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The Marquis of Carabas

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BOOK ONE

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Chapter One⋆MASTER-AT-ARMS

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There is, you will come to agree, a certain humour to be discovered in the fact that Monsieur de Morlaix accounted himself free of the sin by which the angels fell, took ‘parva domus magna quies’ for his motto, accounted tranquillity the greatest good, and regarded as illusory and hollow the worldly prizes for which men sweat and bleed.

That was before the sight of Mademoiselle de Chesnières came to disturb his poise. It was also at a time when, living in a state of comparative affluence, he could afford such views. For he enjoyed an income greater even than that earned by the famous Angelo Tremamondo, whose show pupil he had been and a part of whose mantle had descended to him. And he enjoyed, too, the benevolent aid of Madam Fortune. She had spared him the years of arduous toil by which men usually climb to their ultimate eminence. She had lifted him at the very outset to the summit.

The manner of his becoming thus, *per saltum*, London’s most famous and fashionable master-at-arms was demonstrably of her contriving.

This Quentin de Morlaix, whose peculiar mental equipment and steady nerves enhanced the natural aptitude of his spare, vigorous body for the exercise of arms, was encouraged by Angelo—too well established and prosperous to be apprehensive of competition—to adopt swordsmanship as a profession, so as to supplement the very meagre income of his mother.

But there were other masters-at-arms in London who could not view a fresh arrival in their ranks with the same complacency; and one of these, the well-known Rédas, carried resentment so far as to publish a letter in *The Morning Chronicle* in which he held up to cruellest ridicule the youthful new-comer.

It was the more unpardonable because Rédas himself was in flourishing circumstances, and next to Henry Angelo's, his school was the best attended in Town. His criticisms were accounted of weight; and crushed by them, it might well have followed that Morlaix would have accepted the dismissal from the ranks of fencing-masters which that abominable letter was calculated to pronounce. Fortunately, the generous-hearted Angelo was at hand to inspire confidence and dictate a course of action.

"You will answer him, Quentin. You will not waste words. You will accept his description of you as a bungling dilettante, and you will inform him that this being so he will the more easily defeat you in the match for a hundred guineas to which you have the honour to invite him."

Quentin smiled his regrets. "It would be amusing so to answer him if I disposed of a hundred guineas and dared to risk them."

"You misunderstand me. That is the sum for which I will back you against better men than Rédas."

"It's a flattering confidence. But if I should lose your money?"

"You won't have done yourself justice. I know your strength, and I know Rédas', and I am content."

So the challenging letter was sent, and its appearance in *The Morning Chronicle* produced a mild sensation. It was impossible for Rédas to refuse the trial of skill. He was caught in the trap of his own malice. But he was so little aware of it that his acceptance was couched in terms of scornful insult and garnished with assertions of the phlebotomy he would perform upon his rash challenger if his profession did not preclude a meeting with unbuttoned foils.

“You will reply to this bombast,” said Angelo again, “that since he desires phlebotomy, you will gratify him by using the *pointe d’arrêt*. And you will add the condition that the match shall consist of a single assault for the best of six hits.” The old master answered Morlaix’s look of astonishment by laying a finger to his nose. “I know what I’m doing, child.”

After his jactancy Rédas could not refuse either condition without rendering himself ridiculous, and so the matter was settled.

The courtly old Angelo, acting for Quentin, made the necessary arrangements, and the meeting took place in Rédas’ own academy in the presence of his pupils, their friends, and some others drawn by the correspondence, making up an attendance a couple of hundred strong. The thrifty Rédas had been inspired to charge a half-guinea a head for admission, so that whatever happened his stake would be fully covered.

The fashionable crowd came with manifest intent to heap ridicule upon the presumptuous young fool who dared to measure himself against so redoubtable a master, and to embitter with their laughter the humiliation which they

perceived in store for him. There was laughter and there were some audible jeers to greet his appearance, in contrast with the applause that had hailed the entrance of the formidable Rédas.

Added to the memory of the taunts in his opponent's published letters, this insultingly expressed partisanship filled Quentin de Morlaix with anger. But it was of a cold and steadying kind, which determined him in the scrupulous observance of the plan that Angelo had laid down for him, the plan at the root of the insistence upon a single assault without respite until the best of the six hits had been delivered.

