

FONTENAY,

THE SWORDSMAN.

A MILITARY NOVEL.

BY FORTUNE DU BOISGOBEY.

(Translated by H. L. Williams.)

CHAPTER XXIX.—Continued.

In two hours further, it was impossible to doubt that Villacampa had beaten the Daroca detachment, as his men were seen resuming their positions around the town, quitted to bar the road to the reinforcements.

The last hope of the besieged vanished; all they could do was nobly to die.

From the loop-holes they saw the towns-people prepare to assault. The neighboring houses had holes knocked in them to level muskets through, and strong barriers were built at the mouths of the streets as bases for the storming parties to form. It was doubtful that these would be repulsed, and if they carried the place in a rush, all knew that no quarter would be granted.

A short and stirring speech from the colonel exalted their courage. The wounded and ailing still able to hold a gun, rose to be killed erect like their valid comrades. Those who could not leave their beds, armed themselves with bayonets, to sell dearly what little remained of life.

Carénac, though his left arm was in a sling, had his sword drawn in the other hand, and considered himself "good for half-a-dozen olive-eaters."

The other officers were equally ready.

"If you see France again," said the creole to Tournesol, "tell Mlle. de Gavre that my last thought was for her."

Tournesol was about to protest that he should not outlive his captain when a bugle-call was heard without, and not sounding "the charge."

On a sign from the colonel, Fontenay went up to a loop-hole in the wall, looked out and returned to say:

"The rabble stick at nothing. They are sending us a flag of truce as if they were real soldiers and not mountain robbers."

"What do you say to this, gentlemen?" inquired the colonel of the group around him.

"Colonel," replied Fontenay, "if you consent to receive the fellow who flutters his handkerchief on his gun-barrel, you will pay him too great a compliment."

"I believe the rogues are playing some trick," remarked Zolnycki. "We must not fire on a flag, but my opinion is that he should be waved back and fire opened on the ruffians who sent him, as soon as he gets behind the barricade."

The only one maintaining the contrary course was the engineer. Holding him in high esteem, the colonel sided with him, after some hesitation. By his order, one of the shielded windows were cleared out, a white flag hung over it, and Fontenay, with Tournesol who had borrowed the trumpet of one of Carénac's cuirassiers, went down to the monastery door to challenge the insurgent's messenger. The door required much work to clear it.

It gave direct access into the refectory, where the colonel came with his officers to hear the propositions.

Fontenay was to have served as interpreter, but there was no need to have recourse to him, as, at the first words uttered by the bearer of the flag of truce, it was clear that he thoroughly understood French. He was a good-looking young fellow whom Fontenay might have thought familiar in features but for an aristocratic demeanor rare in the natives whom the soldier had been in the habit of meeting. He jauntily wore an elegant, fanciful uniform, without epaulets or embroidery, yet very theatrical. He did not appear intimidated by the martial array as he unfolded in a steady voice the following little address:

"Colonel, my chief, General Villacampa, sends me to inform you that he surprised and dispersed on the day before yesterday at Alventosa, one of your Polish companies; that he completely defeated, a league away, a strong column leaving Daroca yesterday; its men have laid down their arms and are all prisoners; we hold the artillery. Finally, your General Suchet has met a total defeat before Valencia; his army is retreating in disorder towards Catalonia, but will be annihilated before reaching it.

Of all these items of intelligence, two might be true, as the hearers knew, but not one blanching. That about the destruction of Suchet's army required the proverbial grain of salt, and nobody believed it.

In the same calm tone, and a voice that did not seem new to Fontenay, the envoy proceeded:

"Colonel, you have therefore no other help to expect, and to prolong resistance would be folly, heroic but useless. Out of consideration for your handsome defense and your soldier's bravery, the general offers you honorable capitulation. You will be treated like my fellow-countrymen after the giving up of Saragossa."

"This means we will become prisoners of war?"

"The officers may be exchanged for ours fallen into your hands."

"Very well. We are not going to yield."

Colonel," returned Villacampa's im-

perturbable representative, "this decision does honor to your courage. You will be responsible for the blood shed—not Spanish!"

