Chapter 34. On the Eve of Battle.

Raoul was aroused from his sombre reflections by his host, who rushed into the apartment crying out, "The Spaniards! the Spaniards!"

That cry was of such importance as to overcome all preoccupation. The young men made inquiries and ascertained that the enemy was advancing by way of Houdin and Bethune.

While Monsieur d'Arminges gave orders for the horses to be made ready for departure, the two young men ascended to the upper windows of the house and saw in the direction of Marsin and of Lens a large body of infantry and cavalry. This time it was not a wandering troop of partisans; it was an entire army. There was therefore nothing for them to do but to follow the prudent advice of Monsieur d'Arminges and beat a retreat. They quickly went downstairs. Monsieur d'Arminges was already mounted. Olivain had ready the horses of the young men, and the lackeys of the Count de Guiche guarded carefully between them the Spanish prisoner, mounted on a pony which had been bought for his use. As a further precaution they had bound his hands.

The little company started off at a trot on the road to Cambrin, where they expected to find the prince. But he was no longer there, having withdrawn on the previous evening to La Bassee, misled by false intelligence of the enemy's movements. Deceived by this intelligence he

had concentrated his forces between Vieille-Chapelle and La Venthie; and after a reconnoissance along the entire line, in company with Marshal de Grammont, he had returned and seated himself before a table, with his officers around him. He questioned them as to the news they had each been charged to obtain, but nothing positive had been learned. The hostile army had disappeared two days before and seemed to have gone out of existence.

Now an enemy is never so near and consequently so threatening, as when he has completely disappeared. The prince was, therefore, contrary to his custom, gloomy and anxious, when an officer entered and announced to Marshal de Grammont that some one wished to see him.

The Duc de Grammont received permission from the prince by a glance and went out. The prince followed him with his eyes and continued looking at the door; no one ventured to speak, for fear of disturbing him.

Suddenly a dull and heavy noise was heard. The prince leaped to his feet, extending his hand in the direction whence came the sound, there was no mistaking it--it was the noise of cannon. Every one stood up.

At that moment the door opened.

"Monseigneur," said Marshal de Grammont, with a radiant face, "will your highness permit my son, Count de Guiche, and his traveling companion, Viscount de Bragelonne, to come in and give news of the enemy, whom they have found while we were looking for him?"

"What!" eagerly replied the prince, "will I permit? I not only permit, I desire; let them come in."

The marshal introduced the two young men and placed them face to face with the prince.

"Speak, gentlemen," said the prince, saluting them; "first speak; we shall have time afterward for the usual compliments. The most urgent thing now is to learn where the enemy is and what he is doing."

It fell naturally to the Count de Guiche to make reply; not only was he the elder, but he had been presented to the prince by his father. Besides, he had long known the prince, whilst Raoul now saw him for the first time. He therefore narrated to the prince what they had seen from the inn at Mazingarbe.

Meanwhile Raoul closely observed the young general, already made so famous by the battles of Rocroy, Fribourg, and Nordlingen.

Louis de Bourbon, Prince de Conde, who, since the death of his father, Henri de Bourbon, was called, in accordance with the custom of that period, Monsieur le Prince, was a young man, not more than twenty-six or twenty-seven years old, with the eye of an eagle--agl' occhi grifani, as Dante says--aquiline nose, long, waving hair, of medium height, well formed, possessed of all the qualities essential to the successful soldier--that is to say, the rapid glance, quick decision, fabulous courage. At the same time he was a man of elegant manners and strong mind, so that in addition to the revolution he had made in war, by

his new contributions to its methods, he had also made a revolution at Paris, among the young noblemen of the court, whose natural chief he was and who, in distinction from the social leaders of the ancient court, modeled after Bassompierre, Bellegarde and the Duke d'Angouleme, were called the petits-maitres.

At the first words of the Count de Guiche, the prince, having in mind the direction whence came the sound of cannon, had understood everything. The enemy was marching upon Lens, with the intention, doubtless, of securing possession of that town and separating from France the army of France. But in what force was the enemy? Was it a corps sent out to make a diversion? Was it an entire army? To this question De Guiche could not respond.

Now, as these questions involved matters of gravest consequence, it was these to which the prince had especially desired an answer, exact, precise, positive.

Raoul conquered the very natural feeling of timidity he experienced and approaching the prince:

"My lord," he said, "will you permit me to hazard a few words on that subject, which will perhaps relieve you of your uncertainty?"

