

Literature, &c.

MARY SCOTT.

A STORY OF THE SIXTEENTH CENTURY.
By the author of "Tales of the Southern Counties."

It was autumn—toward the end of October, in the year 1582, or thereabouts, for it is well to be exact in one's chronology—the day had been misty and dull, rather than actually stormy, but the sun had broken out at intervals, and as it drew nearer to the hour of his setting, his beams seemed to grow brighter in proportion. The rich Flemish landscape which those rays lighted up was exactly such as Wouvermans has often delighted to paint; the level blue distance was varied with the steeples of churches and convents, which (lit up and gilded here and there by the evening sun) helped to break the monotony of those rich plains. All was not still, however; for the trees, in the middle of the picture, were mixed with wreaths of curling blue smoke that floated on the heavy atmosphere, and irregular discharges of musketry were heard, at intervals, in the same direction.

In the foreground, too, stood the white charger, whose presence is *de rigueur* in such a scene, among a group of cavalry on the outskirts of the Spanish camp, whose forces were at that time occupying the Low Countries, under the command of the Duke of Parma. The horseman was no less important a personage than Colonel the Baron Von Blitzendorf, an old German officer, who had assembled a band of mercenaries from almost every country in Europe, with whom he had fought his way in the numerous wars which had so long agitated the Continent, and at last engaged under the banners of Philip of Spain. We need not now stop to inquire if they were not, probably, less scrupulous as to the prince, or justice of the cause to which they lent their temporary aid, than as to the chances of meeting with what they considered their due allowance of pay, plunder, or consideration; but it must not be inferred that discipline was permitted to be lax in such a regiment; on the contrary, the worthy baron was a martinet of the first water.

There was no mistaking the sort of man from his outward equipment. About the time we are describing, it had become customary to dispense with the more cumbersome parts of a suit of armour, to the no small dissatisfaction of the baron, who was one of those who think it a matter of conscience not to alter or abandon (even for good reasons) whatever they have not been accustomed to in their youth. A cuirass, however, was still worn over the leather doublet, and enormous jack boots, armed with an awful pair of spurs, whose pointed rowels were full two inches in diameter, encased his lower extremities. After the Spanish fashion, his hard weather beaten features were shaded by a broad hat and drooping feather; but the excessive length of his two handed sword must by no means be forgotten, for its elaborately worked iron hilt would have made the fortune of an artist or curiosity hunter in the present day.

The baron fidgeted in his saddle, and twisted his grizzled moustache impatiently, as he looked out in the direction whither he had despatched a small party of troopers to retake an outpost from the insurgents, several skirmishes had taken place since they had been detached on that service in the morning, and the occasional rattle of fire arms, heard in divers quarters during the day, had kept the worthy baron in a constant state of nervous eagerness; especially as at that time glasses were unthought of, and even if they had been in use, one may ride for two or three days together in the fertile plains of the Low Countries, without finding a single rising knoll of ground, to command a view of what may be going on within perhaps half a mile distance, or even less.

It was not very long, however, before the party was both seen and heard advancing, at a grave leisurely trot along the paved chausse, some clattering over the stones, and others floundering in the deep sandy tracks on each side, between the trunks of the elms and black poplars which bordered the road towards Ghent.

The officer in command rode up with the usual salutation to the old colonel, who sat with stiff and mathematical preciseness on his white horse, and received the report of the successful expedition without moving a muscle of his countenance, until the exact detail of circumstances was finished.

'Goot,' ejaculated the baron; 'so the post is once more in our hands, and you say you have lost but three men?'—'Goot again, and you have left fifteen men

with the lieutenant in the old farm house.'

'Exactly so.'

'Then how is it,' continued the baron, scanning with his eye the troopers who waited to be dismissed to their quarters—'how is it that you have now twenty three men instead of twenty two. Take eighteen from forty, there should remain but twenty two.'

'True,' returned the officer biting his lip, 'but the fact is, after we had set out, I found that there was one man beyond my number, who had joined the party without orders.'

'Without orders, sir,' (and Von Blitzendorf's form and features seemed to grow more rigid than ever as he spoke,) 'how dare you allow of such a thing; and why is he not reported for punishment?'

'Why—in the action to-day he distinguished himself so as to deserve praise as much as blame. Albrecht, one of my best men, was in our front rank when we took the old tower, the muzzle of an enemy's musket was close against his breast, when the young Englishman pushed by, struck up the weapon, and cut down the man, in less time than you could give the word of command.'

'So—it was your English recruit, who seems ever ready to volunteer his life where he is not wanted. Call him out of the ranks.'

The young man, or rather boy, for the stripling who now stepped forward was apparently little more than seventeen or eighteen, had the usual fair complexion and blue eyes of the English peasantry, and his light hair curled in abundance round his smooth face, which was tinted with a little more red than usual at being brought into notice, though the reckless independent glance told of wilfulness, combined with the bravery he was known to possess.

