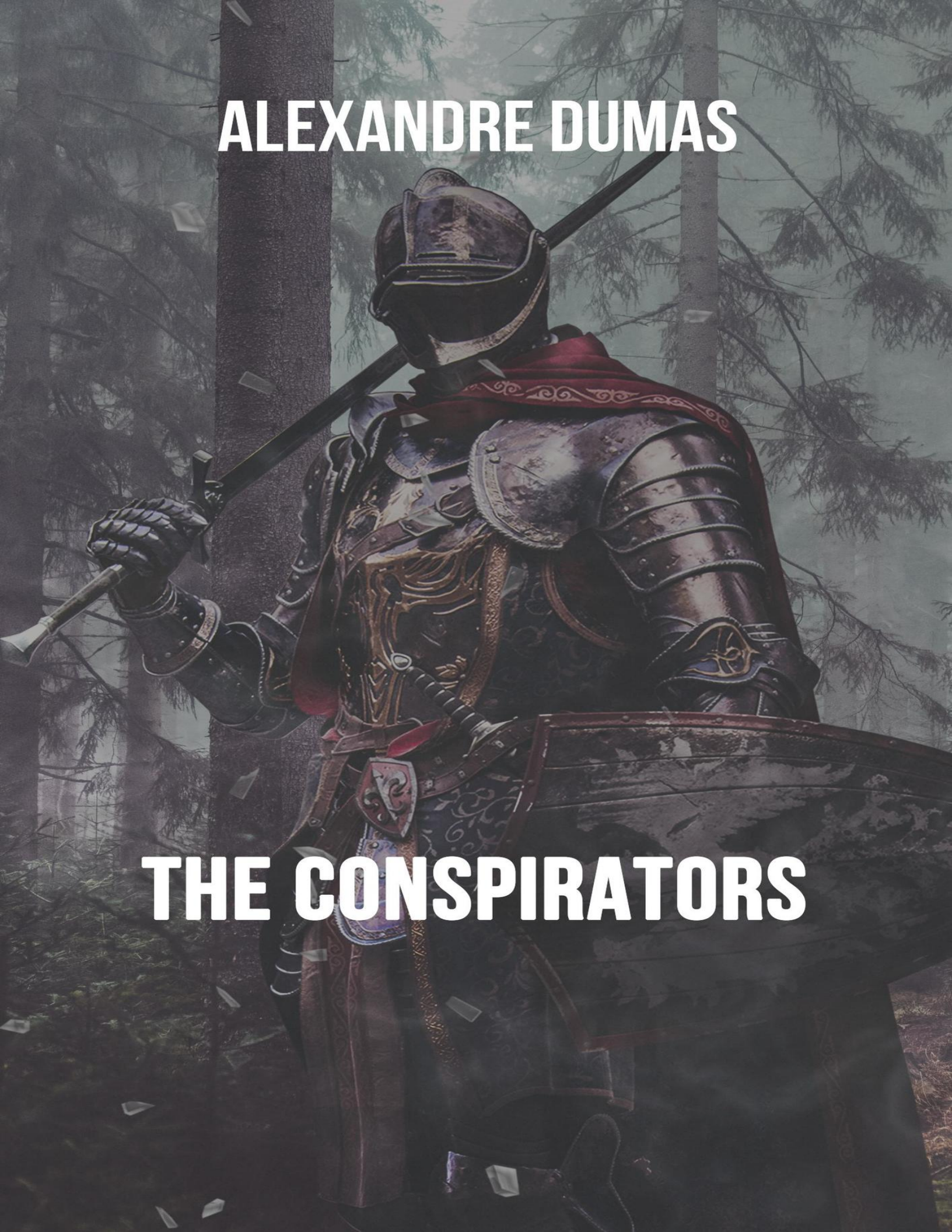
ALEXANDRE DUMAS



THE CONSPIRATORS

The Conspirators

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THE CONSPIRATORS:

THE CHEVALIER D'HARMENTAL.

Alexandre Dumas

CHAPTER I.

CAPTAIN ROQUEFINETTE.

On the 22d of March, in the year of our Lord 1718, a young cavalier of high bearing, about twenty-six or twenty-eight years of age, mounted on a pure-bred Spanish charger, was waiting, toward eight o'clock in the morning, at that end of the Pont Neuf which abuts on the Quai de l'Ecole.

He was so upright and firm in his saddle, that one might have imagined him to be placed there as a sentinel by the Lieutenant-General of Police, Messire Voyer d'Argenson. After waiting about half an hour, during which time he impatiently examined the clock of the Samaritaine, his glance, wandering till then, appeared to rest with satisfaction on an individual who, coming from the Place Dauphine, turned to the right, and advanced toward him.