Old Angelo, still youthful of figure at sixty and a model of grace and elegance in an apricot velvet coat above black satin breeches, acted as his pupil's second, and conducted Quentin to the middle of the fencing floor, where Rédas and his second waited.

The audience, composed mainly of men of fashion, included also a few ladies and some early French émigrés; for this happened in the year 1791, before the heavy exodus from France. These spectators were ranged along the sides and at the ends of the long barn-like room. It was a morning of early spring, and the light, from four windows placed high in the northern wall, was as excellent as could be desired.

As the two swordsmen faced each other, stripped to the waist in accordance with the conditions Quentin had made, the general chatter rippled into silence.

The advantages of wind and limb were certainly with Morlaix. Lean and long, his naked torso, gleaming white above his black satin smalls, seemed muscled in whipcord.

Nevertheless Rédas, for all that at forty-four he was almost twice the age of his opponent, looked formidable: a compact, swarthy, hairy man of obvious power and vigour. It was a contrast of mastiff with greyhound. Rédas had discarded his wig for a black silk scarf in which his cropped head was swathed. Morlaix wore his own hair, dark chestnut in colour and luxuriant, tightly queued.

Formally the seconds examined the adjustments of the arresting point with which each foil had been fitted. It consisted of a diminutive trident, strapped over the button, each of its sharp steel points being a half-inch long.

Satisfied, they placed their men in position. The blades were crossed, and for a moment held lightly by Angelo at the point of contact. Then he gave the word and stood clear.

“Allez, messieurs!”

The released blades slithered and tinkled lightly one against the other. The engagement was on.

Rédas, determined upon making an end so speedy as to mark the contemptible inferiority of the rash upstart who ventured to oppose him, attacked with a dash and vigour that seemed irresistible. That it should be resisted at all sowed in the onlookers a surprise that grew steadily as the resistance was protracted. Soon the reason for it began to appear. Morlaix, as cool and easy as he was determined, ventured no counters, not so much as a riposte that might give his adversary an opening, but contented himself with standing on the defensive, concentrating his play in the deflection of every thrust and lunge whirled against him in fiercely swift succession. Moreover, by playing close, with his elbow well flexed, using only his forearm and the forte of

his blade, he met, with the minimum exertion of strength, an onslaught that was recklessly prodigal of energy.

The counsels of Angelo had determined these tactics, calculated to avenge as signally as Morlaix's powers might permit the insults of which he had been the butt. The aim was not merely to defeat Rédas, but to make that defeat so utter as to leave him crushed under a recoil of the ridicule which he had used so lavishly. Therefore, whilst taking no risks, Morlaix made use of his every natural advantage, the chief of which were his youth and greater staying power. These he would carefully conserve whilst Rédas spent himself in the fierce persistent attack which had been foreseen. Morlaix calculated also that these tactics and his opponent's impotence to defeat them and to draw him into counter-attacking, would presently act upon Rédas' temper, driving him to increase the fury of his onslaught and thus hasten that breathlessness and exhaustion for which Morlaix was content maliciously to wait.

It came as he had calculated.

At first Rédas, whilst fencing with unsparing vigour, had yet preserved the academic correctness to be expected in a maître d'armes. But with the growth of his irritation before that impenetrable defence, which nothing could lure even momentarily into an offensive, he descended to tricks of swashbuckling, accompanying feintes by exclamations and foot-stampings intended to deceive the opponent into mistaking a false attack for a real one. When by such devices he had merely succeeded in the further waste of an energy of which he had now none to spare, he fell back and paused so as to give expression to his anger.

“What’s this? Morbleu! Do we fight, or do we play at fighting?”

Yet even as he spoke he was conscious that this verbal attempt to save his face did him no better service than his fencing. Even if he should still prevail in the end—and that, at least, he had not yet come to doubt—his could no longer be that masterly overwhelming victory upon which he had counted. Too long already had his crafty opponent withstood him, and in the utter silence that had now settled upon the ranks of the spectators he perceived an astonishment that humiliated him.

Worse than this, there were actually one or two who laughed as if in approval of Quentin’s answer to his foolish question.

“It is what I was asking myself, cher maître. Do not, I beg you, be reluctant to make good your boasts.”

