” I said, “you can do me little good, and may do yourself much harm.”

“You shall not go without one friend,” he cried fiercely.

“Tut, tut !” I said. “I shall have Simon.”

But Simon, when I turned to speak to him, was gone. Few men are at their bravest in the early hours of the day, and it did not surprise me that the lad's courage had failed him. The defection only strengthened, however, the resolution I had formed that I would not injure M. d'Agen; though it was some time before I could persuade him that I was in earnest, and would go alone or not at all. In the end he had to content himself with lending me his back and breast piece, which I gladly put on, thinking it likely enough that I might be set upon before I reached the Castle. And then, the time being about seven, I parted from him with many embraces and kindly words, and went into the street with my sword under my cloak.

The town, late in rising after its orgy, lay very still and quiet. The morning was grey and warm, with a cloudy sky. The flags, which had made so gay a show yesterday, hung close to the poles, or flapped idly and fell dead again. I walked slowly along be-

neath them, keeping a sharp look-out on every side ; but there were few persons moving in the streets, and I reached the Castle gates without misadventure. Here was something of life : a bustle of officers and soldiers passing in and out, of courtiers whose office made their presence necessary, of beggars who had flocked hither in the night for company. In the middle of these I recognised on a sudden and with great surprise Simon Fleix walking my horse up and down. On seeing me he handed it to a boy, and came up to speak to me with a red face, muttering that four legs were better than two. I did not say much to him, my heart being full and my thoughts occupied with the presence chamber and what I should say there ; but I nodded kindly to him, and he fell in behind me as the sentries challenged me. I answered them that I sought M. de Crillon, and so getting by, fell into the rear of a party of three who seemed bent on the same errand as myself.

One of these was a Jacobin monk, whose

black and white robes, by reminding me of Father Antoine, sent a chill to my heart. The second, whose eye I avoided, I knew to be M. la Guesle, the king's Solicitor-General. The third was a stranger to me. Enabled by M. la Guesle's presence to pass the main guards without challenge, the party proceeded through a maze of passages and corridors, conversing together in a low tone; while I, keeping in their train with my face cunningly muffled, got as far by this means as the ante-chamber, which I found almost empty. Here I inquired of the usher for M. de Crillon, and learned with the utmost consternation that he was not present.

This blow, which almost stunned me, opened my eyes to the precarious nature of my position, which only the early hour and small attendance rendered possible for a moment. At any minute I might be recognised and questioned, or my name be inquired; while the guarded doors of the chamber shut me off as effectually from the king's face and grace as though

I were in Paris, or a hundred leagues away. Endeavouring to the best of my power to conceal the chagrin and alarm which possessed me as this conviction took hold of me, I walked to the window ; and to hide my face more completely and at the same time gain a moment to collect my thoughts, affected to be engaged in looking through it.

Nothing which passed in the room, however, escaped me. I marked everything and everyone, though all my thought was how I might get to the king. The barber came out of the chamber with a silver basin, and stood a moment, and went in again with an air of vast importance. The guards yawned, and an officer entered, looked round, and retired. M. la Guesle, who had gone into the presence, came out again and stood near me talking with the Jacobin, whose pale nervous face and hasty movements reminded me somehow of Simon Fleix. The monk held a letter or petition in his hand, and appeared to be getting it by heart, for his lips moved con-

tinually. The light which fell on his face from the window showed it to be of a peculiar sweaty pallor, and distorted besides. But supposing him to be devoted, like many of his kind, to an unwholesome life, I thought nothing of this ; though I liked him little, and would have shifted my place but for the convenience of his neighbourhood.

Presently, while I was cudgelling my brains, a person came out and spoke to La Guesle ; who called in his turn to the monk, and started hastily towards the door. The Jacobin followed. The third person who had entered in their company had his attention directed elsewhere at the moment ; and though La Guesle called to him, took no heed. On the instant I grasped the situation. Taking my courage in my hands, I crossed the floor behind the monk ; who, hearing me or feeling his robe come in contact with me, presently stared and looked round suspiciously, his face wearing a scowl so black and ugly that I almost recoiled from him, dreaming for a

moment that I saw before me the very spirit of Father Antoine. But as the man said nothing, and the next instant averted his gaze, I hardened my heart and pushed on behind him, and passing the usher, found myself as by magic in the presence which had seemed a while ago as unattainable by my wits as it was necessary to my safety.

It was not this success alone, however, which caused my heart to beat more hopefully. The king was speaking as I entered, and the gay tones of his voice seemed to promise a favourable reception. His Majesty sat half-dressed on a stool at the farther end of the apartment, surrounded by five or six noblemen, while as many attendants, among whom I hastened to mingle, waited near the door.

La Guesle made as if he would advance, and then, seeing the king's attention was not on him, held back. But in a moment the king saw him and called to him. "Ha, Guesle!" he said with good temper, "is it you? Is your friend with you?"



The Solicitor went forward with the monk at his elbow, and I had leisure to remark the favourable change which had taken place in the king, who spoke more strongly and seemed in better health than of old. His face looked less cadaverous under the paint, his form a trifle less emaciated. That which struck me more than anything, however, was the improvement in his spirits. His eyes sparkled from time to time, and he laughed continually, so that I could scarcely believe that he was the same man whom I had seen overwhelmed with despair and tortured by his conscience.

Letting his attention slip from La Guesle, he began to bandy words with the nobleman who stood nearest to him ; looking up at him with a roguish eye, and making bets on the fall of Paris.

“Morbleu !” I heard him cry gaily, “I would give a thousand pounds to see the Montpensier this morning ! She may keep her third crown for herself. Or, peste ! we might put her in a convent. That would be a fine vengeance !”

“The veil for the tonsure,” the nobleman said with a smirk.

“Ay. Why not ! She would have made a monk of me,” the king rejoined smartly. “She must be ready to hang herself with her garters this morning, if she is not dead of spite already. Or, stay, I had forgotten her golden scissors. Let her open a vein with them. Well, what does your friend want, La Guesle ?”

I did not hear the answer, but it was apparently satisfactory, for in a minute all except the Jacobin fell back, leaving the monk standing before the king ; who, stretching out his hand, took from him a letter. The Jacobin, trembling visibly, seemed scarcely able to support the honour done him, and the king, seeing this, said in a voice audible to all, “Stand up, man. You are welcome. I love a cowl as some love a lady’s hood. And, now, what is this ?”