"Do you not think we shall defend ourselves?" testily queried the colonel.

"On the contrary, I believe you would do so with the utmost energy, but we are not going to attack."

"I understand. You rely on famine, the favorite method of men who do not like steel and shot. Try it, sir! it will take a long time, for we are victualled for four months to come."

"General Villacampa has no time to wait till you exhaust them. He must promptly drive the French from Aragon and Spain. Before resuming the campaign against the remnants of your army beaten at Valencia, he means to have done with you. I am instructed to notify you that if you do not accept the conditions offered, he will blow up this building."

"The monastery would have to be mined for that to happen."

"It is so. Our engineers have been at work at it for three weeks. The mine has been driven under the building, and is loaded, we have only to clap the torch to it."

The officers exchanged glances, understanding the sounds they had heard for a week past, the strokes of the miners' pick-axes in the earth underneath them; they did not doubt that the enemy, having entered a neighboring house, had continued its cellar into those of the monastery.

"If this were true, you would not have waited so long," the colonel disdainfully responded.

"It was only yesterday we were ready, and the general gives you but till evening to decide. If you do not evacuate this building by sunset, and lay down your arms, the mine will be fired."

"Well, we shall go up," returned the colonel, persuaded that the Spanish were not in a way to realize the threat.

"Colonel," said the Spanish voice of the parley, "perhaps you doubt the existence of the mine? The general offers an assurance of the fact by allowing one or two of your officers to visit it. When you hear their report, you can determine whether or not it is right to let brave soldiers perish instead of accepting an inevitable capitulation."

However resolved not to surrender, the commander could not reject this invitation. Yet he hesitated, for the memory haunted them all of the sorrowful capitulation of Baylen; since that disaster, the number was great who preferred death by their own hands to laying down their arms. But, unlike at Baylen, this was not a capitulation in the open country. The case for fortified place was foreseen in the military regulation, authorizing the governor to verify the enemy's allegations before coming to a decision.

"Be it so," answered the colonel. "I consent to what you propose, but it is understood that I remain master to continue the resistance even if I learn that you tell the truth."

"General Villacampa never breaks his word. He will wait till evening for your reply."

All the colonel had to do now was to designate the officer for this confidential errand, perhaps dangerous, as the insurgents, commanded by an irregular general, were capable of shooting the bearer of a flag of truce. The colonel chose Fontenay, because he spoke Spanish and was able to see clearly and judge on what he saw. He might also hear something worth its repetition. The creole was ready; he only asked for Tournesol to be his herald with the trumpet, and that raised no difficulty.

Correct to the end, the white-flag bearer courteously saluted the colonel and his officers before withdrawing.

Fontenay walked forth with him. He was willing to have his eyes blindfolded according to the usage, but Villacampa's envoy said it was useless, as they had merely to enter the contiguous house. The road was so short that Fontenay could see nothing of the besiegers' works save what they wanted to show him. Behind the rough breastworks were the ferocious armed peasants, who evidently regretted having no permission to shoot him.

Tournesol followed at the prescribed distance, beside the Spanish trumpeter, stiff and silent as a stone statue. The house they were to inspect was guarded by a strong picket of men, commanded by an officer who exchanged a few words with his brother officer, perfectly understood by Fontenay.

"When they see it, they will give in," the officer had remarked in Spanish.

Fontenay and his orderly were taken down into the cellar; they were led into a freshly dug tunnel ending beneath the monastery wall in a cave, where, by the dim glow of several safety-lanterns, workmen were laying a long match destined to fire a score of barrels of gunpowder, arranged in rows in the centre of the excavation.

"You may count them, captain," said Villacampa's officer. "There is enough to send your building sky high, and you can see that we do not lack expert miners. The preparations will be terminated by noon, and our precautions are taken against our men being injured by the explosions. The sun sets at half-past seven, but my general does not mind waiting till

eight o'clock for your commandant's reply."

Fontenay could no longer doubt, having yielded to evidences. The French had no choice between capitulation and letting themselves be crushed under the monastery ruins.