Rédas said no more. But even through the meshes of his mask the baleful glare of his eyes could be discerned. Enraged by the taunt, he renewed the attack, still with the same unsparing vigour. But it did not last. He began to pay for the hot pace he had made in his rash confidence that the engagement would be a short one. He began to understand, and enraged the more because he understood, the crafty motive underlying the condition that the combat should be limited to a single assault. His breathing began to trouble him; his muscles began to lose resilience. Perceiving this in the slackening speed and loss of precision, Morlaix tested him by a sudden riposte, which he was barely in time to parry. He longed desperately for that pause, be it of but a few seconds, which the conditions denied him.

He fell back in an endeavour to try to steal it. But Morlaix was swift to follow him. And now Rédas, half-winded, weary and dispirited, found himself giving ground before an attack pressed by an opponent who was still comparatively fresh. It broke upon him in answer to an almost despairing lunge in which the master had extended himself so fully and with such disregard of academic rules that he employed his left hand to support him on the ground. A counter-parry swept his blade clear, and a lightning riposte planted the prongs of the arresting point high upon his breast.

A murmur rippled through the assembly as he recovered, with the blood trickling from that superficial wound. He fell back beyond his opponent's reach in another desperate hope of a respite for his labouring lungs.

Actually Morlaix allowed it him, what time he mocked him.

"I will not further tax your patience, cher maître. Now guard yourself."

He went in with a feinte in the low lines, whence he whirled his point into carte as he lunged, and planted the trident over the master's heart.

"Two!" he counted as he recovered. "And now, in tierce, thus, the third." Again the points tore the master's flesh. But crueller far the words that tore his soul. "Pah! They told me you were a fencing-master, and you're but a *tirailleur de régiment*. It's time to make an end. Where will you have it? In carte again, shall we say?"

Once more Morlaix thrust low, and as Rédas, grown sluggish, moved his blade to the parry, the point flashed in over his guard. "Thus!"

And there, as the fourth hit went home, so violently that Quentin’s foil was bent into an arc, the seconds intervened. The master’s ignominious defeat was complete, and from the spectators who had come to mock him Morlaix received the ovation earned by his concluding supreme display of mastery.

Rédas plucked the mask from a face that was grey. He stood forth railing and raging whilst the blood streamed from his labouring chest. “Ah, ça! You applaud him, do you? Quelle lâcheté! You do not perceive how base were his methods.” Passion strangled him. “That was not to fight, that. He has the younger heart and lungs. He used the advantage of those. You saw that he did not dare attack until I was tired. If this coward had played fair—crédieu!—you would have seen a different end.”

“And so we should,” said Angelo, intervening, “if you had fought with your tongue, Rédas, or with your pen. Those are the weapons of which you are really master. In swordsmanship Monsieur de Morlaix has shown that he can give you lessons.”

So much was this the common opinion, that most of those who had come to jeer at Morlaix were the first to transfer themselves to his school, whilst such was the stir made in Town by the affair, so swiftly and widely did it spread the fame of the new fencing-master, that he found his academy overcrowded almost from the hour of its establishment.

This instant, fortuitous flow of prosperity compelled him to engage assistants, justified his removal to handsome

premises in Bruton Street, and enabled him to bring the ease of affluence into the closing years of his mother’s life.

In the four years that were sped since its foundation the Académie Morlaix, under royal patronage, had become fashionable not only as a fencing-school, but as a resort. The long, austerely bare salle d’armes on the ground floor, the gallery above it, the elegant adjacent rooms, and in fine weather even the little garden, where Morlaix cultivated his roses, came to be frequented by other than fencers. The continuing and ever-increasing flow of French emigrants to London in those days was largely responsible for converting the academy into a fashionable meeting-place. It may have begun in an assumption that Monsieur de Morlaix was, himself, one of those fugitives from the Revolution who were compelled to apply such aptitudes as they possessed to the earning of a livelihood. By the time this misapprehension had been corrected the character of the fencing-school had been established as an agreeable rendezvous for émigrés, and one in which these exiled nobles were under no necessity of spending any of the money that was so painfully scarce with them.

Morlaix encouraged them by the affability that was natural to his easy-going temperament. Reared from infancy in England, and an Englishman in tastes and outlook, yet his French blood lent him a natural warmth of heart for his compatriots. He made them welcome to his well-appointed establishment, encouraged them to frequent it, and out of his prosperity—for his school was reputed to earn upwards of three thousand pounds a year, which was affluence indeed in the days of King George III—he dispensed a liberal

hospitality, and eased the financial embarrassment of many an émigré in those days that were so dark and grim for the French noblesse.