He read a part of the letter and rose. As he did so the monk leaned forward as though

to receive the paper back again, and then, so swiftly, so suddenly, with so unexpected a movement that no one stirred until all was over, struck the king in the body with a knife! As the blade flashed and was hidden, and his Majesty with a deep sob fell back on the stool, then, and not till then, I knew that I had missed a providential chance of earning pardon and protection. For had I only marked the Jacobin as we passed the door together, and read his evil face aright, a word, one word, had done for me more than the pleading of a score of Crillons!

Too late a dozen sprang forward to the king's assistance; but before they reached him he had himself drawn the knife from the wound and struck the assassin with it on the head. While some, with cries of grief, ran to support Henry, from whose body the blood was already flowing fast, others seized and struck down the wretched monk. As they gathered round him I saw him raise himself for a moment on his knees and look

upward; the blood which ran down his face, no less than the mingled triumph and horror of his features, impressed the sight on my recollection. The next instant three swords were plunged into his breast, and his writhing body, plucked up from the floor amid a transport of curses, was forced headlong through the casement and flung down to make sport for the grooms and scullions who stood below.

A scene of indescribable confusion followed, some crying that the king was dead, while others called for a doctor, and some by name for Dortoman. I expected to see the doors closed and all within secured, that if the man had confederates they might be taken. But there was no one to give the order. Instead, many who had neither the *entrée* nor any business in the chamber forced their way in, and by their cries and pressure rendered the hub-hub and tumult a hundred times worse. In the midst of this, while I stood stunned and dumbfounded, my own risks and concerns forgotten, I felt my sleeve furiously plucked

and, looking round, found Simon at my elbow. The lad's face was crimson, his eyes seemed starting from his head.

“Come,” he muttered, seizing my arm. “Come!” And without further ceremony or explanation he dragged me towards the door, while his face and manner evinced as much heat and impatience as if he had been himself the assassin. “Come, there is not a moment to be lost,” he panted, continuing his exertions without the least intermission.

“Whither?” I said, in amazement, as I reluctantly permitted him to force me along the passage and through the gaping crowd on the stairs. “Whither, man?”

“Mount and ride!” was the answer he hissed in my ear. “Ride for your life to the King of Navarre, to the King of France it may be! Ride as you have never ridden before, and tell him the news, and bid him look to himself! Be the first, and, Heaven helping us, Turenne may do his worst!”

I felt every nerve in my body tingle as I

awoke to his meaning. Without a word I left his arm, and flung myself into the crowd, which filled the lower passage to suffocation. As I struggled fiercely with them Simon aided me by crying "A doctor! a doctor! make way there!" and this induced many to give place to me under the idea that I was an accredited messenger. Eventually I succeeded in forcing my way through and reaching the courtyard; being, as it turned out, the first person to issue from the Château. A dozen people sprang towards me with anxious eyes and questions on their lips, but I ran past them, and, catching the Cid, which was fortunately at hand, by the rein, bounded into the saddle.

As I turned the horse to the gate I heard Simon cry after me, "The Scholars' Meadow! Go that way!" and then I heard no more. I was out of the yard and galloping bareheaded down the pitched street, while women snatched their infants up and ran aside, and men came startled to the doors, crying that the League

was upon us. As the good horse flung up his head and bounded forward, hurling the gravel behind him with hoofs which slid and clattered on the pavement as the wind began to whistle by me, and I seized the reins in a shorter grip, I felt my heart bound with exultation. I experienced such a blessed relief and elation as the prisoner long fettered and confined feels when restored to the air of heaven.

Down one street and through a narrow lane we thundered, until a broken gateway stopped with fascines, through which the Cid blundered and stumbled, brought us at a bound into the Scholars' Meadow just as the tardy sun broke through the clouds and flooded the low wide plain with brightness. Half a league in front of us the towers of Meudon rose to view on a hill. In the distance, to the left, lay the walls of Paris, and nearer, on the same side, a dozen forts and batteries; while here and there, in that quarter, a shining clump of spears or a dense mass of infantry betrayed the enemy's presence.

I heeded none of these things, however, nor anything except the towers of Meudon, setting the Cid's head straight for these, and riding on at the top of his speed. Swiftly ditch and dyke came into view before us and flashed away beneath us. Men lying in pits rose up and aimed at us, or ran with cries to intercept us. A cannon-shot fired from the fort by Issy tore up the earth to one side; a knot of lancers sped from the shelter of an earthwork in the same quarter, and raced us for half-a-mile, with frantic shouts and threats of vengeance. But all such efforts were vanity. The Cid, fired by this sudden call upon his speed, and feeling himself loose—rarest of events—to do his best, shook the foam from his bit, and opening his blood-red nostrils to the wind, crouched lower and lower; until his long neck, stretched out before him, seemed, as the sward swept by, like the point of an arrow speeding resistless to its aim.

God knows, as the air rushed by me and the sun shone in my face, I cried aloud like a



boy, and though I sat still and stirred neither hand nor foot, lest I should break the good sard's stride, I prayed wildly that the horse which I had groomed with my own hands and fed with my last crown might hold on unfalteringly to the end. For I dreamed that the fate of a nation rode in my saddle ; and mindful alike of Simon's words, “ Bid him look to himself,” and of my own notion that the League would not be so foolish as to remove one enemy to exalt another, I thought nothing more likely than that, with all my fury, I should arrive too late, and find the King of Navarre as I had left the King of France.

In this strenuous haste I covered a mile as a mile has seldom been covered before ; and I was growing under the influence of the breeze which whipped my temples somewhat more cool and hopeful, when I saw on a sudden right before me, and between me and Meudon, a handful of men engaged in a *mêlée*. There were red and white jackets in it—Leaguers and Huguenots—and the red coats seemed to be

having the worst of it. Still, while I watched, they came off in order, and unfortunately in such a way and at such a speed that I saw they must meet me face to face, whether I tried to avoid the encounter or not. I had barely time to take in the danger and its nearness, and discern beyond both parties the main-guard of the Huguenots, enlivened by a score of pennons, when the Leaguers were upon me.

I suppose they knew that no friend would ride for Meudon at that pace, for they dashed at me six abreast with a shout of triumph; and before I could count a score we met. The Cid was still running strongly, and I had not thought to stay him, so that I had no time to use my pistols. My sword I had out, but the sun dazzled me, and the men wore corslets, and I made but poor play with it; though I struck out savagely, as we crashed together, in my rage at this sudden crossing of my hopes when all seemed done and gained. The Cid faced them bravely—I heard the

distant huzza of the Huguenots—and I put aside one point which threatened my throat. But the sun was in my eyes, and something struck me on the head. Another second, and a blow in the breast forced me fairly from the saddle. Gripping furiously at the air I went down, stunned and dizzy, my last thought as I struck the ground being of Mademoiselle, and the little brook with the stepping-stones.

