

FONTENAY, THE SWORDSMAN.

CHAPTER II.—Continued.

He looked splendid—his visage streaked with blood, his eyes flaming, his head held erect, and the sword point planted in the sod, in the position of an experienced fencer.

The commandant smiled with scorn, but he changed his tone.

"The deuce!" he ejaculated. "You are in a great hurry, young man! It strikes me that we might as well doff our coats."

"To what good?" exclaimed Fontenay, unbuttoning his coat. "You see that I wear no coat of mail, and I do not accuse you of wearing a breast-plate under your uniform. Let us finish, I entreat, or I shall believe that you are trying to gain time in hope that my strength will ooze away with my blood."

It was now the old soldier's turn to start under insult.

"That is a suspicion which shall cost you dear. I would have been content with giving you a lesson, but now I am obliged to kill you. You will make the seventh I have laid low," he said, on taking the other sword.

"Enough of your boasting! I am waiting for you."

"A little patience! you will lose nothing," grumbled Carénac, falling into the position of guard with the ease and coolness of a fencing-master.

The sword blades crossed without the seconds having placed them so, as would have happened in a more regular duel.

In spite of the youthful exploits which had gained for Fontenay the war-like surname of "The Master of Fence," George de Prégny augured badly of the issue of this encounter and made up his mind to intervene at need to stop any close fighting. But nothing betokened that this would ensue as both combatants appeared indisposed to attack sharply. They were soon aware that they were of nearly the same force, and they tested one another before charging home.

The American had not boasted; he fenced marvelously well, but his wound did not allow him to prolong this unequal encounter without disadvantage, and he was the first to risk a disengagement of his blade so rapid, and a thrust along the other's so close that Carénac had much difficulty in parrying it. But he did ward it off, and he was preparing a lightning-like reply-thrust, when varied shouts arose in the underwood.

"He passed here! I see his track!"

"He must have got away by the Jonchère Wood."

"Keep to it, my lads! we must bring him to bay before he scales the park wall."

The voices drew near, and the combatants, however fiercely engaged, could not continue before the men came up at a run in pursuit of the intruder who had shot Fontenay. The two duelists recoiled from one another, and their swords were lowered, to the keenest satisfaction of the state council auditor.

Almost instantly, four park-keepers in the imperial gold and green livery, rushed out into the walk which was the battleground, but stopped stupefied on seeing two military officers and two gentlemen in court costume, in attitudes leaving no doubt as to their intentions. These keepers were led by a huntsman of the imperial hunt, a corporal who instantly recognized Fontenay, from having met him more than once in Malmaison palace. He saluted him militarily, and asked him, not what he was doing there, but if he had seen an individual wearing a broad-brimmed hat.

To which Fontenay replied without hesitating.

"I was so close to him that I tried to seize him, and he scorched my face with a pistol-shot."

"That's true, for you are wounded," muttered the huntsman; "but did not scamp carry a casket?"

"It seems to me that he did bear an object under the left arm that I could not clearly distinguish. But you may give up the chase, for he ran like a roebuck, and must be out of reach 'ever so long ago. You arrive rather behindhand, my honest huntsman."

"It's the fault of an imbecile gardener, who saw him slip out of the palace by a servant's door, but, instead of shouting 'stop thief,' he let him pass. It was ten minutes before I was notified by a chamber-maid who found the apartment of one of her majesty's maids of honor turned upside down."

"That is what I thought," muttered the auditor; "the chateau is badly guarded. If his majesty only knew this—"

"Run, you fellows!" roared the huntsman, "and if you do not overtake him, notify the Rueil gendarmes. We have his description—give it to the chief officer and let him set all his men afield. We must catch this burglar!"

Away dashed the keepers at once, some into the thicket and some over the lawn, but their commander stayed behind. His legs were older than when he was twenty, and he was not sorry to recover breath while pretending to gather information.

Not interesting himself at all in the story of the theft, Carénac stepped aside, only awaiting the old forester's departure to renew the combat.