"Captain, call your soldier to you," said the Spanish officer suddenly, "and forbid him blundering among those kegs. This is no place for an inebriate, and I have no wish to visit the moon!"

Since he had come, Fontenay had not troubled himself about his orderly, and he had not remarked that he was indeed fidgeting among the barrels, now saving himself from falling by resting his hand on one, now clumsily banging his sabre-scarbard tip against a lower one; the steel might have started a spark, and they would all be blown up, Spanish and French together. Worse than a great imprudence, it was a great peril, and Tournesol was not in his place according to regulations. His captain sharply bade him come away, which he did so awkwardly as to touch the kegs more than once in making half the circuit of them.

"I have nothing further to show you, captain," continued the Spanish officer, "but I suppose you have seen enough to corroborate to your commandant our having all ready upon an order from General Villacampa to finish the matter."

"I have seen indeed all that I wanted to see and I can make my report," laconically answered Fontenay, studying the speaker, whom still he could not claim as an old acquaintance.

"I will then escort you back to the monastery. As soon as you enter, the firing will recommence, as we have not agreed on a suspension of hostilities; at sunset, they will cease on our side, and at eight o'clock, if my general shall not have received a reply, the mine will be exploded without further notice."

Fontenay was conducted home with the same ceremony. On parting with him, at the door of the undermined building, the still unrecognized Spaniard took leave of him in these winning terms:

"Not farewell, captain, but may we meet again!"

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE LION'S ADVICE.

The colonel was waiting for his messenger, surrounded by his officers, but before questioning Fontenay, he dismissed Tournesol into the first story, as one not qualified to take part in the debate. Fontenay fancied that Tournesol, who seemed sober enough by this time, obeyed unwillingly, as if he had something to say, but dared not speak from respect for his superiors.

"Colonel," began Fontenay, "all is true. Under our feet are twenty barrels of gunpowder, with the match laid. Nothing need be done but light it, and that will be done at 8 p. m. precisely."

"It is still time enough for relief," said the old soldier, decided on doing anything but yielding. "I do not credit the defeat of Suchet's army."

"What makes me doubt it," agreed the wary Pole, "is Villacampa's haste to end matters. If he did not dread outside interference he would wait till we ran out of powder or food."

"My advice is the same," said the engineer officer, "and I believe he would rather capture than destroy us. The laurels of Castanos, won in the Baylen affair, prevent him sleeping. He, although only a captain of irregulars, wishes to make French prisoners, and show them to the common people of Aragon."

"A shame that I will not undergo," said the impetuous American.

"I do not like it either," added the colonel, "we will hold out to the very last. If we are to be blown up, blown up we shall be. These *Villa-scampas* will have nothing but ruins to take."

"Wait to be blown up?" exclaimed the West Indian. "Wait for anything when we may have a slash at them with our swords? stupidly await death in a monastery when it depends upon ourselves alone to charge the ragamuffins? they are ten against one! but what's the odds, indeed? are we not worth ten apiece of Spanish peasants? we can plough as broad a furrow in them as any mine, and if we all go down, it will be dying in the broad sunlight as becomes soldiers of our glorious Emperor!"

This speech electrified all hearers.

"Yes, yes," they shouted, "let us go out upon the enemy?"

Zolnycki did not shout; shouting was not his forte; but he silently grasped Fontenay's hand; the engineer captain did the same. All that was wanting was the colonel's approbation. He was silent, but they could read in his eyes that he shared their feelings if he might not associate himself with them in their enthusiasm.

"I will lop my hand off rather than sign a capitulation with such scum," he said coldly, and then added with a grim smile, "for I am not so fond of writing as that comes to! It is for form's sake that I have consulted you, for my resolve was taken, and I think, with Captain Fontenay, that it is better to sally out to seek death than to receive it between falling walls. I will march at your head, each man will do his duty."

"Yes, our men long for the fighting," said Fontenay. "You must have remarked that awhile ago when you announced the Spanish offered to storm us."

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