The man who thus attracted the attention of the young chevalier was a powerfully-built fellow of five feet ten, wearing, instead of a peruke, a forest of his own black hair, slightly grizzled, dressed in a manner half-bourgeois, half-military, ornamented with a shoulder-knot which had once been crimson, but from exposure to sun and rain had become a dirty orange. He was armed with a long sword slung in a belt, and which bumped ceaselessly against the calves of his legs. Finally, he wore a hat once furnished with a plume and lace, and which—in remembrance, no doubt, of its past splendor—its owner had stuck so much over his left ear,

that it seemed as if only a miracle of equilibrium could keep it in its place. There was altogether in the countenance and in the carriage and bearing of the man (who seemed from forty to forty-five years of age, and who advanced swaggering and keeping the middle of the road, curling his mustache with one hand, and with the other signing to the carriages to give place), such a character of insolent carelessness, that the cavalier who watched him smiled involuntarily, as he murmured to himself, "I believe this is my man."

In consequence of this probability, he walked straight up to the new-comer, with the evident intention of speaking to him. The latter, though he evidently did not know the cavalier, seeing that he was going to address him, placed himself in the third position, and waited, one hand on his sword and the other on his mustache, to hear what the person who was coming up had to say to him. Indeed, as the man with the orange ribbon had foreseen, the young cavalier stopped his horse by him, and touching his hat—"Sir," said he, "I think I may conclude, from your appearance and manner, that you are a gentleman; am I mistaken?"

"No, palsam-bleu!" replied he to whom this strange question was addressed, touching his hat in his turn. "I am delighted that my appearance speaks so well for me, for, however little you would think that you were giving me my proper title, you may call me captain."

"I am enchanted that you are a sol[Pg 240]dier; it is an additional security to me that you are incapable of leaving a brave man in distress."

"Welcome, provided always the brave man has no need of my purse, for I confess, freely, that I have just left my last crown in a cabaret on the Port de la Tonnelle."

"Nobody wants your purse, captain; on the contrary, I beg you to believe that mine is at your disposal."

"To whom have I the honor to speak?" asked the captain, visibly touched by this reply, "and in what can I oblige you?"

"I am the Baron Rene de Valef," replied the cavalier.

"I think," interrupted the captain, "that I knew, in the Flemish wars, a family of that name."

"It was mine, since we are from Liege." The two speakers exchanged bows.

"You must know then," continued the Baron de Valef, "that the Chevalier Raoul d'Harmental, one of my most intimate friends, last night, in my company, picked up a quarrel, which will finish this morning by a meeting. Our adversaries were three, and we but two. I went this morning to the houses of the Marquis de Gacé and Comte de Sourgis, but unfortunately neither the one nor the other had passed the night in his bed; so, as the affair could not wait, as I must set out in two hours for Spain, and that we absolutely require a second, or rather a third, I installed myself on the Pont Neuf with the intention of addressing the first gentleman who passed. You passed, and I addressed myself to you."

"And you have done right, pardieu! rest satisfied, baron, I am your man. What hour is fixed for the meeting?"

"Half-past nine this morning."

"Where will it take place?"

"At the Port Maillot."

"Diable! there is no time to lose; but you are on horseback and I am on foot; how shall we manage that?"

"There is a way, captain."

"What is it?"

"It is that you should do me the honor of mounting behind me."

"Willingly, baron."

"I warn you, however," added the young cavalier, with a slight smile, "that my horse is rather spirited."

"Oh, I know him!" said the captain, drawing back a step, and looking at the beautiful animal with the eye of a connoisseur; "if I am not mistaken, he was bred between the mountains of Grenada and the Sierra Morena. I rode such a one at Almanza, and I have often made him lie down like a sheep

when he wanted to carry me off at a gallop, only by pressing him with my knees."

"You reassure me. To horse then, captain."——"Here I am, baron."

And without using the stirrup, which the young cavalier left free for him, with a single bound the captain sprang on to the croup.

The baron had spoken truly; his horse was not accustomed to so heavy a load, therefore he attempted to get rid of it. Neither had the captain exaggerated, and the animal soon felt that he had found his master; so that, after a few attempts, which had no other effect than to show to the passers-by the address of the two cavaliers, he became obedient, and went at a swinging trot down the Quai de l'Ecole, which at that time was nothing but a wharf, crossed at the same pace the Quai du Louvre and the Quai des Tuileries, through the gate of the Conference, and leaving on the left the road to Versailles, threaded the great avenue of the Champs-Elysées, which now leads to the triumphal Arc de l'Etoile. Arrived at the Pont d'Antin, the Baron de Valef slackened his horse's pace a little, for he found that he had ample time to arrive at the Port Maillot at the hour fixed.