Chapter II⋆MADEMOISELLE DE CHESNIÈRES

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It is, as I have indicated, from his meeting with Mademoiselle de Chesnières that he dates the awakening of ambition in him; that is to say, of discontent with a lot which hitherto had fully satisfied him and of desire to fill in life a loftier station.

That historic event is placed some four years after the founding of his academy. Its scene was the mansion of the Duc de Lionne in Berkeley Square. The young Duke having married soon after his emigration the heiress of one of those upstart nawabs who had enriched themselves with the plunder of the Indies, had been so far removed by this matrimonial opportunism from the indigence afflicting so many of his noble compatriots that he was enabled to live in a splendour even surpassing that of which the Revolution had deprived him in France.

His house, and to a limited extent his purse, were at all times open to his less-fortunate fellow-exiles of birth, and once a week his good-natured Duchess held a salon for their reception and entertainment, where music, dancing, charades, conversation, and—most welcome of all to many of those half-famished aristocrats—refreshments were to be enjoyed.

Morlaix owed his invitation to the fact that the Duke, with ambitions to excel as a swordsman, was of an assiduous attendance at the Bruton Street academy round the corner.

For the rest it came to him chiefly because the Duke had fallen into the common habit of regarding Morlaix as a fellow-émigré.

In shimmering black and silver, with silver clocks to his stockings, paste buckles to his red-heeled shoes and a dusting of powder on his unclubbed, severely queued hair, his moderately tall, well-knit figure, of that easy deportment which constant fencing brings, was of the few that took the eye in an assembly that in the main was shabby-genteel.

To many of the men he was already known, for many of them were of those who attended his academy, a few to fence, and more merely to lounge in his antechamber. By some of these he was presented to others: to Madame de Genlis, who made a bare living by painting indifferently little landscapes on the lids of fancy boxes; to the Countesses de Sisseral and de Lastic, who conducted an establishment of modes charitably set up for them by the Marchioness of Buckingham; to the Marquise des Réaux, who earned what she could by the confection of artificial flowers; to the Comte de Chaumont, who was trading in porcelains; to the Chevalier de Payen, who was prospering as a dancing-master; to the Duchesse de Villejoyeuse, who taught French and music, being imperfectly acquainted with either; and there was the learned, courtly Gautier de Brécy, who had been rescued from starvation to catalogue the library of a Mr. Simmons. Thus were these great ones of the earth, these lilies of the field, brought humbly to toil and spin for bare existence. None of it was toil of an exalted order. Yet that there were limits imposed by birth to the depths to

which one might descend in the struggle against hunger, Morlaix received that night an illustration.

He found himself caught up in a group of men that had clustered about the Vicomte du Pont de Bellanger. It included the corpulent Comte de Narbonne, the witty Montlosier, the Duc de La Châtre, and some émigré officers who subsisted on an allowance of a shilling or two a day from the British Government. These Bellanger was entertaining in his rich, sonorous voice with the scandalous case of Aimé de La Vauvraye, on whom sentence had that day been passed. Bellanger's manner, pompously histrionic and rich in gesture, went admirably with his voice and inflated diction. A tall man, of a certain studied grace, with hair of a luxuriant and lustrous black, eyes large, dark and liquid, and lips full and sensuous, he carried that too-handsome head at an angle that compelled him to look down his shapely nose upon the world. Arrested and sentenced to death by the Revolutionary Tribunal of St. Malo, he had saved his head by a sensational escape, which made him famous in London émigré society, and procured him in particular the admiration of the ladies, of which, having left a wife in France, he accounted it due to himself to miss no advantage.

To-night he was more than ordinarily swollen with importance by the part he had played in the case of M. de La Vauvraye. That unfortunate gentleman, a Knight of St. Louis, had so far forgotten what was due to the order of which he had the honour to be a member, as to have taken service as valet to a Mr. Thornton, a wealthy merchant of the city of London. It was a scandal, said M. de Bellanger,

which could not possibly be overlooked. The Vicomte and three general officers had constituted themselves into a chapter of the order. They had that morning attended as a preliminary a Mass of the Holy Ghost, whereafter they had sat in judgment upon the unfortunate man.

