

## Chapter 13

### The Combat.

De Wardes and De Guiche selected their horses, and saddled them with their own hands, with holster saddles. De Guiche, having two pairs of pistols, went to his apartments to get them; and after having loaded them, gave the choice to De Wardes, who selected the pair he had made use of twenty times before - the same, indeed, with which De Guiche had seen him kill swallows flying. "You will not be surprised," he said, "if I take every precaution. You know the weapons well, and, consequently, I am only making the chances equal."

"Your remark was quite useless," replied De Guiche, "and you have done no more than you are entitled to do."

"Now," said De Wardes, "I beg you to have the goodness to help me to mount; for I still experience a little difficulty in doing so."

"In that case, we had better settle the matter on foot."

"No; once in the saddle, I shall be all right."

"Very good, then; we will not speak of it again," said De Guiche, as he assisted De Wardes to mount his horse.

"And now," continued the young man, "in our eagerness to murder one another, we have neglected one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That it is quite dark, and we shall almost be obliged to grope about, in order to kill."

"Oh!" said De Guiche, "you are as anxious as I am that everything should be done in proper order."

"Yes; but I do not wish people to say that you have assassinated me, any more than, supposing I were to kill you, I should myself like to be accused of such a crime."

"Did any one make a similar remark about your duel with the Duke of Buckingham?" said De Guiche; "it took place precisely under the same conditions as ours."

"Very true; but there was still light enough to see by; and we were up to our middles almost, in the water; besides, there were a good number of spectators on shore, looking at us."

De Guiche reflected for a moment; and the thought which had already presented itself to him became more confirmed - that De Wardes wished to

have witnesses present, in order to bring back the conversation about Madame, and to give a new turn to the combat. He avoided saying a word in reply, therefore; and, as De Wardes once more looked at him interrogatively, he replied, by a movement of the head, that it would be best to let things remain as they were. The two adversaries consequently set off, and left the chateau by the same gate, close to which we may remember to have seen Montalais and Malicorne together. The night, as if to counteract the extreme heat of the day, had gathered the clouds together in masses which were moving slowly along from the west to the east. The vault above, without a clear spot anywhere visible, or without the faintest indication of thunder, seemed to hang heavily over the earth, and soon began, by the force of the wind, to split into streamers, like a huge sheet torn to shreds. Large and warm drops of rain began to fall heavily, and gathered the dust into globules, which rolled along the ground. At the same time, the hedges, which seemed conscious of the approaching storm, the thirsty plants, the drooping branches of the trees, exhaled a thousand aromatic odors, which revived in the mind tender recollections, thoughts of youth, endless life, happiness, and love. "How fresh the earth smells," said De Wardes; "it is a piece of coquetry to draw us to her."

"By the by," replied De Guiche, "several ideas have just occurred to me; and I wish to have your opinion upon them."

"Relative to - "

"Relative to our engagement."

"It is quite some time, in fact, that we should begin to arrange matters."

"Is it to be an ordinary combat, and conducted according to established custom?"

"Let me first know what your established custom is."

"That we dismount in any particular open space that may suit us, fasten our horses to the nearest object, meet, each without our pistols in our hands, and afterwards retire for a hundred and fifty paces, in order to advance on each other."

"Very good; that is precisely the way in which I killed poor Follivent, three weeks ago, at Saint-Denis."

"I beg your pardon, but you forgot one circumstance."

"What is that?"

"That in your duel with Follivent you advanced towards each other on foot, your swords between your teeth, and your pistols in your hands."

"True."

"While now, on the contrary, as you cannot walk, you yourself admit that we shall have to mount our horses again, and charge; and the first who wishes to fire will do so."

"That is the best course, no doubt; but it is quite dark; we must make allowances for more missed shots than would be the case in the daytime."

"Very well; each will fire three times; the pair of pistols already loaded, and one reload."

"Excellent! Where shall our engagement take place?"

"Have you any preference?"

"No."

"You see that small wood which lies before us?"

"The wood which is called Rochin?"

"Exactly."

"You know it?"

"Perfectly."

"You know that there is an open glade in the center?"

"Yes."

"Well, this glade is admirably adapted for such a purpose, with a variety of roads, by-places, paths, ditches, windings, and avenues. We could not find a better spot."

"I am perfectly satisfied, if you are so. We are at our destination, if I am not mistaken."