## CHAPTER XXXV.

"LE ROI EST MORT!"

IT was M. d'Agen's breastpiece saved my life by warding off the point of the varlet's sword, so that the worst injury I got was the loss of my breath for five minutes, with a swimming in the head and a kind of syncope. These being past, I found myself on my back on the ground, with a man's knee on my breast and a dozen horsemen standing round me. The sky reeled dizzily before my eyes, and the men's figures loomed gigantic; yet I had sense enough to know what had happened to me, and that matters might well be worse.

Resigning myself to the prospect of captivity, I prepared to ask for quarter; which I did not doubt I should receive, since they had taken me in an open skirmish, and honestly,

and in daylight. But the man whose knee already incommoded me sufficiently, seeing me about to speak, squeezed me in a sudden so fiercely, bidding me at the same time in a gruff whisper be silent, that I thought I could not do better than obey.

Accordingly I lay still, and as in a dream, for my brain was still clouded, heard someone say, “Dead! Is he? I hoped we had come in time. Well, he deserved a better fate. Who is he, Rosny?”

“Do you know him, Maignan?” said a voice which sounded strangely familiar.

The man who knelt upon me answered, “No, my lord. He is a stranger to me. He has the look of a Norman.”

“Like enough!” replied a high-pitched voice I had not heard before. “For he rode a good horse. Give me a hundred like it, and a hundred men to ride as straight, and I would not envy the King of France.”

“Much less his poor cousin of Navarre,” the first speaker rejoined in a laughing tone,

“without a whole shirt to his back or a doublet that is decently new. Come, Turenne, acknowledge that you are not so badly off after all!”

At that word the cloud which had darkened my faculties swept on a sudden aside. I saw that the men into whose hands I had fallen wore white favours, their leader a white plume; and comprehended without more ado that the King of Navarre had come to my rescue, and beaten off the Leaguers who had dismounted me. At the same moment the remembrance of all that had gone before, and especially of the scene I had witnessed in the king's chamber, rushed upon my mind with such overwhelming force that I fell into a fury of impatience at the thought of the time I had wasted; and rising up suddenly I threw off Maignan with all my force, crying out that I was alive—that I was alive, and had news.

The equerry did his best to restrain me, cursing me under his breath for a fool, and almost squeezing the life out of me. But in

vain ; for the King of Navarre, riding nearer, saw me struggling. “Hallo ! hallo ! ’tis a strange dead man,” he cried, interposing. “What is the meaning of this ? Let him go ! Do you hear, sirrah ? Let him go !”

The equerry obeyed and stood back sullenly, and I staggered to my feet, and looked round with eyes which still swam and watered. On the instant a cry of recognition greeted me, with a hundred exclamations of astonishment. While I heard my name uttered on every side in a dozen different tones, I remarked dully that M. de Rosny, upon whom my eyes first fell, alone stood silent, regarding me with a face of sorrowful surprise.

“By heavens, sir, I knew nothing of this !” I heard the King of Navarre declare, addressing himself to the Vicomte de Turenne. “The man is here by no connivance of mine. Interrogate him yourself, if you will. Or I will. Speak, sir,” he continued, turning to me with his countenance hard and forbidding. “You heard me yesterday, what I

promised you. Why, in God's name, are you here to-day?"

I tried to answer, but Maignan had so handled me that I had not breath enough, and stood panting.

"Your Highness's clemency in this matter," M. de Turenne said, with a sneer, "has been so great he trusted to its continuance. And doubtless he thought to find you alone. I fear I am in the way."

I knew him by his figure and his grand air, which in any other company would have marked him for master; and forgetting the impatience which a moment before had consumed me—doubtless I was still-lightheaded—I answered him. "Yet I had once the promise of your lordship's protection," I gasped.

"My protection, sir?" he exclaimed, his eyes gleaming angrily.

"Even so," I answered. "At the inn at Etampes, where M. de Crillon would have fought me."



He was visibly taken aback. “Are you that man?” he cried.

“I am. But I am not here to prate of myself,” I replied. And with that the remembrance of my neglected errand flashing on me again—I staggered to the King of Navarre’s side, and falling on my knees, seized his stirrup. “Sire, I bring you news! great news! dreadful news!” I cried, clinging to it. “His Majesty was but a quarter of an hour ago stabbed in the body in his chamber by a villain monk. And is dying, or, it may be, dead.”

“Dead? The king!” Turenne cried with an oath. “Impossible!”

Vaguely I heard others crying, some this, some that, as surprise and consternation, or anger or incredulity moved them. But I did not answer them; for Henry, remaining silent, held me spellbound as it were, and awed by the marvellous change which I saw fall on his face. His eyes became on a sudden suffused with blood, and seemed to retreat under his sunken brows; his cheeks turned of a brick-

red colour ; his half-open lips showed his teeth gleaming through his beard ; while his great nose, which seemed to curve and curve until it well-nigh met his chin, gave to his mobile countenance an aspect as strange as it was terrifying. Withal he uttered for a time no word, though I saw his hand grip the riding-whip he held in a convulsive grasp, as though his thought were “ ’Tis mine ! Mine ! Wrest it away who dares ! ”

“ Bethink you, sir,” he said at last, fixing his piercing eyes on me, and speaking in a harsh, low tone, like the growling of a great dog, “ this is no jesting time. Nor will you save your skin by a ruse. Tell me, on your peril, is this a trick ? ”

“ Heaven forbid, sire ! ” I answered with passion. “ I was in the chamber, and saw it with my own eyes. I mounted on the instant, and rode hither by the shortest route to warn your Highness to look to yourself. Monks are many, and the Holy Union is not apt to stop half-way.”

I saw he believed me, for his face relaxed. His breath seemed to come and go again, and for the tenth part of a second his eyes sought M. de Rosny's. Then he looked at me again. “I thank you, sir,” he said, bowing gravely and courteously, “for your care for me; not for your tidings, which are of the sorriest. God grant my good cousin and king may be hurt only. Now tell us exactly—for these gentlemen are equally interested with myself—had a surgeon seen him?”

I replied in the negative, but added that the wound was in the groin, and bled much.

“You said a few minutes ago, ‘dying or already dead!’” the King of Navarre rejoined. “Why?”