The captain profited by this respite.

"May I, without indiscretion, ask why we are going to fight? I wish, you understand, to know that, in order to regulate my conduct toward my adversary, and to know whether it is worth killing him."

"That is only fair," answered the baron; "I will tell you everything as it passed. We were supping last night at La Fillon's. Of course you know La Fillon, captain?"

He attacked the captain with such fury that their swords engaged at the hilt.

"Pardieu! it was I who started her in the world, in 1705, before my Italian campaign."

"Well," replied the baron, laughing, "you may boast of a pupil who does you honor. Briefly, I supped there tete-à-tete with D'Harmental."

"Without any one of the fair sex?"

"Oh, mon Dieu, yes! I must tell you that D'Harmental is a kind of Trappist, only going to La Fillon's for fear of the reputation of not going there; only loving one woman at a time, and in love for the moment with the little D'Averne, the wife of the lieutenant of the guards."

"Very good!"

"We were there, chatting, when we heard a merry party enter the room next to ours. As our conversation did not concern anybody else, we kept silence, and, without intending it, heard the conversation of our neighbors. See what chance is. Our neighbors talked of the only thing which we ought not to have heard."

"Of the chevalier's mistress, perhaps?"

"Exactly. At the first words of their discourse which reached me, I rose, and tried to get Raoul away, but instead of following me, he put his hand on my shoulder, and made me sit down again. 'Then Philippe is making love to the little D'Averne?' said one. 'Since the fete of the Marechal d'Estrée, where she gave him a sword-belt with some verses, in which she compared him to Mars,' replied another voice. 'That is eight days ago,' said a third. 'Yes,' replied the first. 'Oh! she made a kind of resistance, either that she really held by poor D'Harmental, or that she knew that the regent only likes those who resist him. At last this morning, in exchange for a basketful of flowers and jewels, she has consented to receive his highness.'"

"Ah!" said the captain, "I begin to understand; the chevalier got angry."

"Exactly. Instead of laughing, as you or I would have done, and profiting by this circumstance to get back his brevet of colonel, which was taken from him under pretext of economy, D'Harmental became so pale that I thought he was going to faint; then, approaching the partition, and striking with his fist, to insure silence, 'Gentlemen,' said he, 'I am sorry to contradict you, but the one who said that Madame d'Averne had granted a rendezvous to the regent, or to any other, has told a lie.'

"'It was I who said it, and who repeat it, and if it displeases you, my name is Lafare, captain of the guards.' 'And mine, Fargy,' said a second voice. 'And mine, Ravanne,' said the third. 'Very well, gentlemen,' replied D'Harmental, 'to-morrow, from nine to half-past, at the Port Maillot.' And he sat down again opposite me. They talked of something else, and we finished our supper. That is the whole affair, captain, and you now know as much as I."

The captain gave vent to a kind of exclamation which seemed to say, "This is not very serious;" but in spite of this semi-disapprobation, he resolved none the less to support, to the best of his power, the cause of which he had so unexpectedly been made the champion, however defective that cause might appear to him in principle; besides, even had he wished it, he had gone too far to draw back. They had now arrived at the Port Maillot, and a young cavalier, who appeared to be waiting, and who had from a distance perceived the baron and the captain, put his horse to the gallop, and approached rapidly; this was the Chevalier d'Harmental.

"My dear chevalier," said the Baron de Valef, grasping his hand, "permit me, in default of an old friend, to present to you a new one. Neither Sourgis nor Gacé were at home. I met this gentleman on the Pont Neuf, and told him our embarrassment, and he offered himself to free us from it, with the greatest good will."

"I am doubly grateful to you then, my dear Valef," replied the chevalier, casting on the captain a look which betrayed a slight astonishment. "And to you, monsieur," continued he. "I must excuse myself for making your acquaintance by mixing you up thus with an unpleasant affair. But you will afford me one day or another an opportunity to[Pg 242] return your kindness, and I hope and beg that, an opportunity arising, you would dispose of me as I have of you."

"Well said, chevalier," replied the captain, leaping to the ground; "and in speaking thus you might lead me to the end of the world. The proverb is right: 'It is only mountains that don't meet.'"

"Who is this original?" asked D'Harmental of Valef, while the captain stamped the calls with his right foot, to stretch his legs.

"Ma foi! I do not know," said Valef, "but I do know that we should be in a great difficulty without him. Some poor officer of fortune, without doubt, whom the peace has thrown abroad like so many others; but we will judge him by-and-by, by his works."

