

## Chapter 30. Skirmishing.

The halt at Noyon was but brief, every one there being wrapped in profound sleep. Raoul had desired to be awakened should Grimaud arrive, but Grimaud did not arrive. Doubtless, too, the horses on their part appreciated the eight hours of repose and the abundant stabling which was granted them. The Count de Guiche was awakened at five o'clock in the morning by Raoul, who came to wish him good-day. They breakfasted in haste, and at six o'clock had already gone ten miles.

The young count's conversation was most interesting to Raoul, therefore he listened much, whilst the count talked well and long. Brought up in Paris, where Raoul had been but once; at the court, which Raoul had never seen; his follies as page; two duels, which he had already found the means of fighting, in spite of the edicts against them and, more especially, in spite of his tutor's vigilance--these things excited the greatest curiosity in Raoul. Raoul had only been at M. Scarron's house; he named to Guiche the people whom he had seen there. Guiche knew everybody--Madame de Neuillan, Mademoiselle d'Aubigne, Mademoiselle de Scudery, Mademoiselle Paulet, Madame de Chevreuse. He criticised everybody humorously. Raoul trembled, lest he should laugh among the rest at Madame de Chevreuse, for whom he entertained deep and genuine sympathy, but either instinctively, or from affection for the duchess, he said everything in her favor. His praises increased Raoul's friendship twofold. Then came the question of gallantry and love

affairs. Under this head, also, Bragelonne had much more to hear than to tell. He listened attentively and fancied that he discovered through three or four rather frivolous adventures, that the count, like himself, had a secret to hide in the depths of his heart.

De Guiche, as we have said before, had been educated at the court, and the intrigues of this court were not unknown to him. It was the same court of which Raoul had so often heard the Comte de la Fere speak, except that its aspect had much changed since the period when Athos had himself been part of it; therefore everything which the Count de Guiche related was new to his traveling companion. The young count, witty and caustic, passed all the world in review; the queen herself was not spared, and Cardinal Mazarin came in for his share of ridicule.

The day passed away as rapidly as an hour. The count's tutor, a man of the world and a bon vivant, up to his eyes in learning, as his pupil described him, often recalled the profound erudition, the witty and caustic satire of Athos to Raoul; but as regarded grace, delicacy, and nobility of external appearance, no one in these points was to be compared to the Comte de la Fere.

The horses, which were more kindly used than on the previous day, stopped at Arras at four o'clock in the evening. They were approaching the scene of war; and as bands of Spaniards sometimes took advantage of the night to make expeditions even as far as the neighborhood of Arras, they determined to remain in the town until the morrow. The French army held all between Pont-a-Marc as far as Valenciennes, falling back upon Douai. The prince was said to be in person at Bethune.

The enemy's army extended from Cassel to Courtray; and as there was no species of violence or pillage it did not commit, the poor people on the frontier quitted their isolated dwellings and fled for refuge into the strong cities which held out a shelter to them. Arras was encumbered with fugitives. An approaching battle was much spoken of, the prince having manoeuvred, until that movement, only in order to await a reinforcement that had just reached him.

The young men congratulated themselves on having arrived so opportunely. The evening was employed in discussing the war; the grooms polished their arms; the young men loaded the pistols in case of a skirmish, and they awoke in despair, having both dreamed that they had arrived too late to participate in the battle. In the morning it was rumored that Prince de Conde had evacuated Bethune and fallen back on Carvin, leaving, however, a strong garrison in the former city.

But as there was nothing positively certain in this report, the young warriors decided to continue their way toward Bethune, free on the road to diverge to the right and march to Carvin if necessary.

The count's tutor was well acquainted with the country; he consequently proposed to take a crossroad, which lay between that of Lens and that of Bethune. They obtained information at Ablain, and a statement of their route was left for Grimaud. About seven o'clock in the morning they set out. De Guiche, who was young and impulsive, said to Raoul, "Here we are, three masters and three servants. Our valets are well armed and yours seems to be tough enough."

"I have never seen him put to the test," replied Raoul, "but he is a Breton, which promises something."

"Yes, yes," resumed De Guiche; "I am sure he can fire a musket when required. On my side I have two sure men, who have been in action with my father. We therefore represent six fighting men; if we should meet a little troop of enemies, equal or even superior in number to our own, shall we charge them, Raoul?"

"Certainly, sir," replied the viscount.

"Holloa! young people--stop there!" said the tutor, joining in the conversation. "Zounds! how you manoeuvre my instructions, count! You seem to forget the orders I received to conduct you safe and sound to his highness the prince! Once with the army you may be killed at your good pleasure; but until that time, I warn you that in my capacity of general of the army I shall order a retreat and turn my back on the first red coat we come across." De Guiche and Raoul glanced at each other, smiling.

They arrived at Ablain without accident. There they inquired and learned that the prince had in reality quitted Bethune and stationed himself between Cambria and La Venthie. Therefore, leaving directions at every place for Grimaud, they took a crossroad which conducted the little troop by the bank of a small stream flowing into the Lys. The country was beautiful, intersected by valleys as green as the emerald. Here and there they passed little copses crossing the path which they were

following. In anticipation of some ambuscade in each of these little woods the tutor placed his two servants at the head of the band, thus forming the advance guard. Himself and the two young men represented the body of the army, whilst Olivain, with his rifle upon his knee and his eyes upon the watch, protected the rear.