“His Majesty's face was sunken,” I stammered.

He nodded. “You may be mistaken,” he said. “I pray that you are. But here comes Mornay. He may know more.”

In a moment I was abandoned, even by M. de Turenne, so great was the anxiety which

possessed all to learn the truth. Maignan alone, under the pretence of adjusting a stirrup, remained beside me, and entreated me in a low voice to begone. "Take this horse, M. de Marsac, if you will," he urged, "and ride back the way you came. You have done what you came to do. Go back, and be thankful."

"Chut!" I said, "there is no danger."

"You will see," he replied darkly, "if you stay here. Come, come, take my advice and the horse," he persisted, "and begone! Believe me, it will be for the best."

I laughed outright at his earnestness and his face of perplexity. "I see you have M. de Rosny's orders to get rid of me," I said. "But I am not going, my friend. He must find some other way out of his embarrassment, for here I stay."

"Well, your blood be on your own head," Maignan retorted, swinging himself into the saddle with a gloomy face. "I have done my best to save you!"

"And your master!" I answered laughing.

For flight was the last thing I had in my mind. I had ridden this ride with a clear perception that the one thing I needed was a footing in Court. By the special kindness of Providence I had now gained this; and I was not the man to resign it because it proved to be scanty and perilous. It was something that I had spoken to the great vicomte face to face and not been consumed, that I had given him look for look and still survived, that I had put in practice Crillon's lessons and come to no harm.

Nor was this all. I had never in the worst times blamed the King of Navarre for his denial of me. It had been foolish, indeed, seeing that it was in the bargain, had I done so; nor had I ever doubted his good-will or his readiness to reward me should occasion arise. Now, I flattered myself, I had given him that which he needed, and had hitherto lacked—an excuse, I mean, for interference in my behalf.

Whether I was right or wrong in this notion

I was soon to learn; for at this moment Henry's cavalcade, which had left me a hundred paces behind, came to a stop, and while some of the number waved to me to come on, one spurred back to summon me to the king. I hastened to obey the order as fast as I could, but I saw on approaching that though all was at a standstill till I came up, neither the King of Navarre nor M. de Turenne was thinking principally of me. Every face, from Henry's to that of his least important courtier, wore an air of grave preoccupation; which I had no difficulty in ascribing to the doubt present in every mind, and outweighing every interest, whether the King of France was dead, or dying, or merely wounded.

“Quick, sir!” Henry said with impatience, as soon as I came within hearing. “Do not detain me with your affairs longer than is necessary. M. de Turenne presses me to carry into effect the order I gave yesterday. But as you have placed yourself in jeopardy on my account I feel that something is due to

you. You will be good enough, therefore, to present yourself at once at M. la Varenne's lodgings, and give me your parole to remain there without stirring abroad until your affair is concluded.”

Aware that I owed this respite, which at once secured my present safety and promised well for the future, to the great event that, even in M. de Turenne's mind, had overshadowed all others, I bowed in silence. Henry, however, was not content with this. “Come, sir,” he said sharply, and with every appearance of anger, “do you agree to that?”

I replied humbly that I thanked him for his clemency.

“There is no need of thanks,” he replied coldly. “What I have done is without prejudice to M. de Turenne's complaint. He must have justice.”

I bowed again, and in a moment the troop were gone at a gallop towards Meudon, whence, as I afterwards learned, the King of Navarre, attended by a select body of five-

and-twenty horsemen, wearing private arms, rode on at full speed to St. Cloud to present himself at his Majesty's bedside. A groom who had caught the Cid, which had escaped into the town with no other injury than a slight wound in the shoulder, by-and-by met me with the horse; and in this way I was enabled to render myself with some decency at Varenne's lodgings, a small house at the foot of the hill, not far from the Castle-gate.

Here I found myself under no greater constraint than that which my own parole laid upon me; and my room having the convenience of a window looking upon the public street, I was enabled from hour to hour to comprehend and enter into the various alarms and surprises which made that day remarkable. The manifold reports which flew from mouth to mouth on the occasion, as well as the overmastering excitement which seized all, are so well remembered, however, that I forbear to dwell upon them, though they served to distract my mind from my own position. Suffice it that



at one moment we heard that his Majesty was dead, at another that the wound was skin deep, and again that we might expect him at Meudon before sunset. The rumour that the Duchess de Montpensier had taken poison was no sooner believed than we were asked to listen to the guns of Paris firing *feux de joie* in honour of the King's death.

The streets were so closely packed with persons telling and hearing these tales that I seemed from my window to be looking on a fair. Nor was all my amusement without doors; for a number of the gentlemen of the Court, hearing that I had been at St. Cloud in the morning, and in the very chamber, a thing which made me for the moment the most desirable companion in the world, remembered on a sudden that they had a slight acquaintance with me, and honoured me by calling upon me and sitting a great part of the day with me. From which circumstance I confess I derived as much hope as they diversion; knowing that courtiers are the best weather-

prophets in the world, who hate nothing so much as to be discovered in the company of those on whom the sun does not shine.

The return of the King of Navarre, which happened about the middle of the afternoon, while it dissipated the fears of some and dashed the hopes of others, put an end to this state of uncertainty by confirming, to the surprise of many, that his Majesty was in no danger. We learned with varying emotions that the first appearances, which had deceived, not myself only, but experienced leeches, had been themselves belied by subsequent conditions; and that, in a word, Paris had as much to fear, and loyal men as much to hope, as before this wicked and audacious attempt.

I had no more than stomached this surprising information, which was less welcome to me, I confess, than it should have been, when the arrival of M. d'Agen, who greeted me with the affection which he never failed to show me, distracted my thoughts for a time.

Immediately on learning where I was and the strange adventures which had befallen me he had ridden off stopping only once, when he had nearly reached me, for the purpose of waiting on Madame de Bruhl. I asked him how she had received him.

“Like herself,” he replied with an ingenuous blush. “More kindly than I had a right to expect, if not as warmly as I had the courage to hope.”

“That will come with time,” I said, laughing. “And Mademoiselle de la Vire?”

“I did not see her,” he answered, “but I heard she was well. And a hundred fathoms deeper in love,” he added, eyeing me roguishly, “than when I saw her last.”

It was my turn to colour now, and I did so, feeling all the pleasure and delight such a statement was calculated to afford me. Picturing Mademoiselle as I had seen her last, leaning from her horse, with love written so plainly on her weeping face that all who ran might read, I sank into so delicious a

reverie that M. la Varenne, entering suddenly, surprised us both before another word passed on either side.