"Yes. Look at the beautiful open space in the center. The faint light which the stars afford seems concentrated in this spot; the woods which surround it seem, with their barriers, to form its natural limits."

"Very good. Do as you say."

"Let us first settle the conditions."

"These are mine; if you have any objection to make you will state it."

"I am listening."

"If the horse be killed, its rider will be obliged to fight on foot."

"That is a matter of course, since we have no change of horses here."

"But that does not oblige his adversary to dismount."

"His adversary will, in fact, be free to act as he likes."

"The adversaries, having once met in close contact, cannot quit each other under any circumstances, and may, consequently, fire muzzle to muzzle."

"Agreed."

"Three shots and no more will do, I suppose?"

"Quite sufficient, I think. Here are powder and balls for your pistols; measure out three charges, take three balls, I will do the same; then we will throw the rest of the powder and balls away."

"And we will solemnly swear," said De Wardes, "that we have neither balls nor powder about us?"

"Agreed; and I swear it," said De Guiche, holding his hand towards heaven, a gesture which De Wardes imitated.

"And now, my dear comte," said De Wardes, "allow me to tell you that I am in no way your dupe. You already are, or soon will be, the accepted

lover of Madame. I have detected your secret, and you are afraid I shall tell others of it. You wish to kill me, to insure my silence; that is very clear; and in your place, I should do the same." De Guiche hung down his head. "Only," continued De Wardes, triumphantly, "was it really worth while, tell me, to throw this affair of Bragelonne's on my shoulders? But, take care, my dear fellow; in bringing the wild boar to bay, you enrage him to madness; in running down the fox, you endow him with the ferocity of the jaguar. The consequence is, that brought to bay by you, I shall defend myself to the very last."

"You will be quite right to do so."

"Yes; but take care; I shall work more harm than you think. In the first place, as a beginning, you will readily suppose that I have not been absurd enough to lock up my secret, or your secret rather, in my own breast. There is a friend of mine, who resembles me in every way, a man whom you know very well, who shares my secret with me; so, pray understand, that if you kill me, my death will not have been of much service to you; whilst, on the contrary, if I kill you - and everything is possible, you know - you understand?" De Guiche shuddered. "If I kill you," continued De Wardes, "you will have secured two mortal enemies to Madame, who will do their very utmost to ruin her."

"Oh! monsieur," exclaimed De Guiche, furiously, "do not reckon upon my death so easily. Of the two enemies you speak of, I trust most heartily to dispose of one immediately, and the other at the earliest opportunity."



The only reply De Wardes made was a burst of laughter, so diabolical in its sound, that a superstitious man would have been terrified. But De Guiche was not so impressionable as that. "I think," he said, "that everything is now settled, Monsieur de Wardes; so have the goodness to take your place first, unless you would prefer me to do so."

"By no means," said De Wardes. "I shall be delighted to save you the slightest trouble." And spurring his horse to a gallop, he crossed the wide open space, and took his stand at that point of the circumference of the cross-road immediately opposite to where De Guiche was stationed. De Guiche remained motionless. At this distance of a hundred paces, the two adversaries were absolutely invisible to each other, being completely concealed by the thick shade of elms and chestnuts. A minute elapsed amidst the profoundest silence. At the end of the minute, each of them, in the deep shade in which he was concealed, heard the double click of the trigger, as they put the pistols on full cock. De Guiche, adopting the usual tactics, put his horse to a gallop, persuaded that he should render his safety doubly sure by the movement, as well as by the speed of the animal. He directed his course in a straight line towards the point where, in his opinion, De Wardes would be stationed; and he expected to meet De Wardes about half-way; but in this he was mistaken. He continued his course, presuming that his adversary was impatiently awaiting his approach. When, however, he had gone about two-thirds of the distance, he beheld the trees suddenly illuminated and a ball flew by, cutting the plume of his hat in two. Nearly at the same moment, and as if the flash