"Well!" said the captain, becoming animated with the exercise he was taking, "where are our adversaries?"

"When I came up to you," replied D'Harmental, "they had not arrived, but I perceived at the end of the avenue a kind of hired carriage, which will serve as an excuse if they are late; and indeed," added the chevalier, pulling out a beautiful watch set with diamonds, "they are not behind time, for it is hardly half-past nine."

"Let us go," said Valef, dismounting and throwing the reins to D'Harmental's valet, "for if they arrive at the rendezvous while we stand gossiping here, it will appear as though we had kept them waiting."

"You are right," said D'Harmental; and, dismounting, he advanced toward the entrance of the wood, followed by his two companions.——"Will you not take anything, gentlemen," said the landlord of the restaurant, who was standing at his door, waiting for custom.

"Yes, Maitre Durand," replied D'Harmental, who wished, in order that they might not be disturbed, to make it appear as if they had come from an ordinary walk, "breakfast for three. We are going to take a turn in the avenue, and then we shall come back." And he let three louis fall into the hands of the inn-keeper.

The captain saw the shine of the three gold pieces one after another, and quickly reckoned up what might be had at the "Bois de Boulogne" for seventy-two francs; but as he knew whom he had to deal with, he judged

that a little advice from him would not be useless; consequently, in his turn approaching the maitre d'hotel—

"Listen, my friend," said he; "you know that I understand the price of things, and that no one can deceive me about the amount of a tavern bill. Let the wines be good and varied, and let the breakfast be copious, or I will break your head! Do you understand?"

"Be easy, captain," answered Durand, "it is not a customer like you whom I would deceive."

"All right; I have eaten nothing for twelve hours. Arrange accordingly."

The hotel-keeper bowed, as knowing what that meant, and went back to his kitchen, beginning to think that he had made a worse bargain than he had hoped.

As to the captain, after having made a last sign of recognition, half amicable, half threatening, he quickened his pace, and rejoined the chevalier and the baron, who had stopped to wait for him.

The chevalier was not wrong as to the situation of the hired carriage. At the turn of the first alley he saw his three adversaries getting out of it. They were, as we have already said, the Marquis de Lafare, the Comte de Fargy, and the Chevalier de Ravanne.

Our readers will now permit us to give them some short details of these three personages, who will often reappear in the course of this history. Lafare, the best known of the three, thanks to the poetry which he has left behind him, was a man of about thirty-six or thirty-eight years, of a frank and open countenance, and of an inexhaustible gayety and good humor. Always ready to engage with all comers, at table, at play, or at arms, and

that without malice or bitterness; much run after by the fair sex, and much beloved by the regent, who had named him his captain of the guards, and who, during the ten years in which he had admitted him[Pg 243] into his intimacy, had found him his rival sometimes, but his faithful servant always. Thus the prince, who had the habit of giving nicknames to all his boon companions, as well as to his mistresses, never called him any other than "bon enfant." Nevertheless, for some time the popularity of Lafare, established as it was by agreeable antecedents, was fast lowering among the ladies of the court and the girls of the opera. There was a report current that he was going to be so ridiculous as to become a well-behaved man. It is true that some people, in order to preserve his reputation for him, whispered that this apparent conversion had no other cause than the jealousy of Mademoiselle de Conti, daughter of the duchess, and granddaughter of the great Conde, who it was said honored the regent's captain of the guards with a particular affection. His alliance with the Duc de Richelieu, who on his side was supposed to be the lover of Mademoiselle de Charolais, gave consistency to this report.

The Comte de Fargy, generally called "Le Beau Fargy," thus substituting the title which he had received from nature for that which his fathers had left him was cited, as his name indicates, as the handsomest man of his time, which in that age of gallantry imposed obligations from which he had never recoiled, and from which he had always come with honor. Indeed, it was impossible to be a more perfect figure than he was. At once strong and graceful, supple and active, he seemed to unite all the different perfections of a hero of romance of that time. Add to this a charming head, uniting the most opposite styles of beauty; that is to say, black hair and blue eyes, strongly-marked features, and a complexion like a woman. Unite with all these, wit, loyalty, the greatest courage, and you will have an idea of the high consideration which Le Fargy must have enjoyed from the society of that mad period.

As to the Chevalier de Ravanne, who has left us such strange memoirs of his early life, that, in spite of their authenticity, one is tempted to believe them apocryphal, he was still but a youth, rich and of noble birth, who entered into life by a golden door, and ran into all its pleasures with the fiery imprudence and eagerness of his age. He carried to excess, as so many do at eighteen, all the vices and all the virtues of his day. It will be easily understood how proud he was to serve as second to men like Lafare and Fargy in a meeting which was likely to "make a noise."