“We found,” Bellanger declaimed, “and you will say, messieurs, that we were right to find, that the state of servitude with which this unhappy man did not blush to confess that he had stained himself, left us no choice but to condemn him. Our sentence was that he surrender his cross, and that he never again assume any of the distinctive marks of the Royal and Military Order of St. Louis, or the title or quality of a knight of that order. And we are publishing our sentence in the English news-sheets, so that England may be made aware of what is due to so exalted an order.”

“What,” asked one of the listeners, “was La Vauvraye’s defence?”

Bellanger took snuff delicately from a hand that first had been outflung. “The unhappy creature had none. He pleaded weakly that he accepted the only alternative to charity or starvation.”

“And so far forgot himself as to prefer dishonour,” said an officer.

Narbonne fetched a sigh from his great bulk. “The sentence was harsh, but in the circumstances inevitable.”

“Inevitable, indeed,” agreed another, whilst yet another added: “You had no choice but to expel him from the order.”

Bellanger received these approvals as tributes to his judgment. But meeting the fencing-master’s eyes, something in their grey depths offended his self-satisfaction.

“Monsieur de Morlaix is perhaps of another mind?”

“I confess it,” Morlaix spoke lightly. “The gentleman appears to have been moved by too scrupulous a sense of honour.”

Bellanger’s brows went up. His full eyes stared forbiddingly.

“Really, sir! Really! I think that would be difficult to explain.”

“Oh, no. Not difficult. He might have borrowed money, knowing that he could not repay it; or he might have practised several of the confidence tricks in vogue and rendered easy to the possessor of a cross of St. Louis.”

“Would you dare, sir,” wondered the Duc de La Châtre, “to suggest that any Knight of St. Louis could have recourse to such shifts?”

“It is not a suggestion, Monsieur le Duc. It is an affirmation. And made with authority. I have been a victim. Oh, but let me assure you, a conscious and willing victim.”

He possessed a voice that was clear and pleasantly modulated, and although he kept it level, there was a ring in it that penetrated farther than he was aware and produced now in his neighbourhood a silence of which he was unconscious.

“Of Monsieur de La Vauvraye,” he continued, “let me tell you something more. He borrowed a guinea from me a month ago. He is by no means the only Knight of St. Louis who has borrowed my guineas. But he is the only one who has ever repaid me. That was a week ago, and I must suppose that he earned that guinea as a valet. If you have

debts, messieurs, it seems to me that no servitude that enables you to repay them can be accounted dishonouring."

He passed on, leaving them agape, and it was in that moment, whilst behind him Bellanger was ejaculating horror and amazement, that he found himself face to face with Mademoiselle de Chesnières.

She was moderately tall and of a virginal slenderness not to be dissembled by her panniers of flowered rose silk of a fashion that was now expiring. Her hair, of palest gold, was piled high above a short oval face lighted by eyes of vivid blue that were eager and alert. Those eyes met his fully and frankly, and sparkled with the half-smile, at once friendly and imperious, that was breaking on the delicate parted lips. The smile, which seemed to be of welcome, startled him until intuition told him that it was of approval. She had overheard him, and he felicitated himself upon the chance use of words which had commended him in advance. From which you will gather that already, at a glance, as it were, he discovered the need to be commended to her.

Delight and something akin to panic came to him altogether in the discovery that she was speaking to him in a soft, level, cultured voice that went well with her imperious air. That she ignored the fact that he was a stranger, which in another might have been accounted boldness, seemed in her the result of a breeding so sure of itself as to trust implicitly to the boundaries in which it hedged her.

"You are brave, Monsieur," was all she said.

The ease with which he answered her surprised him. "Brave? I hope so. But in what do I proclaim it?"

“It was brave in such company as that to have broken a lance for the unfortunate Monsieur de La Vauvraye.”

“A friend of yours, perhaps?”

“I have not even his acquaintance. But I should be proud to count so honest a gentleman among my friends. You perceive how fully I agree with you, and why I take satisfaction in your courage.”

“Alas! I must undeceive you there. Perhaps I but abuse the disabilities under which my profession places me.”

Her eyes widened. “You have not the air of an abbé.”

“I am not one. Nevertheless I am just as debarred from sending a challenge, and not likely to receive one.”

“But who are you then?”

This may well have been the moment in which dissatisfaction with his lot awoke in him. It would have been magnificently gratifying to announce himself as a person of exalted rank to this little lady with the airs of a princess, to have answered her: “I am the Duc de Morlaix, peer of France,” instead of answering, as truth compelled him, simply and dryly: “Morlaix, maître d’armes,” to which he added with a bow, “Serviteur.”