In answer to the questions put to him, he gave his name as Harry Scott; but no reply could be obtained as to his motives for pressing forward into a service of danger, which many of his elders would willingly have avoided. The retaking of the post in question was of no inconsiderable importance, for it commanded the passage of the canal which led toward Ghent, and enabled those who held it to cut off the supply of provisions from all the towns between that city and Antwerp. It appeared, moreover; that the retaking this post was owing, in no small degree, to the dashing and reckless bravery of the English recruit, who had been but a few months in the service.

The Baron Von Blitzendorf was by no means the man to overlook a breach of discipline, and he began with some asperity, to deliver a long winded harangue on the benefits to an army which a strict attention to discipline ensured; and having disposed of this idea, he proceeded to show, on the other hand, how neglect of military obedience caused innumerable evils, notwithstanding any individual bravery which might be shown. The worthy baron was one of those who love to hear themselves talk, and his discourse had already a most unreasonable length, when in the midst of a somewhat intricate sentence, a hand was quietly laid on his knee, as he sat on his horse, and a voice cut short his oration by saying—

'Your discourse is wise and soldier like, baron, but I think these men would thank you to abridge your advice a little, seeing they must be somewhat fatigued with their morning's work.'

Von Blitzendorf started, colouring a little with anger at this uncerimonious interruption, as he turned to see who the intruder might be. He was a cavalier still apparently under the meridian of life, wrapped in a plain dark cloak, which was evidently adopted for the purpose of remaining incognito, as the wearer had the air and manner which is so generally natural to persons of high birth, and so difficult of imitation to those who have not had that advantage.

The group of officers fell back and uncovered at the sound of the voice, and a glance at the figure of the new comer, for it was in fact no other than Duke Alexander of Parma, Governor of the Netherlands, who had chosen this mode personally ascertaining the state of discipline and efficiency of his army, by seeking out Von Blitzendorf to learn the result of the morning's expedition.

As the Duke, however, had only overheard the latter part of the edifying discourse of the German veteran, some explanation was necessary, and the details which were accordingly communicated were as follows:—

It appeared that the English recruit, Harry Scott, had enlisted under the Spanish banner in the early part of the summer, and like most of his countrymen, quickly learned to dress a horse, ride,

and go through the exercises of the menage; being active, intelligent and punctual in his duty, he had also acquired the esteem of his officers. A friendship had sprung up between him and Albrecht his comrade, one of the bravest young troopers under the German baron's command, and every time the latter was called on service, Scott always contrived to be next his friend in the ranks, and more than once in battles and skirmishes, succeeded in saving his life at the risk of his own. On this occasion, it appeared that Albrecht having been sent with the picquet on a particularly dangerous and important duty, the young Englishman had joined them without orders; true, he had once saved his comrade's life, and behaved with brilliant intrepidity; but, continued the baron, 'such an example of disregard of discipline is what I cannot allow in my own regiment, and the less, as your highness knows well, that whatever use our poor services may be of to the Spanish cause, dependeth mainly upon our adhering to the rules and discipline of the noble science of war, and thereby keeping up our superiority over the heretical rabble opposed to us.'

The Duke of Parma, however, had been scanning with his eye these modern Pylades and Orestes, instead of paying attention to the conclusion of Von Blitzendorf's oration, though it was what the latter peculiarly prided himself upon, and would have felt his vanity seriously hurt if he had noticed this neglect; but fortunately for those who, like our good baron, are addicted to what the thoughtless world calls prosiness, their own organs of self-esteem and admiration frequently made up for the lack of such observances from others, and prevent the possibility of their discourse ever seeming tedious from occurring to their own minds. Alexander of Parma, who had been personally engaged in the celebrated battle of Lepanto, when only eighteen, was too brave himself not to be an admirer of bravery in others; and the account of the valor and friendship of these two young soldiers seemed to strike and interest him considerably, and the more, as the romances of chivalry in which he had read of such matters, related such sentiments only of knight and princes; so that their manifestations in men of low birth excited some surprise and curiosity. It was not, therefore, difficult for the captain of their troop to obtain a pardon from the Duke, who readily granted it, and ordered the young English hero to attend him next morning, as he wished to learn more of his previous history.

Von Blitzendorf remained silent, but he screwed up his face into a grim look of dissatisfaction, as he watched the departure of Alexander Farnese, whose indulgence seemed to him highly improper, especially being granted without the baron's own intercession.

It was late in the evening when Albrecht came to the tent in which he and his comrade slept, having first littered down and fed their horses, and supped by the light of the watch-fires; but instead of finding his friend asleep, as he expected from his having left the circle of troopers some time before, Scott was seated at the entrance, in a musing posture, with his head resting on one hand.