His look and tone were as abrupt as it was in his nature, which was soft and compliant, to make them. "M. de Marsac," he said, "I am sorry to put any constraint upon you, but I am directed to forbid you to your friends. And I must request this gentleman to withdraw."

"But all day my friends have come in and out," I said with surprise. "Is this a new order?"

"A written order, which reached me no farther back than two minutes ago," he answered plainly. "I am also directed to remove you to a room at the back of the house, that you may not overlook the street."

"But my parole was taken!" I cried, with a natural feeling of indignation.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I am sorry to say that I have nothing to do with that," he answered. "I can only obey orders. I

must ask this gentleman, therefore, to withdraw.”

Of course M. d’Agen had no option but to leave me; which he did, I could see, notwithstanding his easy and confident expressions, with a good deal of mistrust and apprehension. When he was gone, La Varenne lost no time in carrying out the remainder of his orders. As a consequence I found myself confined to a small and gloomy apartment, which looked, at a distance of three paces, upon the smooth face of the rock on which the Castle stood. This change, from a window which commanded all the life of the town, and intercepted every breath of popular fancy, to a closet whither no sounds penetrated, and where the very transition from noon to evening scarcely made itself known, could not fail to depress my spirits sensibly; the more as I took it to be significant of a change in my fortunes fully as grave. Reflecting that I must now appear to the King of Navarre in the light of a bearer of false tidings, I as-

sociated the order to confine me more closely with his return from St. Cloud ; and comprehending that M. de Turenne was once more at liberty to attend to my affairs, I began to look about me with forebodings which were none the less painful because the parole I had given debarred me from any attempt to escape.

Sleep and habit enabled me, nevertheless, to pass the night in comfort. Very early in the morning a great firing of guns, which made itself heard even in my quarters, led me to suppose that Paris had surrendered ; but the servant who brought me my breakfast declined in a surly fashion to give me any information. In the end, I spent the whole day alone, my thoughts divided between my mistress and my own prospects, which seemed to grow more and more gloomy as the hours succeeded one another. No one came near me, no step broke the silence of the house ; and for a while I thought my guardians had forgotten even that I needed

food. This omission, it is true, was made good about sunset; but still M. la Varenne did not appear, the servant seemed to be dumb, and I heard no sounds in the house.

I had finished my meal an hour or more, and the room was growing dark, when the silence was at last broken by quick steps passing along the entrance. They paused, and seemed to hesitate at the foot of the stairs, but the next moment they came on again, and stopped at my door. I rose from my seat on hearing the key turned in the lock, and my astonishment may be conceived when I saw no other than M. de Turenne enter, and close the door behind him.

He saluted me in a haughty manner as he advanced to the table, raising his cap for an instant and then replacing it. This done he stood looking at me, and I at him, in a silence which on my side was the result of pure astonishment; on his, of contempt and a kind of wonder. The evening light, which was fast failing, lent a sombre whiteness to his

face, causing it to stand out from the shadows behind him in a way which was not without its influence on me.

“Well!” he said at last, speaking slowly and with unimaginable insolence, “I came to look at you!”

I felt my anger rise, and gave him back look for look. “At your will,” I said, shrugging my shoulders.

“And to solve a question,” he continued in the same tone. “To learn whether the man who was mad enough to insult and defy *me* was the old penniless dullard some called him, or the dare-devil others painted him.”

“You are satisfied now?” I said.

He eyed me for a moment closely; then with sudden heat he cried, “Curse me if I am! Nor whether I have to do with a man very deep or very shallow, a fool or a knave!”

“You may say what you please to a prisoner,” I retorted coldly.

“Turenne commonly does—to whom he pleases!” he answered. The next moment



he made me start by saying, as he drew out a comfit-box and opened it, “I am just from the little fool you have bewitched. If she were in my power I would have her whipped and put on bread and water till she came to her senses. As she is not, I must take another way. Have you any idea, may I ask,” he continued in his cynical tone, “what is going to become of you, M. de Marsac?”

I replied, my heart inexpressibly lightened by what he had said of Mademoiselle, that “I placed the fullest confidence in the justice of the King of Navarre”.

He repeated the name in a tone I did not understand.

“Yes, sir, the King of Navarre,” I answered firmly.

“Well, I daresay you have good reason to do so,” he rejoined with a sneer. “Unless I am mistaken he knew a little more of this affair than he acknowledges.”

“Indeed! The King of Navarre?” I said, staring stolidly at him.

“Yes, indeed, indeed, the King of Navarre!” he retorted, mimicking me, with a nearer approach to anger than I had yet witnessed in him. “But let him be a moment, sirrah!” he continued, “and do you listen to me. Or first look at that. Seeing is believing.”

He drew out as he spoke a paper, or, to speak more correctly, a parchment, which he thrust with a kind of savage scorn into my hand. Repressing for the moment the surprise I felt, I took it to the window, and reading it with difficulty, found it to be a royal patent, drawn, as far as I could judge, in due form, and appointing some person unknown—for the name was left blank—to the post of Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac, with a salary of 12,000 livres a year!

“Well, sir?” he said impatiently.

“Well?” I answered mechanically. For my brain reeled; the exhibition of such a paper in such a way raised extraordinary thoughts in my mind.

“Can you read it?” he asked.

“Certainly,” I answered, telling myself that he would fain play a trick on me.

“Very well,” he replied; “then listen. I am going to condescend to make you an offer, M. de Marsac. I will procure you your freedom, and fill up the blank, which you see there, with your name—upon one condition.”

I stared at him with all the astonishment it was natural for me to feel in the face of such a proposition. “You will confer this office on me?” I muttered incredulously.

“The king having placed it at my disposal,” he answered, “I will. But first let me remind you,” he went on proudly, “that the affair has another side. On the one hand I offer you such employment, M. de Marsac, as should satisfy your highest ambition. On the other, I warn you that my power to avenge myself is no less to-day than it was yesterday; and that if I condescend to buy you, it is because that course commends itself to me for reasons, not because it is the only one open.”

I bowed. "The condition, M. le Vicomte?" I said huskily, beginning to understand him.

"That you give up all claim and suit to the hand of my kinswoman," he answered lightly. "That is all. It is a simple and easy condition."

I looked at him in renewed astonishment, in wonder, in stupefaction; asking myself a hundred questions. Why did he stoop to bargain who could command? Why did he condescend to treat who held me at his mercy? Why did he gravely discuss my aspirations to whom they must seem the rankest presumption? Why?—but I could not follow it. I stood looking at him in silence; in perplexity as great as if he had offered me the crown of France; in amazement and doubt and suspicion that knew no bounds.