It produced in her no such change as he dreaded. She was smiling again. “Now that I come to look at you more closely, you have the air of one. It makes you even braver. For it was your moral courage that I admired.”

To his chagrin they were interrupted by an untidily made woman of middle age, large and loose of body and lean of limb. An enormous head-dress, powdered and festooned, towered above a countenance that once may have been pretty, but must always have been foolish. Now, with its

pale eyes and lipless, simpering mouth, it was merely mean. A valuable string of pearls adorned a neck in scraggy contrast with the opulent breast from which it sprang. Diamonds blazing on a corsage of royal blue proclaimed her among the few Frenchwomen who had not yet been driven to take advantage of the kindly willingness of Messrs. Pope & Co., of Old Burlington Street, to acquire for cash—as advertised in *The Morning Chronicle*—the jewels of French emigrants.

"You have found a friend, Germaine." He was not sure whether there was irony in the acid voice, but quite sure of the disapproval in her glance.

"A kinsman, I think," the little lady startled him by answering. "This is Monsieur Morlaix."

"Morlaix? Morlaix of what?" the elder woman asked.

"Morlaix of nothing, of nowhere, Madame. Just Morlaix. Quentin de Morlaix."

"I seem to have heard of a Quentin in the House of Morlaix. But if you are not a Morlaix de Chesnières I am probably mistaken." She announced herself with conscious pride: "I am Madame de Chesnières de Chesnes, and this is my niece, Mademoiselle de Chesnières. We find life almost insupportable in this dreary land, and we put our hopes in such men as you to restore us soon to our beloved France."

"Such men as I, Madame?"

"Assuredly. You will be joining one of the regiments that are being formed for the enterprise of M. de Puisaye."

Bellanger, arm-in-arm with Narbonne, came to intrude upon them. "Did I hear the odious name of Puisaye? The man's astounding impudence disgusts me."

Mademoiselle looked up at him. Her eyes were cold. “At least he is impudent to some purpose. He succeeds with Mr. Pitt where more self-sufficient gentlemen have failed.”

Bellanger’s indulgent laugh deflected the rebuke. “That merely condemns the discernment of Mr. Pitt. Notorious dullards, these English. Their wits are saturated by their fogs.”

“We enjoy their hospitality, M. le Vicomte. You should remember it.”

He was unabashed. “I do. And count it not the least of our misfortunes. We live here without sun, without fruit, without wine that a man may drink. It is of a piece with the rest that the apathy of the British Government towards our cause should have been conquered by this M. de Puisaye, an upstart, a constitutionalist, an impure.”

“Yet the Princes, M. le Vicomte, in their despair must clutch at straws.”

“That is well said, pardi!” swore Narbonne. “In Puisaye they clutch at straw, indeed: at a man of straw.” He laughed explosively at his own wit, and M. de Bellanger condescended to be amused.

“Admirable, my dear Count. Yet Monsieur de Morlaix does not even smile.”

“Faith no,” said Quentin. “I confess to a failing. I can never perceive wit that has no roots in reason. We cannot hope to change a substance by changing the name of it.”

“I find you obscure, Monsieur Morlaix.”

“Let me help you. It cannot be witty to say that my sword is made of straw when it remains of steel.”

“And the application of that, if you please?”

“Why, that Monsieur de Puisaye being a man of steel, does not become of straw from being called so.”

The cast with which the eyes of Monsieur de Narbonne were afflicted gave him now a sinister appearance. Bellanger breathed hard.

“A friend of yours, this notorious Count Joseph, I suppose.”

“I have never so much as seen him. But I have heard what he is doing, and I conceive that every gentleman in exile should be grateful.”

“If you were better informed upon the views that become a gentleman, Monsieur de Morlaix,” said Bellanger with his drawling insolence, “you might hold a different opinion.”

“Faith, yes,” Narbonne agreed. “A fencing academy is hardly a school of honour.”

“If it were, Messieurs,” said Mademoiselle sweetly, “I think that you might both attend it with profit.”

Narbonne gasped. But Bellanger carried it off with his superior laugh. “Touché, pardi! Touché!” He dragged Narbonne away.

“You are pert, Germaine,” her aunt’s pursed lips reproved her. “There is no dignity in pertness. Monsieur de Morlaix, I am sure, could answer for himself.”