They had observed for some time before them, on the horizon, a rather thick wood; and when they had arrived at a distance of a hundred steps from it, Monsieur d'Arminges took his usual precautions and sent on in advance the count's two grooms. The servants had just disappeared under the trees, followed by the tutor, and the young men were laughing and talking about a hundred yards off. Olivain was at the same distance in the rear, when suddenly there resounded five or six musket-shots. The tutor cried halt; the young men obeyed, pulling up their steeds, and at the same moment the two valets were seen returning at a gallop.

The young men, impatient to learn the cause of the firing, spurred on toward the servants. The tutor followed them.

"Were you stopped?" eagerly inquired the two youths.

"No," replied the servants, "it is even probable that we have not been seen; the shots were fired about a hundred paces in advance of us, in the thickest part of the wood, and we returned to ask your advice."

"My advice is this," said Monsieur d'Arminges, "and if needs be, my will, that we beat a retreat. There may be an ambuscade concealed in this wood."

"Did you see nothing there?" asked the count.

"I thought I saw," said one of the servants, "horsemen dressed in yellow, creeping along the bed of the stream.

"That's it," said the tutor. "We have fallen in with a party of Spaniards. Come back, sirs, back."

The two youths looked at each other, and at this moment a pistol-shot and cries for help were heard. Another glance between the young men convinced them both that neither had any wish to go back, and as the tutor had already turned his horse's head, they both spurred forward, Raoul crying: "Follow me, Olivain!" and the Count de Guiche: "Follow, Urban and Planchet!" And before the tutor could recover from his surprise they had both disappeared into the forest. Whilst they spurred their steeds they held their pistols ready also. In five minutes they arrived at the spot whence the noise had proceeded, and then restraining their horses, they advanced cautiously.

"Hush," whispered De Guiche, "these are cavaliers."

"Yes, three on horseback and three who have dismounted."

"Can you see what they are doing?"

"Yes, they appear to be searching a wounded or dead man."

"It is some cowardly assassination," said De Guiche.

"They are soldiers, though," resumed De Bragelonne.

"Yes, skirmishers; that is to say, highway robbers."

"At them!" cried Raoul. "At them!" echoed De Guiche.

"Oh! gentlemen! gentlemen! in the name of Heaven!" cried the poor tutor.

But he was not listened to, and his cries only served to arouse the attention of the Spaniards.

The men on horseback at once rushed at the two youths, leaving the three others to complete the plunder of the dead or wounded travelers; for on approaching nearer, instead of one extended figure, the young men discovered two. De Guiche fired the first shot at ten paces and missed his man; and the Spaniard, who had advanced to meet Raoul, aimed in his turn, and Raoul felt a pain in the left arm, similar to that of a blow from a whip. He let off his fire at but four paces. Struck in the breast and extending his arms, the Spaniard fell back on the crupper, and the terrified horse, turning around, carried him off.

Raoul at this moment perceived the muzzle of a gun pointed at him, and remembering the recommendation of Athos, he, with the rapidity of lightning, made his horse rear as the shot was fired. His horse bounded to one side, losing its footing, and fell, entangling Raoul's leg under its body. The Spaniard sprang forward and seized the gun by its muzzle,

in order to strike Raoul on the head with the butt. In the position in which Raoul lay, unfortunately, he could neither draw his sword from the scabbard, nor his pistols from their holsters. The butt end of the musket hovered over his head, and he could scarcely restrain himself from closing his eyes, when with one bound Guiche reached the Spaniard and placed a pistol at his throat. "Yield!" he cried, "or you are a dead man!" The musket fell from the soldier's hands, who yielded on the instant. Guiche summoned one of his grooms, and delivering the prisoner into his charge, with orders to shoot him through the head if he attempted to escape, he leaped from his horse and approached Raoul.

"Faith, sir," said Raoul, smiling, although his pallor betrayed the excitement consequent on a first affair, "you are in a great hurry to pay your debts and have not been long under any obligation to me. Without your aid," continued he, repeating the count's words "I should have been a dead man--thrice dead."

"My antagonist took flight," replied De Guiche "and left me at liberty to come to your assistance. But are you seriously wounded? I see you are covered with blood!"

"I believe," said Raoul, "that I have got something like a scratch on the arm. If you will help me to drag myself from under my horse I hope nothing need prevent us continuing our journey."

Monsieur d'Arminges and Olivain had already dismounted and were attempting to raise the struggling horse. At last Raoul succeeded in drawing his foot from the stirrup and his leg from under the animal, and



in a second he was on his feet again.

"Nothing broken?" asked De Guiche.

"Faith, no, thank Heaven!" replied Raoul; "but what has become of the poor wretches whom these scoundrels were murdering?"

"I fear we arrived too late. They have killed them, I think, and taken flight, carrying off their booty. My servants are examining the bodies."

"Let us go and see whether they are quite dead, or if they can still be helped," suggested Raoul. "Olivain, we have come into possession of two horses, but I have lost my own. Take for yourself the better of the two and give me yours."

They approached the spot where the unfortunate victims lay.