The prince turned and seemed to cover the young man with a single glance; he smiled on perceiving that he was a child hardly fifteen years old.

"Certainly, monsieur, speak," he said, softening his stern, accented tones, as if he were speaking to a woman.

"My lord," said Raoul, blushing, "might examine the Spanish prisoner."

"Have you a Spanish prisoner?" cried the prince.

"Yes, my lord."

"Ah, that is true," said De Guiche; "I had forgotten it."

"That is easily understood; it was you who took him, count," said Raoul, smiling.

The old marshal turned toward the viscount, grateful for that praise of his son, whilst the prince exclaimed:

"The young man is right; let the prisoner be brought in."

Meanwhile the prince took De Guiche aside and asked him how the prisoner had been taken and who this young man was.

"Monsieur," said the prince, turning toward Raoul, "I know that you have a letter from my sister, Madame de Longueville; but I see that you have preferred commending yourself to me by giving me good counsel."

"My lord," said Raoul, coloring up, "I did not wish to interrupt your highness in a conversation so important as that in which you were

engaged with the count. But here is the letter."

"Very well," said the prince; "give it to me later. Here is the prisoner; let us attend to what is most pressing."

The prisoner was one of those military adventurers who sold their blood to whoever would buy, and grew old in stratagems and spoils. Since he had been taken he had not uttered a word, so that it was not known to what country he belonged. The prince looked at him with unspeakable distrust.

"Of what country are you?" asked the prince.

The prisoner muttered a few words in a foreign tongue.

"Ah! ah! it seems that he is a Spaniard. Do you speak Spanish, Grammont?"

"Faith, my lord, but indifferently."

"And I not at all," said the prince, laughing. "Gentlemen," he said, turning to those who were near him "can any one of you speak Spanish and serve me as interpreter?"

"I can, my lord," said Raoul.

"Ah, you speak Spanish?"

"Enough, I think, to fulfill your highness's wishes on this occasion."

Meanwhile the prisoner had remained impassive and as if he had no understanding of what was taking place.

"My lord asks of what country you are," said the young man, in the purest Castilian.

"Ich bin ein Deutscher," replied the prisoner.

"What in the devil does he say?" asked the prince. "What new gibberish is that?"

"He says he is German, my lord," replied Raoul; "but I doubt it, for his accent is bad and his pronunciation defective."

"Then you speak German, also?" asked the prince.

"Yes, my lord."

"Well enough to question him in that language?"

"Yes, my lord."

"Question him, then."

Raoul began the examination, but the result justified his opinion. The prisoner did not understand, or seemed not to understand, what Raoul

said to him; and Raoul could hardly understand his replies, containing a mixture of Flemish and Alsatian. However, amidst all the prisoner's efforts to elude a systematic examination, Raoul had recognized his natural accent.

"Non siete Spagnuolo," he said; "non siete Tedesco; siete Italiano."

The prisoner started and bit his lips.

"Ah, that," said the prince, "I understand that language thoroughly; and since he is Italian I will myself continue the examination. Thank you, viscount," continued the prince, laughing, "and I appoint you from this moment my interpreter."

But the prisoner was not less unwilling to respond in Italian than in the other languages; his aim was to elude the examination. Therefore, he knew nothing either of the enemy's numbers, or of those in command, or of the purpose of the army.

"Very good," said the prince, understanding the reason of that ignorance; "the man was caught in the act of assassination and robbery; he might have purchased his life by speaking; he doesn't wish to speak. Take him out and shoot him."

The prisoner turned pale. The two soldiers who had brought him in took him, each by one arm, and led him toward the door, whilst the prince, turning to Marshal de Grammont, seemed to have already forgotten the order he had given.

When he reached the threshold of the door the prisoner stopped. The soldiers, who knew only their orders, attempted to force him along.

"One moment," said the prisoner, in French. "I am ready to speak, my lord."

"Ah! ah!" said the prince, laughing, "I thought we should come to that. I have a sure method of limbering tongues. Young men, take advantage of it against the time when you may be in command."

"But on condition," continued the prisoner, "that your highness will swear that my life shall be safe."

"Upon my honor," said the prince.

"Question, then, my lord."

"Where did the army cross the Lys?"

"Between Saint-Venant and Aire."

"By whom is it commanded?"

"By Count de Fuonsaldagna, General Beck and the archduke."