“Alas, Madame,” said Quentin, “there was but one answer I could return to that, and, again, the disabilities of my profession silenced me.”

“Besides, sir, French swords are required for other ends. What regiment do you join?”

“Regiment?” He was at a loss.

“Of those that Monsieur de Puisaye is to take to France: the Loyal Émigrant, the Royal Louis and the rest?”

“That is not for me, Madame.”

“Not for you? A Frenchman? A man of the sword? Do you mean that you are not going to France?”

“I have not thought of it, Madame. I have no interests to defend in France.”

Mademoiselle’s eyes lost, he thought, some of the warmth in which they had been regarding him. “There are nobler things than interest to be fought for. There is a great cause to serve; great wrongs to be set right.”

“That is for those who have been dispossessed; for those who have been driven into exile. In fighting for the cause of monarchy, they fight for the interests bound up with it. I am not of those, Mademoiselle.”

“How, not of those?” asked Madame. “Are you not an émigré like the rest of us?”

“Oh, no, Madame. I have lived in England since I was four years of age.”

He would not have failed to notice how that answer seemed to startle her had not Mademoiselle commanded his attention. “But you are entirely French,” she was insisting.

“In blood, entirely.”

“Then, do you owe that blood no duty? Do you not owe it to France to lend a hand in her regeneration?” Her eyes were challenging, imperious.

“I wish, Mademoiselle, that I could answer with the enthusiasm you expect. But I am of a simple, truthful nature. These are matters that have never preoccupied me. You see, I am not politically minded.”

“This, Monsieur, is less a question of politics than of ideals. You will not tell me that you are without these?”

“I hope not. But they are not concerned with government or forms of government.”

Madame interposed. “How long do you say that you have been in England?”

“I came here with my mother, some four and twenty years ago, when my father died.”

“From what part of France do you come?”

“From the district of Angers.”

Madame seemed to have lost colour under her rouge. “And your father’s name?”

“Bertrand de Morlaix,” he answered simply, in surprise.

She nodded in silence, her expression strained.

“Now that is very odd,” said Mademoiselle, and looked at her aunt.

But Madame de Chesnières, paying no heed to her, resumed her questions. “And madame your mother? She is still alive?”

“Alas, no, Madame. She died a year ago.”

“But this is a catechism,” her niece protested.

“Monsieur de Morlaix will pardon me. And we detain him.” Her head-dress quivered grotesquely from some agitation that was shaking her. “Come, Germaine. Let us find St. Gilles.”

Under the suasion of her aunt’s bony, ring-laden hand, Mademoiselle de Chesnières was borne away, taking with her all Quentin’s interest in this gathering.

Lackeys moved through the chattering groups on the gleaming floor, bearing salvers of refreshments. Quentin

accepted a glass of Sillery. Whilst he stood sipping it he became aware that across the crowded, brilliantly lighted room Madame de Chesnières' fan was pointing him out to two young men between whom she was standing. His host, the Duc de Lionne, seeing him alone, came to join him at that moment. The interest which made those young men crane their necks to obtain a better view of him, led him to question the Duke upon their identity.

"But is it possible that you do not know the brothers Chesnières? St. Gilles, the elder, should interest a fencing-master. He is reckoned something of a swordsman. It has been said of him that he is the second blade in France."

Quentin was amused rather than impressed. "A daring claim. Rumour could not place him second unless it also named the first. Do you know, Monsieur le Duc, upon whom it has conferred that honour?"

"Upon his own cousin, Boisgelin, the heroic Royalist leader now in Brittany. Oh, but heroic in no other sense. A remorseless devil who has never scrupled to take advantage of his evil, deadly swordsmanship: that is to be an assassin. Boisgelin has already killed four men and made three widows. A bad man, the hero of Brittany. But then ..." The Duke raised his slim shoulders. "... the house of Chesnières does not produce saints. A tainted family. The last marquis was no better than an imbecile in his old age; the present one is shut up in a madhouse in Paris, and those gentlemen know how to profit by it." His tone was contemptuous. "He enjoys the immunity of his condition, and his estates are saved by it from the general confiscation. Those cousins of his live at ease here upon the revenues, and yet do nothing

to ease the lot of their less-fortunate fellow-exiles. I do not commend their acquaintance to you, Morlaix. A tainted family, the family of Chesnières.”