'How, now, comrade, not asleep yet?' was Albrecht's salutation to the other, whose cheek was a little pale; and as the rays of the moon fell directly upon the boy's light hair and smooth forehead, it struck him that there was something unusual in his looks. 'Why, what made thee leave our fire so soon,' contrived the trooper; 'what now is the matter? Art sick or in love—which is it Harry?'

As he spoke, he placed his hand on the boy's shoulder, who rather peevishly, as it seemed, avoided his touch, but in so doing Albrecht's eye caught a few stains on the front of his leather doublet, which was half unbuttoned at the neck.—'How,—wounded to day at my side, and I noticed it not before? Why didst not speak of it sooner?' And he bent down to examine the spot, but as he laid his hand on the open collar, the stripling pushed his comrade rudely away in return for his kindly meant services, and exclaimed, 'Nonsense Albrecht; it's a mere scratch and nothing more; it has done bleeding now, and I feel nothing of it. A man never minds such a trifle.'

The trooper was inclined to ascertain whether this was only the desire of a boy to make light of a wound, but found his companion so petulant that he desisted. 'Sapperment, you would seem to have trod on the black hound's tail to day, by your sulkiness. I only meant to be civil and friendly, but if you are not hurt, why then all's well, and no need to say more about the matter.'

And without troubling his head further, Albrecht rolled himself up in his cloak,

and was soon fast asleep in one corner of the tent.

But the other seemed to have something on his mind which prevented his following that example. An hour or two passed away, and all was still in the camp, except the measured tread of the sentinel at his post; but the English recruit was still gazing at the bright moon, whose rays fell on the numerous tents around him, and a tear now and then trickled down his cheek, but was quickly brushed away again. At length he turned into the shelter of the canvass, and fatigue compelled him to throw himself down at a little distance from his friend, when a heavy sleep, the consequence of the day's expedition, fell upon him till after the watch had been changed.

Albrecht was the first to wake; and as he stood and watched his still sleeping companion, he hesitated to rouse him, on observing the pale and restless look of the boy. Suddenly it struck him that the wound in his neck must have been much more serious than he supposed, and that it had been concealed from foolish bravado; and, determined to ascertain the truth, he stooped down and opened the front of the youth's doublet, where the stain of blood appeared. The wound was, indeed, nothing of any consequence; but a sudden exclamation of astonishment, which he could not repress, broke from him the next instant, causing the boy to start up suddenly, and, perceiving what Albrecht had done, blush deeper than crimson.

The two friends looked at each other for some moments without speaking, until the trooper burst into a fit of laughing at the embarrassment caused by his unexpected discovery that his comrade belonged to the softer sex. 'Der teufel,' he at last exclaimed; 'and I had suspected nothing of this for the two months we have been quartered together till this moment.'

His companion half smiled through her blushes, as she replied, 'Nor should you have known it now Albrecht with my consent; but since I can no longer conceal it, I must explain what cannot but seem strange to you.'

'Strange indeed,' muttered he, 'how could I be so blind.'

And seizing her by the hand, he snatched a kiss, but the next instant she broke from him, and caught her sword, which lay near them on the ground.

'Hands off, comrade—no liberties with me. There, how like fools you men do look, if a girl shows a spark or two of spirit,' added she laughing, as the soldier's countenance showed evident marks of amazement at her behaviour. 'Seriously though Albrecht let us understand one another. We have fought side by side, and you have treated me like a brother. Well, let it be so still; we can esteem each other as before; but now, remember, I have, I hope, gained your respect and friendship as a man, surely you would not wish me to do any thing to forfeit it as a woman? No; never will I become as one of those outcasts of my own sex that follow in the train of the camp.'

Mary Scott, for we must now call her by her real name, had by this time recovered her self possession, and was able to be amused at the awkward way her friend began to excuse himself, when he became convinced of her being in earnest.

Peace was soon made between them; but Mary had no time to explain to him the history of her previous life, for the hour of morning parade arrived, and their colonel informed them he had orders to conduct both of them to the tent of the Duke of Parma.

The levee which the Governor of the Netherlands held in his tent was beginning to break up when the Baron Von Blitzendorf presented himself at the entrance, followed by the trooper Albrecht and our heroine, (as she must now be called, since the secret of her sex is no longer one to the reader.)—Mixed with the crowd of military officers were several ecclesiastics, who kept an eye to the rich church preferments of Flanders, which seemed now likely to remain under the dominion of Philip of Spain; for in the year or two which had passed since Alexander Farnese had held the reins of the government, his military talents had done much to relieve the losses which the Spaniards had previously sustained; in fact, almost the whole of the country south of Antwerp was already recovered from the Republican party. Mary began to be a little out of countenance, and Albrecht somewhat angry, at the looks of curiosity and questions they had to encounter from the loungers, both lay and clerical, surprised at the unusual summons of two private troopers to the presence of the prince, during the interval of their waiting, while Von Blit-