of the first shot had served to indicate the direction of the other, a second report was heard, and a second ball passed through the head of De Guiche's horse, a little below the ear. The animal fell. These two reports, proceeding from the very opposite direction in which he expected to find De Wardes, surprised him a great deal; but as he was a man of amazing self-possession, he prepared himself for his horse falling, but not so completely, however, that the toe of his boot escaped being caught under the animal as it fell. Very fortunately the horse in its dying agonies moved so as to enable him to release the leg which was less entangled than the other. De Guiche rose, felt himself all over, and found that he was not wounded. At the very moment he had felt the horse tottering under him, he placed his pistols in the holsters, afraid that the force of the fall might explode one at least, if not both of them, by which he would have been disarmed, and left utterly without defense. Once on his feet, he took the pistols out of the holsters, and advanced towards the spot where, by the light of the flash, he had seen De Wardes appear. De Wardes had, at the first shot, accounted for the maneuver, than which nothing could have been simpler. Instead of advancing to meet De Guiche, or remaining in his place to await his approach, De Wardes had, for about fifteen paces, followed the circle of the shadow which hid him from his adversary's observation, and at the very moment when the latter presented his flank in his career, he had fired from the place where he stood, carefully taking aim, and assisted instead of being inconvenienced by the horse's gallop. It has been seen that, notwithstanding the darkness, the first ball passed hardly more than an inch above De Guiche's head. De Wardes had so confidently relied upon

his aim, that he thought he had seen De Guiche fall; his astonishment was extreme when he saw he still remained erect in his saddle. He hastened to fire his second shot, but his hand trembled, and he killed the horse instead. It would be a most fortunate chance for him if De Guiche were to remain held fast under the animal. Before he could have freed himself, De Wardes would have loaded his pistol and had De Guiche at his mercy. But De Guiche, on the contrary, was up, and had three shots to fire. De Guiche immediately understood the position of affairs. It would be necessary to exceed De Wardes in rapidity of execution. He advanced, therefore, so as to reach him before he should have had time to reload his pistol. De Wardes saw him approaching like a tempest. The ball was rather tight, and offered some resistance to the ramrod. To load carelessly would be simply to lose his last chance; to take the proper care in loading meant fatal loss of time, or rather, throwing away his life. He made his horse bound on one side. De Guiche turned round also, and, at the moment the horse was quiet again, fired, and the ball carried off De Wardes's hat from his head. De Wardes now knew that he had a moment's time at his own disposal; he availed himself of it in order to finish loading his pistol. De Guiche, noticing that his adversary did not fall, threw the pistol he had just discharged aside, and walked straight towards De Wardes, elevating the second pistol as he did so. He had hardly proceeded more than two or three paces, when De Wardes took aim at him as he was walking, and fired. An exclamation of anger was De Guiche's answer; the comte's arm contracted and dropped motionless by his side, and the pistol fell from his grasp. His anxiety was excessive. "I am lost," murmured De Wardes, "he is not mortally

wounded." At the very moment, however, De Guiche was about to raise his pistol against De Wardes, the head, shoulders, and limbs of the comte seemed to collapse. He heaved a deep-drawn sigh, tottered, and fell at the feet of De Wardes's horse.

"That is all right," said De Wardes, and gathering up the reins, he struck his spurs into the horse's sides. The horse cleared the comte's motionless body, and bore De Wardes rapidly back to the chateau. When he arrived there, he remained a quarter of an hour deliberating within himself as to the proper course to be adopted. In his impatience to leave the field of battle, he had omitted to ascertain whether De Guiche were dead or not. A double hypothesis presented itself to De Wardes's agitated mind; either De Guiche was killed, or De Guiche was wounded only. If he were killed, why should he leave his body in that manner to the tender mercies of the wolves; it was a perfectly useless piece of cruelty, for if De Guiche were dead, he certainly could not breathe a syllable of what had passed; if he were not killed, why should he, De Wardes, in leaving him there uncared for, allow himself to be regarded as a savage, incapable of one generous feeling? This last consideration determined his line of conduct.

De Wardes immediately instituted inquiries after Manicamp. He was told that Manicamp had been looking after De Guiche, and, not knowing where to find him, had retired to bed. De Wardes went and awoke the sleeper, without any delay, and related the whole affair to him, which Manicamp

listened to in perfect silence, but with an expression of momentarily increasing energy, of which his face could hardly have been supposed capable. It was only when De Wardes had finished, that Manicamp uttered the words, "Let us go."

As they proceeded, Manicamp became more and more excited, and in proportion as De Wardes related the details of the affair to him, his countenance assumed every moment a darker expression. "And so," he said, when De Wardes had finished, "you think he is dead?"

"Alas, I do."

"And you fought in that manner, without witnesses?"

"He insisted upon it."

"It is very singular."

"What do you mean by saying it is singular?"

"That it is very unlike Monsieur de Guiche's disposition."

"You do not doubt my word, I suppose?"

"Hum! hum!"

"You do doubt it, then?"