"Well!" he said at last, misreading the emotion which appeared in my face. "You consent, sir?"

"Never!" I answered firmly.

He started. “I think I cannot have heard you aright,” he said, speaking slowly, and almost courteously. “I offer you a great place and my patronage, M. de Marsae. Do I understand that you prefer a prison and my enmity?”

“On those conditions,” I answered.

“Think, think!” he said harshly.

“I have thought,” I answered.

“Ay, but have you thought where you are?” he retorted. “Have you thought how many obstacles lie between you and this little fool? How many persons you must win over, how many friends you must gain? Have you thought what it will be to have me against you in this, or which of us is more likely to win in the end?”

“I have thought,” I rejoined.

But my voice shook, my lips were dry. The room had grown dark. The rock outside, intercepting the light, gave it already the air of a dungeon. Though I did not dream of yielding to him, though I even felt

that in this interview he had descended to my level, and I had had the better of him, I felt my heart sink. For I remembered how men immured in prisons drag out their lives—always petitioning, always forgotten; how wearily the days go, that to free men are bright with hope and ambition. And I saw in a flash what it would be to remain here, or in some such place; never to cross horse again, or breathe the free air of heaven, never to hear the clink of sword against stirrup, or the rich tones of M. d'Agen's voice calling for his friend!

I expected M. de Turenne to go when I had made my answer, or else to fall into such a rage as opposition is apt to cause in those who seldom encounter it. To my surprise, however, he restrained himself. "Come," he said, with patience which fairly astonished me, and so much the more as chagrin was clearly marked in his voice, "I know where you put your trust. You think the King of Navarre will protect you. Well,

I pledge you the honour of Turenne that he will not; that the King of Navarre will do nothing to save you. Now, what do you say?”

“As I said before,” I answered doggedly.

He took up the parchment from the table with a grim laugh. “So much the worse for you then!” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “So much the worse for you! I took you for a rogue! It seems you are a fool!”

## CHAPTER XXXVI.

“VIVE LE ROI !”

HE took his leave with those words. But his departure, which I should have hailed a few minutes before with joy, as a relief from embarrassment and humiliation, found me indifferent. The statement to which he had solemnly pledged himself in regard to the King of Navarre, that I could expect no further help from him, had prostrated me ; dashing my hopes and spirits so completely that I remained rooted to the spot long after his step had ceased to sound on the stairs. If what he said was true, in the gloom which darkened alike my room and my prospects I could descry no glimmer of light. I knew his Majesty's weakness and vacillation too well to repose any confidence in him ; if the



King of Navarre also abandoned me, I was indeed without hope, as without resource.

I had stood some time with my mind painfully employed upon this problem, which my knowledge of M. de Turenne's strict honour in private matters did not allow me to dismiss lightly, when I heard another step on the stairs, and in a moment M. la Varenne opened the door. Finding me in the dark he muttered an apology for the remissness of the servants; which I accepted, seeing nothing else for it, in good part.

“We have been at sixes-and-sevens all day, and you have been forgotten,” he continued. “But you will have no reason to complain now. I am ordered to conduct you to his Majesty without delay.”

“To St. Cloud!” I exclaimed, greatly astonished.

“No, the King of France is here,” he answered.

“At Meudon?”

“To be sure. Why not?”

I expressed my wonder at his Majesty's rapid recovery.

"Pooh!" he answered roughly. "He is as well as he ever was. I will leave you my light. Be good enough to descend as soon as you are ready, for it is ill work keeping kings waiting. Oh! and I had forgotten one thing," he continued, returning when he had already reached the door. "My orders are to see that you do not hold converse with anyone until you have seen the king, M. de Marsac. You will kindly remember this if we are kept waiting in the antechamber."

"Am I to be transported to—other custody?" I asked, my mind full of apprehension.

He shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly," he replied. "I do not know."

Of course there was nothing for it but to murmur that I was at the king's disposition; after which M. la Varenne retired, leaving me to put the best face on the matter I could. Naturally I augured anything but well of an interview weighted with such a condition;

and this contributed still further to depress my spirits, already lowered by the long solitude in which I had passed the day. Fearing nothing, however, so much as suspense, I hastened to do what I could to repair my costume, and then descended to the foot of the stairs, where I found my custodian awaiting me with a couple of servants, of whom one bore a link.

We went out side by side, and, having barely a hundred yards to go, seemed in a moment to be passing through the gate of the Castle. I noticed that the entrance was very strongly guarded, but an instant's reflection served to remind me that this was not surprising after what had happened at St. Cloud. I remarked to M. la Varenne as we crossed the court-yard that I supposed Paris had surrendered; but he replied in the negative so curtly, and with so little consideration, that I forbore to ask any other questions; and the Château being small, we found ourselves almost at once in a long, narrow corridor, which appeared to serve as the ante-chamber.

It was brilliantly lighted and crowded from end to end, and almost from wall to wall, with a mob of courtiers; whose silence, no less than their keen and anxious looks, took me by surprise. Here and there two or three, who had seized upon the embrasure of a window, talked together in a low tone; or a couple, who thought themselves sufficiently important to pace the narrow passage between the waiting lines, conversed in whispers as they walked. But even these were swift to take alarm, and continually looked askance; while the general company stood at gaze, starting and looking up eagerly whenever the door swung open or a new-comer was announced. The strange silence which prevailed reminded me of nothing so much as of the Court at Blois on the night of the Duke of Mercœur's desertion; but that stillness had brooded over empty chambers, this gave a peculiar air of strangeness to a room thronged in every part.

M. la Varenne, who was received by those about the door with silent politeness, drew me

into the recess of a window ; whence I was able to remark, among other things, that the Huguenots present almost outnumbered the king's immediate following. Still, among those who were walking up and down, I noticed M. de Rambouillet, to whom at another time I should have hastened to pay my respects ; with Marshal d'Aumont, Sancy, and Humières. Nor had I more than noted the presence of these before the door of the chamber opened and added to their number Marshal Biron, who came out leaning on the arm of Crillon. The sight of these old enemies in combination was sufficient of itself to apprise me that some serious crisis was at hand ; particularly as their progress through the crowd was watched, I observed, by a hundred curious and attentive eyes.

They disappeared at last through the outer door, and the assemblage turned as with one accord to see who came next. But nearly half-an-hour elapsed before the chamber door, which all watched so studiously, again opened.