CHAPTER II.

THE MEETING.

As soon as Lafare, Fargy, and Ravanne saw their adversaries appear at the corner of the path, they walked to meet them. Arrived at ten paces from each other, they all took off their hats and bowed with that elegant politeness which was a characteristic of the aristocracy of the eighteenth century, and advanced some steps thus bareheaded with a smile on their lips, so that to the eyes of the passer-by, ignorant of the cause of their réunion, they would have appeared like friends enchanted to meet.

"Gentlemen," said the Chevalier d'Harmental, to whom the first word by right belonged, "I hope that neither you nor we have been followed; but it is getting late, and we might be disturbed here. I think it would be wise in us to find a more retired spot, where we shall be more at ease to transact the little business which we have in hand."

"Gentlemen," said Ravanne, "I know one which will suit you, a hundred yards from here—a true cover."

"Come, let us follow the child," said the captain; "innocence leads to safety."

Ravanne turned round, and examined, from head to foot, our friend with the yellow ribbons.

"If you are not previously engaged, my strapping friend," said he, in a bantering tone, "I claim the preference."

"Wait a moment, Ravanne," interrupted Lafare; "I have some explanations to give to Monsieur d'Harmental."

"Monsieur Lafare," replied the chevalier, "your courage is so well known, that the explanations you offer me are a[Pg 244] proof of delicacy for which I thank you; but these explanations would only delay us uselessly, and we have no time to lose."

"Bravo!" cried Ravanne, "that is what I call speaking, chevalier. As soon as we have cut each other's throats, I hope you will grant me your friendship. I have heard you much spoken of in good quarters, and have long wished to make your acquaintance."

"Come, come, Ravanne," said Fargy, "since you have undertaken to be our guide, show us the way."

Ravanne sprang into the wood like a young fawn: his five companions followed. At the end of about ten minutes' walking, during which the six adversaries had maintained the most profound silence, either from fear of being heard, or from that natural feeling which makes a man in the moment of danger reflective for a time, they found themselves in the midst of a glade, surrounded on all sides by a screen of trees.

"Well," said Ravanne, looking round him in a satisfied manner, "what do you say to the locality?"

"I say that if you boast of having discovered it," said the captain, "you are a strange kind of Christopher Columbus. If you had told me it was here you were coming, I could have guided you with my eyes shut."——"Well,"

replied Ravanne, "we will endeavor that you shall leave it in the same manner."

"It is with you that my business lies, Monsieur de Lafare," said D'Harmental, throwing his hat on the ground.

"Yes, monsieur," replied the captain of the guards, following the example of the chevalier; "and at the same time I know that nothing could give me more honor and more pain than a rencontre with you, particularly for such a cause."

D'Harmental smiled as a man on whom this flower of politeness was not lost, but his only answer was to draw his sword.

"It appears, my dear baron," said Fargy, addressing himself to Valef, "that you are on the point of setting out for Spain."

"I ought to have left last night; and nothing less than the pleasure I promised myself in seeing you this morning would have detained me till now, so important is my errand."

"Diable! you distress me," said Fargy, drawing, "for if I should have the misfortune to retard you, you are the man to bear me deadly malice."

"Not at all. I should know that it was from pure friendship, my dear count," replied Valef; "so do your best, I beg, for I am at your orders."

"Come, then, monsieur," said Ravanne to the captain, who was folding his coat neatly, and placing it by his hat, "you see that I am waiting for you."

"Do not be impatient, my fine fellow," said the old soldier, continuing his preparations with the phlegm natural to him; "one of the most essential qualities in arms is sang-froid. I was like you at your age; but after the

third or fourth sword-blow I received, I understood that I was on the wrong road, and I returned to the right path. There," added he, at last drawing his sword, which I have said was of extreme length.

"Peste!" said Ravanne, throwing a glance on his adversary's weapon, "what a charming implement you have there! It reminds me of the great spit in my mother's kitchen; and I am grieved that I did not order the maitre-d'hotel to bring it me, as a match to yours."

"Your mother is a worthy woman, and her 'cuisine' is a good one; I have heard both spoken of with great praise, Monsieur le Chevalier," replied the captain with an almost paternal manner; "I should be grieved to take you from one or the other for a trifle like that which procures me the honor of crossing swords with you. Suppose, then, that you are only taking a lesson from your fencing-master, and keep the distance."

The recommendation was useless. Ravanne was exasperated by his adversary's calmness, to which, in spite of his courage, his young and ardent blood did not allow him to attain. He attacked the captain with such fury that their swords engaged at the hilt. The captain made a step back.