"I knew well enough that the fellow was not a conspirator," said Prégny, in an undertone. "He has only stolen a jewel-case—he is a vulgar thief."

"Being one does not prevent his being the other," grumbled Fontenay. "How," he proceeded, addressing the corporal—"how did he manage to steal into the palace, which is full of guests to-day?"

"We suppose he sneaked in at dusk yest'even, hid himself in some cellar corner, and came forth to make his swoop while her majesty and her suite were at the concert."

"I hope he has not killed any one?"

"No, because nobody dropped in to disturb him while he was thieving; but if anybody surprised him searching the drawers, I reckon he would not have shrunk from using the dagger."

"Certainly not! for he fired at me because I tried to bar his way. He had one of those faces one would not like to spy in a dark wood. By its swarthy hue and his dress, I took him for a Spaniard."

"That he may be! They are a folk who do not like the French, and they hate our Emperor. I will double the patrol to-night—but I do hope that my men or the mounted constables will lay hands on him this evening."

"Has the Empress been informed of what has happened?"

"I dare say she has, by this time, as well as the young lady whom the burglar spoiled."

"Oh, the loser is a young lady, eh?"

"Yes, mon-sieur, a young lady who has been her majesty's reader these two years—one you know right well; a tall lady with a figure as slender and supple as a reed, and with such eyes as I never saw the like of!"

"Her name?" sharply inquired Paul.

"I do not remember. But any of the palace officials will tell you."

Paul was going to insist, for he almost guessed who was in debate, and he had private reasons to want his doubts cleared up; but Carénac broke into the parley by roaring as if he had been at the head of his squadrons:

"Corporal, advance to receive orders!"

The ex-soldier hastened to obey. He stood at "carry arms," before his superior officer, whose shoulders bore the insignia of his rank, and who roughly demanded:

"Why are you lingering here? Why are you not with your men?"

"I am going to join them, commandant," faltered the huntsman; "this gentleman was questioning me, and I thought I might—"

"You are on duty, and when on duty a man ought not to babble with the civilians he may meet. Right about face! wheel! and do not let me see you again, for if you hang around here, I shall make my report to your chief."

Packed off in this style, the poor fellow wheeled round without replying, but Fontenay intervened.

"I beg your pardon," he coldly said, "I am not on duty, and I am only a civilian: consequently, I am not bound to receive orders from you, and you will be pleased to let me learn a fact interesting me."

"Oh," jeered the veteran, "I know you are not in a hurry to resume our interrupted explanation. Pray learn all you can, therefore, but do so quickly, or I am not at your orders either, and if you continue to drag out an affair which ought to have been settled before this, I shall leave you, sharp!"

At this moment, the corporal, on his way by Fontenay, said to him:

"I remember the name now of the reading lady who was robbed. It is Mlle. de Gavre."

The commandant did not hear this name which caused Paul Fontenay to start, but George de Prégny heard it very plainly; he understood what his companion must feel and it seemed a good opening for him to risk a final attempt at conciliation.

"Commandant," said he to Carénac, "my friend has proved to you that he does not refuse to fight. He is still quite ready, but night falls—one cannot see clearly, and you may lose both your lives by a blunder if you recommence now. This is why, without consulting my principal, and as second, I take upon myself to propose a postponement till to-morrow."

"I should not oppose it if the thing were possible," answered the other, "but I am quitting Malmaison this evening, and I must be on the road to-morrow morning to join my regiment in the army of Aragon. It has already gone into action at Burgos without my being in my place. I have no desire to miss the campaign by waiting on your friend's good pleasure. Let us, then, have done now and here, or let it rest. I cannot force your friend to stand up, sword in hand, if his heart does not back him!"

This final slur stung the American like a whip-lashing, although he would willingly have accepted the postponement proposed by Prégny for, since the huntsman had named Mlle. de Gavre, he thought of none but her, and he was eager to learn that no other injury, had been done to her save the robbery. But the intractable veteran seemed to accuse him once more of lacking courage. He could govern himself no longer, and, forgetting the lady whom he loved, he stood on guard.

"Defend yourself!" he called out, bluntly.