This time it was to give passage to my late visitor, Turenne, who came out smiling, and leaning, to my great surprise, on the arm of M. de Rosny.

As the two walked down the room, greeting here and there an obsequious friend, and followed in their progress by all eyes, I felt my heart sink indeed; both at sight of Turenne's good-humour, and of the company in which I found him. Aware that in proportion as he was pleased I was like to meet with displeasure, I still might have had hope left had I had Rosny left. Losing him, however—and I could not doubt, seeing him as I saw him, that I had lost him—and counting the King of Navarre as gone already, I felt such a failure of courage as I had never known before. I told myself with shame that I was not made for Courts, or for such scenes as these; and recalling with new and keen mortification the poor figure I had cut in the King of Navarre's antechamber at St. Jean, I experienced so strange a gush of pity for my

mistress that nothing could exceed the tenderness I felt for her. I had won her under false colours. I was not worthy of her. I felt that my mere presence in her company in such a place as this, and among these people, must cover her with shame and humiliation.

To my great relief, since I knew my face was on fire, neither of the two, as they walked down the passage, looked my way or seemed conscious of my neighbourhood. At the door they stood a moment talking earnestly, and it seemed as if M. de Rosny would have accompanied the vicomte farther. The latter would not suffer it, however, but took his leave there; and this with so many polite gestures that my last hope based on M. de Rosny vanished.

Nevertheless, that gentleman was not so wholly changed that on his turning to re-traverse the room I did not see a smile flicker for an instant on his features as the two lines of bowing courtiers opened before him. The next moment his look fell on me, and though his face scarcely altered, he stopped opposite me.

“M. de Marsac is waiting to see his Majesty?” he asked aloud, speaking to M. la Varenne.

My companion remaining silent, I bowed.

“In five minutes,” M. de Rosny replied quietly, yet with a distant air, which made me doubt whether I had not dreamed all I remembered of this man. “Ah! M. de Paul, what can I do for you?” he continued. And he bent his head to listen to the application which a gentleman who stood next me poured into his ear. “I will see,” I heard him answer. “In any case you shall know tomorrow.”

“But you will be my friend?” M. Paul urged, detaining him by the sleeve.

“I will put only one before you,” he answered.

My neighbour seemed to shrink into himself with disappointment. “Who is it?” he murmured piteously.

“The king and his service, my friend,” M. de Rosny replied drily. And with that he



walked away. But half-a-dozen times at least before he reached the upper end of the room I saw the scene repeated.

I looked on at all this in the utmost astonishment, unable to guess or conceive what had happened to give M. de Rosny so much importance. For it did not escape me that the few words he had stopped to speak to me had invested me with interest in the eyes of all who stood near. They gave me more room and a wider breathing space, and looking at me askance, muttered my name in whispers. In my uncertainty, however, what this portended I drew no comfort from it; and before I had found time to weigh it thoroughly the door through which Turenne and Rosny had entered opened again. The pages and gentlemen who stood about it hastened to range themselves on either side. An usher carrying a white wand came rapidly down the room, here and there requesting the courtiers to stand back where the passage was narrow. Then a loud voice without cried, “The king,

gentlemen! the king!" and one in every two of us stood a-tiptoe to see him enter.

But there came in only Henry of Navarre, wearing a violet cloak and cap.

I turned to La Varenne, and with my head full of confusion muttered impatiently, "But the king, man! Where is the king?"

He grinned at me, with his hand before his mouth. "Hush!" he whispered. "'Twas a jest we played on you! His late Majesty died at daybreak this morning. This is the king."

"This! the King of Navarre?" I cried; so loudly that some round us called "Silence!"

"No, the King of France, fool!" he replied. "Your sword must be sharper than your wits, or I have been told some lies!"

I let the gibe pass and the jest, for my heart was beating so fast and painfully that I could scarcely preserve my outward composure. There was a mist before my eyes, and a darkness which set the lights at defiance. It was in vain I tried to think what this might mean to me. I could not put two thoughts together,

and while I still questioned what reception I might expect, and who in this new state of things were my friends, the king stopped before me.

“Ha, M. de Marsac!” he cried cheerfully, signing to those who stood before me to give place. “You are the gentleman who rode so fast to warn me the other morning. I have spoken to M. de Turenne about you, and he is willing to overlook the complaint he had against you. For the rest, go to my closet, my friend. Go! Rosny knows my will respecting you.”

I had sense enough left to kneel and kiss his hand; but it was in silence, which he knew how to interpret. He had moved on and was speaking to another before I recovered the use of my tongue, or the wits which his gracious words had scattered. When I did so, and got on my feet again too, I found myself the centre of so much observation and the object of so many congratulations that I was glad to act upon

the hint which La Varenne gave me, and hurry away to the closet.

Here, though I had now an inkling of what I had to expect, I found myself received with a kindness which bade fair to overwhelm me. Only M. de Rosny was in the room, and he took me by both hands in a manner which told me without a word that the Rosny of old days was back, and that for the embarrassment I had caused him of late I was more than forgiven. When I tried to thank him for the good offices which I knew he had done me with the king, he would have none of it; reminding me with a smile that he had eaten of my cheese when the choice lay between that and Lisieux.

“And besides, my friend,” he continued, his eyes twinkling, “you have made me richer by five hundred crowns.”

“How so?” I asked, wondering more and more.

“I wagered that sum with Turenne that he could not bribe you,” he answered, smiling.

“And see,” he continued, selecting from some on the table the same parchment I had seen before, “here is the bribe. Take it; it is yours. I have given a score to-day, but none with the same pleasure. Let me be the first to congratulate the Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac.”

For a while I could not believe that he was in earnest; which pleased him mightily, I remember. When I was brought at last to see that the king had meant this for me from the first, and had merely lent the patent to Turenne that the latter might make trial of me, my pleasure and gratification were such that I could no more express them than I can now describe them. For they knew no bounds. I stood before Rosny silent and confused, with long-forgotten tears welling up to my eyes, and one regret only in my heart, that my dear mother had not lived to see the fond illusions with which I had so often amused her turned to sober fact. Not then, but afterwards, I remarked that the salary of my office

amounted to the exact sum which I had been in the habit of naming to her; and I learned that Rosny had himself fixed it on information given him by Mademoiselle de la Vire.

As my transports grew more moderate, and I found voice to thank my benefactor, he had still an answer. "Do not deceive yourself, my friend," he said gravely. "or think this an idle reward. My master is King of France, but he is a king without a kingdom, and a captain without money. To-day, to gain his rights, he has parted with half his powers. Before he win all back there will be blows—blows, my friend. And to that end I have bought your sword."