[Pg 245]"Ah! you give ground, my tall friend."

"To give ground is not to fly, my little chevalier," replied the captain; "it is an axiom of the art which I advise you to consider; besides, I am not sorry to study your play. Ah! you are a pupil of Berthelot, apparently; he is a good master, but he has one great fault: it is not teaching to parry. Stay, look at this," continued he, replying by a thrust in "seconde" to a straight thrust; "if I had lunged, I should have spitted you like a lark."

Ravanne was furious, for he had felt on his breast the point of his adversary's sword, but so lightly that he might have taken it for the button of a foil. His anger redoubled at the conviction that he owed his life to the captain, and his attacks became more numerous and more furious than ever.

"Stop, stop," said the captain; "now you are going crazy, and trying to blind me; fie! fie! young man; at the chest, morbleu! Ah! at the face again; you will force me to disarm you. Again! Go and pick up your sword, young man; and come back hopping on one leg to calm yourself."

And with a sudden twist he whipped Ravanne's sword out of his hand and sent it flying some twenty paces from him. This time Ravanne profited by the advice. He went slowly to pick up his sword, and came back quietly to the captain; but the young man was as pale as his satin vest, on which was apparent a small drop of blood.

"You are right, captain," said he, "and I am still but a child; but this meeting will, I hope, help to make a man of me. Some passes more, if you please, that it may not be said you have had all the honors."

And he put himself on guard. The captain was right; the chevalier only required to be calm to make him a formidable adversary: thus, at the first thrust of this third engagement, he saw that he must attend solely to his own defense; but his superiority in the art of fencing was too decided for his young adversary to obtain any advantage over him. The matter ended as it was easy to foresee. The captain disarmed Ravanne a second time; but this time he went and picked up the sword himself, and with a politeness of which at first one might have supposed him incapable.

"Monsieur le Chevalier," said he, extending his hand to Ravanne, "you are a brave young man; but believe in an old frequenter of schools and taverns,

who was at the Flemish wars before you were born, at the Italian when you were in your cradle, and at the Spanish while you were a page; change your master. Leave Berthelot, who has already taught you all he knows, and take Bois-Robert; and may the devil fly away with me, if in six months you are not as good a fencer as myself."

"Thanks for your lesson," said Ravanne, taking the hand of the captain, while two tears, which he could not restrain, flowed down his cheeks; "I hope it will profit me."

And, receiving his sword, he did what the captain had already done—sheathed it. They then both cast their eyes on their companions to see how things were going. The combat was over. Lafare was seated on the ground, with his back leaning against a tree: he had been run through the body, but happily the point of the sword had struck against a rib, and had glanced along the bone, so that the wound seemed at first worse than it really was; still he had fainted—the shock had been so violent. D'Harmental was on his knees before him, endeavoring to staunch the blood with his handkerchief. Fargy and Valef had wounded each other at the same moment. One was struck in the thigh, the other run through the arm; both had apologized, promising to be friends for the future.

"Look, young man," said the captain, showing Ravanne these different episodes of the field of battle. "Look on that, and meditate. There is the blood of three brave gentlemen flowing—probably for a folly."

"Faith, captain," answered Ravanne, quite calmed down, "I believe you are right, and that you are the only one of us all that has got common sense."

[Pg 246]At that moment Lafare opened his eyes and recognized D'Harmental in the man who was tending him.

"Chevalier," said he, "take a friend's advice; send me a kind of surgeon whom you will find in the carriage, and whom I brought with me in case of accident. Then gain Paris as fast as possible. Show yourself to-night at the opera ball, and if they ask you about me, say that it is a week since you have seen me. As to me, you may be quite easy. Your name shall not pass my lips; and if you get into any unpleasant discussion with the police, let me know at once, and we will manage so that the affair shall have no consequences."

"Thanks, Monsieur le Marquis," answered D'Harmental, "I quit you because I leave you in better hands than mine; otherwise, believe me, nothing should have separated me from you until I had seen you in your bed."

"Pleasant journey, my dear Valef," said Fargy, "for I do not think that scratch will hinder your going. On your return, do not forget that you have a friend at No. 14, Place Louis-le-Grand."

"And you, my dear Fargy, if you have any commission for Madrid, you have but to say so, and you may rely upon its being executed with the exactitude and zeal of a true comrade."

And the two friends shook hands as if nothing had passed.

"Adieu, young man, adieu," said the captain to Ravanne; "do not forget the advice which I have given you. Give up Berthelot, and take to Bois-Robert. Be calm—give ground when it is necessary—parry in time, and you will be one of the best fencers in the kingdom of France. My implement sends its compliments to your mother's great spit."