And rushing on his adversary he at-

tacked him with so much fury that Carénac had great difficulty in avoiding a straight lunge. Fontenay no longer thought of guarding himself—only of killing his man, and in a game of that kind the end would speedily be the death of one or both of the contestants. His cheek still bled, so that he had the appearance of a wounded lion.

All of a sudden, at the height of the engagement, just as the colliding blades were clanging like iron beaten on the anvil, Carénac made a side leap which carried him out of reach, and he flung his sword into the copse.

CHAPTER III.

AN ENGAGEMENT OF HEARTS.

The stupefied Fontenay was compelled to stop. His back was turned to the lawn, and he did not see what was visible to the man who had faced him. He thought that the latter fled, and he was about to apostrophize him caustically, when Prégny hastily urged him:

"Do the same! throw down your sword!"

Still Paul did not understand, and his snatched it from his grasp and hurled it among the briars. The commandant's second had drawn himself up by the path border in the attitude of a soldier about to be passed in review by his general.

Fontenay wondered if they had not all suddenly become mad, but, on turning round, he comprehended all.

Twenty paces from where the duel was taking place, the alley ended on a lawn framed by the wood, and from that side came a group, or rather a cortege, at the head of which walked a figure whom Fontenay recognized at the first glance.

"The Empress," he muttered.

It was Josephine preceding several courtiers, and followed at a distance by a platoon of grenadiers. She was accompanied by two ladies of honor. She would have been recognized without this brilliant escort. So much majesty and graciousness could only belong to the lovable West Indian who was Napoleon's good genius.

Although in her five-and-fortieth year, she did not appear in her thirtieth. Her eyes enchanted and her smile charmed. She was most simply attired with that exquisite taste and supreme elegance of which she alone possessed the secret. One bowed to the woman in her, rather than to the sovereign.

The rough warrior Carénac, who had thrown aside his steel on seeing her appear, was not the least agitated of the four actors in this scene.

No doubt it was fated that their twice interrupted duel should never be finished, for neither of the pair would have dared to give the sight to the Empress, and they all four trembled for fear that she would divine what they were doing when thus surprised.

She came over the lawn by skirting the edge of the underwood and walked up the path where they had been fighting, upon desecrating them.

Quickly though they had desisted, they could scarcely expect her not to have noticed the flagrant offense, and they waited like school-boys caught red-handed by the master. More than the others, Fontenay was abashed, for she had over-whelmed her fellow-countryman with favors, and he would have sooner died than displeased her.

He cast down his eyes, and he forgot to wipe away the blood, smearing his cheek and showing only too plainly that his stroll outdoors had not been pacific. It was evident that the evening breeze had not brought this excess of color upon his temple! What he feared most of all, did not fail to arrive.

"Oh, gracious heaven!" exclaimed Josephine in that golden voice which thrilled all hearts, "you are wounded, my dear Paul!"

He did not know how to reply, although not deficient in readiness, and having the habit of being so addressed, as he had long lived in the Empress' private court, where she had treated him as spoilt child. It was Prégny who spoke to explain the case.

"Madame, Paul has been wounded by a malefactor whom he tried to arrest," began he.

He had immediately divined that, whatever precautions they had taken, she must suspect them of meeting here for a duel, and he endeavored to divert her from this idea, knowing well that her Majesty, no more than her august husband, did not like life to be risked anywhere save on the battle-field.

"A malefactor!" she repeated: "no doubt, the one my guards were pursuing! then the gunshot that was heard—"

"It was fired at me, madam," said Fontenay, "but it hardly did more than touch me. Unfortunately the villain escaped."

"The important thing is that you were not killed. We would never have been consoled for your death."

By emphasizing the word "we," the kind Josephine withdrew herself to bring forward a person who had kept respectfully behind her, but who was now taken by the Imperial hand to be literally placed in view.

Fontenay could not restrain an outcry. This person was Mlle. Marguerite de Gavre, pale with emotion, but more beautiful still from her pallor. She looked bewitching in her white dress, with her ashen hued fair hair and large black eyes

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