I told him that if no other left its scabbard for the king, mine should be drawn.

"I believe you," he answered kindly, laying his hand on my shoulder. "Not by reason of your words—Heaven knows I have heard vows enough to-day!—but because I have proved you. And now," he continued, speaking in an altered tone and looking at me with

a queer smile, “now I suppose you are perfectly satisfied? You have nothing more to wish for, my friend?”

I looked aside in a guilty fashion, not daring to prefer on the top of all his kindness a further petition. Moreover, his Majesty might have other views; or on this point Turenne might have proved obstinate. In a word, there was nothing in what had happened, or in M. de Rosny’s communication, to inform me whether the wish of my heart was to be gratified or not.

But I should have known that great man better than to suppose that he was one to promise without performing, or to wound a friend when he could not salve the hurt. After enjoying my confusion for a time he burst into a great shout of laughter, and taking me familiarly by the shoulders, turned me towards the door. “There go!” he said. “Go up the passage. You will find a door on the right, and a door on the left. You will know which to open.”

Forbidding me to utter a syllable, he put me out. In the passage, where I fain would have stood awhile to collect my thoughts, I was affrighted by sounds which warned me that the king was returning that way. Fearing to be surprised by him in such a state of perturbation, I hurried to the end of the passage, where I discovered, as I had been told, two doors.

They were both closed, and there was nothing about either of them to direct my choice. But M. de Rosny was correct in supposing that I had not forgotten the advice he had offered me on the day when he gave me so fine a surprise in his own house—  
“When you want a good wife, M. de Marsae, turn to the right!” I remembered the words, and without a moment’s hesitation—for the king and his suite were already entering the passage—I knocked boldly, and scarcely waiting for an invitation, went in.

Fanchette was by the door, but stood aside with a grim smile, which I was at liberty to



accept as a welcome or not. Mademoiselle, who had been seated on the farther side of the table, rose as I entered, and we stood looking at one another. Doubtless she waited for me to speak first; while I on my side was so greatly taken aback by the change wrought in her by the court dress she was wearing and the air of dignity with which she wore it, that I stood gasping. I turned toward after all that had passed between us. This was not the girl I had wooed in the greenwoods by St. Gaultier; nor the pale-faced woman I had lifted to the saddle a score of times in the journey Paris-wards. The sense of unworthiness which I had experienced a few minutes before in the crowded antechamber returned in full force in presence of her grace and beauty, and once more I stood tongue-tied before her, as I had stood in the lodgings at Blois. All the later time, all that had passed between us, was forgotten.

She, for her part, looked at me, wondering at my silence. Her face, which had grown

rosy red at my entrance, turned pale again. Her eyes grew large with alarm; she began to beat her foot on the floor in a manner I knew. "Is anything the matter, sir?" she muttered at last.

"On the contrary, mademoiselle," I answered hoarsely, looking every way, and grasping at the first thing I could think of, "I am just from M. de Rosny."

"And he?"

"He has made me Lieutenant-Governor of the Armagnac."

She curtseyed to me in a wonderful fashion. "It pleases me to congratulate you, sir," she said, in a voice between laughing and crying. "It is not more than equal to your deserts."

I tried to thank her becomingly, feeling at the same time more foolish than I had ever felt in my life; for I knew that this was neither what I had come to tell nor she to hear. Yet I could not muster up courage nor find words to go farther, and stood by the table in a state of miserable discomposure.

“Is that all, sir?” she said at last, losing patience.

Certainly it was now or never, and I knew it. I made the effort. “No, mademoiselle,” I said in a low voice. “Far from it. But I do not see here the lady to whom I came to address myself, and to whom I have seen a hundred times in far other garb than yours, wet and weary and dishevelled, in danger and in flight. Her I have served and loved; and for her I have lived. I have had no thought for months that has not been hers, nor care save for her. I and all that I have by the king’s bounty are hers, and I came to lay them at her feet. But I do not see her here.”

“No, sir?” she answered in a whisper, with her face averted.

“No, Mademoiselle.”

With a sudden brightness and quickness which set my heart beating she turned, and looked at me. “Indeed!” she said. “I am sorry for that. It is a pity your love should

be given elsewhere, M. de Marsac—since it is the king's will that you should marry me.”

“Ah, Mademoiselle !” I cried, kneeling before her—for she had come round the table and stood beside me—“But you ?”

“It is my will too, sir,” she answered, smiling through her tears.

On the following day Mademoiselle de la Vire became my wife ; the king's retreat from Paris, which was rendered necessary by the desertion of many who were ill-affected to the Huguenots, compelling the instant performance of the marriage, if we would have it read by M. d'Amours. This haste notwithstanding, I was enabled by the kindness of M. d'Agen to make such an appearance, in respect both of servants and equipment, as became rather my future prospects than my past distresses. It is true that his Majesty, out of a desire to do nothing which might offend Turenne, did not honour us with his presence ; but Madame Catherine attended on his behalf, and herself gave me my bride.

M. de Sully and M. Crillon, with the Marquis de Rambouillet and his nephew, and my distant connection, the Duke de Rohan, who first acknowledged me on that day, were among those who earned my gratitude by attending me upon the occasion.

The marriage of M. François d'Agen with the widow of my old rival and opponent did not take place until something more than a year later, a delay which was less displeasing to me than to the bridegroom, inasmuch as it left madame at liberty to bear my wife company during my absence on the campaign of Arques and Ivry. In the latter battle, which added vastly to the renown of M. de Rosny, who captured the enemy's standard with his own hand, I had the misfortune to be wounded in the second of the two charges led by the king; and being attacked by two foot soldiers, as I lay entangled I must inevitably have perished but for the aid afforded me by Simon Fleix, who flew to the rescue with the courage of a veteran. His action

was observed by the king, who begged him from me, and attaching him to his own person in the capacity of clerk, started him so fairly on the road to fortune that he has since risen beyond hope or expectation.

The means by which Henry won for a time the support of Turenne (and incidentally procured his consent to my marriage) are now too notorious to require explanation. Nevertheless, it was not until the vicomte's union a year later with Mademoiselle de la Marck, who brought him the Duchy of Bouillon, that I thoroughly understood the matter; or the kindness peculiar to the king, my master, which impelled that great monarch, in the arrangement of affairs so vast, to remember the interests of the least of his servants.

THE END.









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