"Of how many does it consist?"

"Eighteen thousand men and thirty-six cannon."

"And its aim is?"

"Lens."

"You see; gentlemen!" said the prince, turning with a triumphant air toward Marshal de Grammont and the other officers.

"Yes, my lord," said the marshal, "you have divined all that was possible to human genius."

"Recall Le Plessis, Bellievre, Villequier and D'Erlac," said the prince, "recall all the troops that are on this side of the Lys. Let them hold themselves in readiness to march to-night. To-morrow, according to all probability, we shall attack the enemy."

"But, my lord," said Marshal de Grammont, "consider that when we have collected all our forces we shall have hardly thirteen thousand men."

"Monsieur le marechal," said the prince, with that wonderful glance that was peculiar to him, "it is with small armies that great battles are won."

Then turning toward the prisoner, "Take away that man," he said, "and keep him carefully in sight. His life is dependent on the information he has given us; if it is true, he shall be free; if false, let him be shot."

The prisoner was led away.

"Count de Guiche," said the prince, "it is a long time since you saw your father, remain here with him. Monsieur," he continued, addressing Raoul, "if you are not too tired, follow me."

"To the end of the world, my lord!" cried Raoul, feeling an unknown enthusiasm for that young general, who seemed to him so worthy of his renown.

The prince smiled; he despised flatterers, but he appreciated enthusiasts.

"Come, monsieur," he said, "you are good in council, as we have already discovered; to-morrow we shall know if you are good in action."

"And I," said the marshal, "what am I to do?"

"Wait here to receive the troops. I shall either return for them myself or shall send a courier directing you to bring them to me. Twenty guards, well mounted, are all that I shall need for my escort."

"That is very few," said the marshal.

"It is enough," replied the prince. "Have you a good horse, Monsieur de Bragelonne?"

"My horse was killed this morning, my lord, and I am mounted provisionally on my lackey's."

"Choose for yourself in my stables the horse you like best. No false modesty; take the best horse you can find. You will need it this evening, perhaps; you will certainly need it to-morrow."

Raoul didn't wait to be told twice; he knew that with superiors, especially when those superiors are princes, the highest politeness is to obey without delay or argument; he went down to the stables, picked out a pie-bald Andalusian horse, saddled and bridled it himself, for Athos had advised him to trust no one with those important offices at a time of danger, and went to rejoin the prince, who at that moment mounted his horse.

"Now, monsieur," he said to Raoul, "will you give me the letter you have brought?"

Raoul handed the letter to the prince.

"Keep near me," said the latter.

The prince threw his bridle over the pommel of the saddle, as he was wont to do when he wished to have both hands free, unsealed the letter of Madame de Longueville and started at a gallop on the road to Lens, attended by Raoul and his small escort, whilst messengers sent to recall the troops set out with a loose rein in other directions. The prince read as he hastened on.

"Monsieur," he said, after a moment, "they tell me great things of you. I have only to say, after the little that I have seen and heard, that I think even better of you than I have been told."

Raoul bowed.

Meanwhile, as the little troop drew nearer to Lens, the noise of the cannon sounded louder. The prince kept his gaze fixed in the direction of the sound with the steadfastness of a bird of prey. One would have said that his gaze could pierce the branches of trees which limited his horizon. From time to time his nostrils dilated as if eager for the smell of powder, and he panted like a horse.

At length they heard the cannon so near that it was evident they were within a league of the field of battle, and at a turn of the road they perceived the little village of Aunay.

The peasants were in great commotion. The report of Spanish cruelty had gone out and every one was frightened. The women had already fled, taking refuge in Vitry; only a few men remained. On seeing the prince they hastened to meet him. One of them recognized him.

"Ah, my lord," he said, "have you come to drive away those rascal Spaniards and those Lorraine robbers?"

"Yes," said the prince, "if you will serve me as guide."

"Willingly, my lord. Where does your highness wish to go?"

"To some elevated spot whence I can look down on Lens and the surrounding country----"

"In that case, I'm your man."

"I can trust you--you are a true Frenchman?"

"I am an old soldier of Rocroy, my lord."

"Here," said the prince, handing him a purse, "here is for Rocroy. Now, do you want a horse, or will you go afoot?"

"Afoot, my lord; I have served always in the infantry. Besides, I expect to lead your highness into places where you will have to walk."