Ravanne, in spite of his presence of mind, could not find anything to reply to the captain; so he contented himself with bowing and going up to

Lafare, who appeared to be the most seriously wounded.

As to D'Harmental, Valef, and the captain, they rapidly gained the path, where they found the coach, and inside, the surgeon, who was enjoying a nap. D'Harmental woke him; and showing him the way he must go, told him that the Marquis de Lafare and the Comte de Fargy had need of his services. He also ordered his valet to dismount and follow the surgeon in order to aid him; then, turning toward the captain—

"Captain," said he, "I do not think that it would be prudent to go and eat the breakfast which we have ordered; therefore receive my thanks for the assistance you have rendered me, and in remembrance of me, as it seems you are on foot, will you accept one of my two horses? you can take one by chance; they are both good, and neither will fail you if you have need to go eight or ten leagues in the hour."

"Faith, chevalier," answered the captain, casting a look on the horse which had been so generously offered to him, "there was no need for that. Their blood and their purses are things which gentlemen lend each other every day; but you make the offer with so good a grace that I know not how to refuse you. If you ever have need of me, for anything whatever, remember that I am at your service."

"If that case should occur, where should I find you, monsieur?" said D'Harmental, smiling.

"I have no fixed residence, chevalier, but you may always hear of me by going to La Fillon's and asking for La Normande, and inquiring of her for Captain Roquefinette."

And as the two young men mounted their horses, the captain did the same, not without remarking to himself that D'Harmental had left him the best

of the three. Then, as they were near a four-cross road, each one took his own way at a gallop.

The Baron de Valef re-entered by the Barriere de Passy, and returned straight to the arsenal to receive the commissions of the Duchesse de Maine, to whose establishment he belonged, and left the same day for Spain.

Captain Roquefinette made two or three tours round the Bois de Boulogne, walking, trotting, and galloping, in order to appreciate the different qualities of his[Pg 247] horse; and having satisfied himself that it was, as the chevalier had told him, a fine and pure-blooded animal, he returned to Durand's hotel, where he ate, all alone, the breakfast which had been ordered for three. The same day, he took his horse to a dealer and sold it for sixty louis. It was about half what it was worth; but one must be prepared to make sacrifices, if one wishes to realize promptly.

As to the Chevalier d'Harmental, he took the road to La Muette, entered Paris by the great avenue of the Champs-Elysées, and on returning to his home in the Rue de Richelieu, found two letters waiting for him. One of these letters was in a handwriting so well known to him that he trembled from head to foot as he looked at it, and after having taken it up with as much hesitation as if it had been a burning coal, he opened it with a hand whose shaking betrayed the importance he attached to it. It read as follows:

"My dear Chevalier—No one is master of his own heart—you know that; and it is one of the misfortunes of our nature not to be able to love the same person, or the same thing, long at a time. As to myself, I wish at least to have, beyond other women, the merit of never deceiving the man who has been my lover. Do not come, then, at your accustomed hour, for you will be told that I am not at home; and I am so scrupulous that I would not

willingly endanger the soul even of a valet or a waiting-maid by making them tell so great a lie.

"Adieu, my dear chevalier. Do not retain too unkind a remembrance of me, and behave so that ten years hence I may still think what I think now—that is to say, that you are one of the noblest gentlemen in France.

"Sophie d'Averne."

"Mon Dieu!" cried D'Harmental, striking his fist on a beautiful buhl table, which he smashed to bits, "if I have killed that poor Lafare I shall never forgive myself."

After this outburst, which comforted him a little, the poor fellow began to walk backward and forward between the door and the window in a manner that showed that he still wanted more deceptions of the same sort in order to arrive at the perfection of moral philosophy which the faithless beauty preached to him. Then, after two or three turns, he saw the other letter, which he had entirely forgotten, lying on the floor. He passed it once or twice, looking at it with a supreme indifference. At last, seeming to think that it would make some diversion on the first, he picked it up disdainfully, opened it slowly, looked at the writing, which was unknown to him, searched for the signature, but there was none; and then, led on by the mysterious air of it, he read as follows:

"Chevalier—If you have in your mind a quarter of the romance, or in your heart half the courage, that your friends give you credit for, some one is ready to offer you an enterprise worthy of you, and the result of which will be at the same time to avenge you on the man you hate most in the world,

and to conduct you to a goal more brilliant than you can have hoped for in your wildest dreams. The good genius who will lead you thither by an enchanted road, and in whom you must trust entirely, will expect you this evening at ten o'clock at the opera ball. If you come there unmasked, he will come to you; if you come masked, you will know him by the violet ribbon which he will wear on his left shoulder. The watch-word is 'open sesame;' speak boldly, and a cavern will open to you as wonderful as that of Ali Baba."