"A little. But I shall doubt it more than ever, I warn you, if I find the poor fellow is really dead."

"Monsieur Manicamp!"

"Monsieur de Wardes!"

"It seems you intend to insult me."

"Just as you please. The fact is, I never did like people who come and say, 'I have killed such and such a gentleman in a corner; it is a great pity, but I killed him in a perfectly honorable manner.' It has an ugly appearance, M. de Wardes."

"Silence! we have arrived."

In fact, the glade could now be seen, and in the open space lay the motionless body of the dead horse. To the right of the horse, upon the dark grass, with his face against the ground, the poor comte lay, bathed in his blood. He had remained in the same spot, and did not even seem to have made the slightest movement. Manicamp threw himself on his knees, lifted the comte in his arms, and found him quite cold, and steeped in blood. He let him gently fall again. Then, stretching out his hand and feeling all over the ground close to where the comte lay, he sought until

he found De Guiche's pistol.

"By Heaven!" he said, rising to his feet, pale as death and with the pistol in his hand, "you are not mistaken, he is quite dead."

"Dead!" repeated De Wardes.

"Yes; and his pistol is still loaded," added Manicamp, looking into the pan.

"But I told you that I took aim as he was walking towards me, and fired at him at the very moment he was going to fire at me."

"Are you quite sure that you fought with him, Monsieur de Wardes? I confess that I am very much afraid it has been a foul assassination. Nay, nay, no exclamations! You have had your three shots, and his pistol is still loaded. You have killed his horse, and he, De Guiche, one of the best marksmen in France, has not touched even either your horse or yourself. Well, Monsieur de Wardes, you have been very unlucky in bringing me here; all the blood in my body seems to have mounted to my head; and I verily believe that since so good an opportunity presents itself, I shall blow your brains out on the spot. So, Monsieur de Wardes, recommend yourself to Heaven."

"Monsieur Manicamp, you cannot think of such a thing!"

"On the contrary, I am thinking of it very strongly."

"Would you assassinate me?"

"Without the slightest remorse, at least for the present."

"Are you a gentleman?"

"I have given a great many proofs of that."

"Let me defend my life, then, at least."

"Very likely; in order, I suppose, that you may do to me what you have done to poor De Guiche."

And Manicamp slowly raised his pistol to the height of De Wardes's breast, and with arm stretched out, and a fixed, determined look on his face, took a careful aim.

De Wardes did not attempt a flight; he was completely terrified. In the midst, however, of this horrible silence, which lasted about a second, but which seemed an age to De Wardes, a faint sigh was heard.

"Oh," exclaimed De Wardes, "he still lives! Help, De Guiche, I am about to be assassinated!"



Manicamp fell back a step or two, and the two young men saw the comte raise himself slowly and painfully upon one hand. Manicamp threw the pistol away a dozen paces, and ran to his friend, uttering a cry of delight. De Wardes wiped his forehead, which was covered with a cold perspiration.

"It was just in time," he murmured.

"Where are you hurt?" inquired Manicamp of De Guiche, "and whereabouts are you wounded?"

De Guiche showed him his mutilated hand and his chest covered with blood.

"Comte," exclaimed De Wardes, "I am accused of having assassinated you; speak, I implore you, and say that I fought loyally."

"Perfectly so," said the wounded man; "Monsieur de Wardes fought quite loyally, and whoever says the contrary will make an enemy of me."

"Then, sir," said Manicamp, "assist me, in the first place, to carry this gentleman home, and I will afterwards give you every satisfaction you please; or, if you are in a hurry, we can do better still; let us stanch the blood from the comte's wounds here, with your pocket-handkerchief and mine, and then, as there are two shots left, we can have them between us."

"Thank you," said De Wardes. "Twice already, in one hour, I have seen death too close at hand to be agreeable; I don't like his look at all, and I prefer your apologies."

Manicamp burst out laughing, and Guiche, too, in spite of his sufferings. The two young men wished to carry him, but he declared he felt quite strong enough to walk alone. The ball had broken his ring-finger and his little finger, and then had glanced along his side, but without penetrating deeply into his chest. It was the pain rather than the seriousness of the wound, therefore, which had overcome De Guiche. Manicamp passed his arm under one of the count's shoulders, and De Wardes did the same with the other, and in this way they brought him back to Fontainebleau, to the house of the same doctor who had been present at the death of the Franciscan, Aramis's predecessor.