"Come, then," said the prince; "let us lose no time."

The peasant started off, running before the prince's horse; then, a hundred steps from the village, he took a narrow road hidden at the bottom of the valley. For a half league they proceeded thus, the cannon-shot sounding so near that they expected at each discharge to hear the hum of the balls. At length they entered a path which, going out from the road, skirted the mountainside. The prince dismounted, ordered one of his aids and Raoul to follow his example, and directed the others to await his orders, keeping themselves meanwhile on the alert. He then began to ascend the path.

In about ten minutes they reached the ruins of an old chateau; those ruins crowned the summit of a hill which overlooked the surrounding country. At a distance of hardly a quarter of a league they looked down on Lens, at bay, and before Lens the enemy's entire army.

With a single glance the prince took in the extent of country that lay before him, from Lens as far as Vimy. In a moment the plan of the battle which on the following day was to save France the second time from invasion was unrolled in his mind. He took a pencil, tore a page from his tablets and wrote:

"My Dear Marshal,--In an hour Lens will be in the enemy's possession. Come and rejoin me; bring with you the whole army. I shall be at Vendin to place it in position. To-morrow we shall retake Lens and beat the enemy."

Then, turning toward Raoul: "Go, monsieur," he said; "ride fast and give this letter to Monsieur de Grammont."

Raoul bowed, took the letter, went hastily down the mountain, leaped on his horse and set out at a gallop. A quarter of an hour later he was with the marshal.

A portion of the troops had already arrived and the remainder was expected from moment to moment. Marshal de Grammont put himself at the head of all the available cavalry and infantry and took the road to Vendin, leaving the Duc de Chatillon to await and bring on the rest. All the artillery was ready to move, and started off at a moment's notice.

It was seven o'clock in the evening when the marshal arrived at the appointed place. The prince awaited him there. As he had foreseen, Lens had fallen into the hands of the enemy immediately after Raoul's departure. The event was announced by the cessation of the firing.

As the shadows of night deepened the troops summoned by the prince arrived in successive detachments. Orders were given that no drum should be beaten, no trumpet sounded.

At nine o'clock the night had fully come. Still a last ray of twilight lighted the plain. The army marched silently, the prince at the head of the column. Presently the army came in sight of Lens; two or three houses were in flames and a dull noise was heard which indicated what suffering was endured by a town taken by assault.

The prince assigned to every one his post. Marshal de Grammont was to hold the extreme left, resting on Mericourt. The Duc de Chatillon commanded the centre. Finally, the prince led the right wing, resting on Aunay. The order of battle on the morrow was to be that of the positions taken in the evening. Each one, on awaking, would find himself on the field of battle.

The movement was executed in silence and with precision. At ten o'clock every one was in his appointed position; at half-past ten the prince visited the posts and gave his final orders for the following day.

Three things were especially urged upon the officers, who were to see that the soldiers observed them scrupulously: the first, that the different corps should so march that cavalry and infantry should be on the same line and that each body should protect its gaps; the second, to go to the charge no faster than a walk; the third, to let the enemy fire first.

The prince assigned the Count de Guiche to his father and kept Bragelonne near his own person; but the two young men sought the privilege of passing the night together and it was accorded them. A tent was erected for them near that of the marshal.

Although the day had been fatiguing, neither of them was inclined to sleep. And besides, even for old soldiers the evening before a battle is a serious time; it was so with greater reason to two young men who were about to witness for the first time that terrible spectacle. On the evening before a battle one thinks of a thousand things forgotten till then; those who are indifferent to one another become friends and those who are friends become brothers. It need not be said that if in the depths of the heart there is a sentiment more tender, it reaches then, quite naturally, the highest exaltation of which it is capable. Some sentiment of this kind must have been cherished by each one of these two friends, for each of them almost immediately sat down by himself at an end of the tent and began to write.

The letters were long--the four pages were covered with closely written words. The writers sometimes looked up at each other and smiled; they understood without speaking, their organizations were so delicate and sympathetic. The letters being finished, each put his own into two envelopes, so that no one, without tearing the first envelope, could discover to whom the second was addressed; then they drew near to each other and smilingly exchanged their letters.

"In case any evil should happen to me," said Bragelonne.

"In case I should be killed," said De Guiche.

They then embraced each other like two brothers, and each wrapping himself in his cloak they soon passed into that kindly sleep of youth which is the prerogative of birds, flowers and infants.