"Bravo!" said D'Harmental; "if the genius in the violet ribbons keeps only half his promise, by my honor he has found his man!"

CHAPTER III.

THE CHEVALIER.

The Chevalier Raoul d'Harmental, with whom, before going further, it is necessary that our readers make a better acquaintance, was the last of one of the best families of Nivernais. Although that family had never played an impor[Pg 248]tant part in history, yet it did not want a certain notoriety, which it had acquired partly alone and partly by its alliances. Thus the father of the chevalier, the Sire Gaston d'Harmental, had come to Paris in 1682, and had proved his genealogical tree from the year 1399, an heraldic operation which would have given some trouble to more than one duke and peer. In another direction, his maternal uncle, Monsieur de Torigny, before being named chevalier of the order in the promotion of 1694, had confessed, in order to get his sixteen quarterings recognized, that the best part of his scutcheon was that of the D'Harmentals, with whom his ancestors had been allied for three hundred years. Here, then, was enough to satisfy the aristocratic demands of the age of which we write.

The chevalier was neither poor nor rich—that is to say, his father, when he died, had left him an estate in the environs of Nevers, which brought him in from 20,000 to 25,000 livres a year. This was enough to live well in the country, but the chevalier had received an excellent education, and was very ambitious; therefore he had at his majority, in 1711, quitted his home for Paris. His first visit was to the Comte de Torigny, on whom he counted to introduce him at court. Unfortunately, at that time the Comte de

Torigny was absent from home; but as he remembered with pleasure the family of D'Harmental, he recommended his nephew to the Chevalier de Villarceaux, who could refuse nothing to his friend the Comte de Torigny, and took the young man to Madame de Maintenon.

Madame de Maintenon had one good quality—she always continued to be the friend of her old lovers. She received the Chevalier d'Harmental graciously, thanks to the old recollections which recommended him to her, and some days afterward, the Marechal de Villars coming to pay his court to her, she spoke a few such pressing words in favor of her young protégé, that the marechal, delighted to find an opportunity of obliging this queen "in partibus," replied that from that hour he attached the chevalier to his military establishment and would take care to offer him every occasion to justify his august protectress's good opinion of him.

It was a great joy to the chevalier to see such a door opened to him. The coming campaign was definitive. Louis XIV. had arrived at the last period of his reign—the period of reverses. Tallard and Marsin had been beaten at Hochstett, Villeroy at Ramilies, and Villars himself, the hero of Friedlingen, had lost the famous battle of Malplaquet against Marlborough and Eugene. Europe, kept down for a time by Colbert and Louvois, rose against France, and the situation of affairs was desperate.

The king, like a despairing invalid who changes his doctor every hour, changed ministers every day. Each new attempt but revealed a new weakness. France could not sustain war and could not obtain peace. Vainly she offered to abandon Spain, and limit her frontier. This was not sufficient humiliation. They exacted that the king should allow the hostile armies to cross France, in order to chase his grandson from the throne of Spain; and also that he should give up, as pledges, Cambray, Mettray, La

Rochelle, and Bayonne, unless he preferred dethroning him himself, by open force, during the following year.

These were the conditions on which a truce was granted to the conqueror of the plains of Senef, Fleurus, of Steerekirk, and of La Marsalle; to him who had hitherto held in the folds of his royal mantle peace and war; to him who called himself the distributer of crowns, the chastiser of nations, the great, the immortal; to him in whose honor, during the last half century, marbles had been sculptured, bronzes cast, sonnets written, and incense poured.

Louis XIV. had wept in the full council. These tears had produced an army, which was intrusted to Villars.

Villars marched straight to the enemy, whose camp was at Denain, and who slept in security while watching the agony of France. Never had greater responsibility rested on one head. On one blow of Villars hung the salvation of France.[Pg 249] The allies had established a line of fortifications between Denain and Marchiennes, which, in their pride of anticipation, Albemarle and Eugene called the grand route to Paris.

Villars resolved to take Denain by surprise, and, Albemarle conquered, to conquer Eugene. In order to succeed in this audacious enterprise, it was necessary to deceive, not only the enemy's army, but also his own, the success of this coup de main being in its impossibility.

Villars proclaimed aloud his intention of forcing the lines of Landrecies. One night, at an appointed hour, the whole army moves off in the direction of that town. All at once the order is given to bear to the left. His genius throws three bridges over the Scheldt. Villars passes over the river without obstacle, throws himself into the marshes considered impracticable, and where the soldier advances with the water up to his waist; marches