

Chapter 37

ERNANTON DE CARMAINGES.

Ernanton remained on the field of battle, much embarrassed what to do with the two men, who would shortly open their eyes. As he deliberated, he saw a wagon coming along, drawn by two oxen, and driven by a peasant. Ernanton went to the man and told him that a combat had taken place between the Huguenots and Catholics, that four had been killed, but that two were still living. The peasant, although desperately frightened, aided Ernanton to place first M. de Mayenne and then the soldier in the wagon. The four bodies remained.

"Monsieur," said the peasant, "were they Catholics or Huguenots?"

"Huguenots," said Ernanton, who had seen the peasant cross himself in his first terror.

"In that case there will be no harm in my searching them, will there?"

"None," replied Ernanton, who thought it as well that the peasant should do it, as the first passer-by. The man did not wait to be told twice, but turned out their pockets. It seemed that he was far from disappointed, for his face looked smiling when he had finished the operation, and he drove on his oxen at their quickest pace, in order to reach his home with his treasure.

It was in the stable of this excellent Catholic, on a bed of straw, that M. de Mayenne recovered his consciousness. He opened his eyes, and looked at the men and the things surrounding him with a surprise easy to imagine. Ernanton immediately dismissed the peasant.

"Who are you, monsieur?" asked Mayenne.

Ernanton smiled.

"Do you not recognize me?" said he.

"Yes, I do now; you are he who came to the assistance of my enemy."

"Yes, but I am he who prevented your enemy from killing you."

"That must be true, since I live; unless, indeed, he thought me dead."

"He went away knowing you to be alive."

"Then he thought my wound mortal."

"I do not know; but had I not opposed him, he would have given you one which certainly would have been so."

"But then, monsieur, why did you aid him in killing my men?"

"Nothing more simple, monsieur; and I am astonished that a gentleman, as you seem to be, does not understand my conduct. Chance brought me on your road, and I saw several men attacking one; I defended the one, but when this brave man--for whoever he may be, he is brave--when he remained alone with you, and would have decided the victory by your death, then I interfered to save you."

"You know me, then?" said Mayenne, with a scrutinizing glance.

"I had no need to know you, monsieur; you were a wounded man, that was enough."

"Be frank; you knew me?"

"It is strange, monsieur, that you will not understand me. It seems to me that it is equally ignoble to kill a defenseless man, as six men to attack one."

"There may be reasons for all things."

Ernanton bowed, but did not reply.

"Did you not see," continued Mayenne, "that I fought sword to sword with that man?"

"It is true."

"Besides, he is my most mortal enemy."

"I believe it, for he said the same thing of you."

"Do you think me dangerously wounded?"

"I have examined your wound, monsieur, and I think that, although it is serious, you are in no danger of death. I believe the sword slipped along the ribs, and did not penetrate the breast. Breathe, and I think you will find no pain in the lungs."

"It is true; but my men?"

"Are dead, all but one."

"Are they left on the road?"

"Yes."

"Have they been searched?"

"The peasant whom you must have seen on opening your eyes, and who is your host, searched them."

"What did he find?"

"Some money."

"Any papers?"

"I think not."

"Ah!" said Mayenne, with evident satisfaction. "But the living man; where is he?"

"In the barn, close by."

"Bring him to me, monsieur; and if you are a man of honor, promise me to ask him no questions."

"I am not curious, monsieur; and I wish to know no more of this affair than I know already."

The duke looked at him uneasily.

"Monsieur," said Ernanton, "will you charge some one else with the commission you have just given me?"

"I was wrong, monsieur, I acknowledge it; have the kindness to render me the service I ask of you."

Five minutes after, the soldier entered the stable. He uttered a cry on seeing the duke; but he put his finger on his lip, and the man was silent.

"Monsieur," said Mayenne to Ernanton, "my gratitude to you will be eternal; and, doubtless, some day we shall meet under more favorable circumstances. May I ask to whom I have the honor of speaking?"

"I am the Vicomte Ernanton de Carmainges, monsieur."

"You were going to Beaugency?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Then I have delayed you, and you cannot go on to-night."

"On the contrary, monsieur, I am about to start at once."--"For Beaugency?"

"No, for Paris," said Ernanton; "somewhat unwillingly."

The duke appeared astonished.

"Pardon," said he; "but it is strange that going to Beaugency, and being stopped by an unforeseen circumstance, you should return without fulfilling the end of your journey."

"Nothing is more simple, monsieur; I was going to a rendezvous for a particular time, which I have lost by coming here with you; therefore I return."

"Oh! monsieur, will you not stay here with me for two or three days? I will send this soldier to Paris for a surgeon, and I cannot remain here alone with these peasants, who are strangers to me."

"Then let the soldier remain with you, and I will send you a doctor."

"Do you know the name of my enemy?"

"No, monsieur."

"What! you saved his life, and he did not tell you his name?"

"I did not ask him."

"You did not ask him?"

"I have saved your life also, monsieur; have I asked you your name? But, in exchange, you both know mine."

"I see, monsieur, there is nothing to be learned from you; you are as discreet as brave."

"I observe that you say that in a reproachful manner; but, on the contrary, you ought to be reassured, for a man who is discreet with one person will be so with another."

"You are right! your hand, M. de Carmainges."

Ernanton did quietly as he was asked.

"You have blamed my conduct, monsieur," said Mayenne; "but I cannot justify myself without revealing important secrets."

"You defend yourself, monsieur, when I do not accuse."

"Well! I will only say that I am a gentleman of good rank, and able to be of use to you."

"Say no more, monsieur; thanks to the master whom I serve, I have no need of assistance from any one."

"Your master, who is he?"

"I have asked no questions, monsieur."

"It is true."

"Besides, your wound begins to inflame; I advise you to talk less."

"You are right; but I want my surgeon."

"I am returning to Paris, as I told you: give me his address."

"M. de Carmainges, give me your word of honor that if I intrust you with a letter it shall be given to the person to whom it is addressed."

"I give it, monsieur."

"I believe you; I am sure I may trust you. I must tell you a part of my secret. I belong to the guards of Madame de Montpensier."

"Oh! I did not know she had guards."

"In these troublous times, monsieur, every one guards himself as well as he can, and the house of Guise being a princely one--"

"I asked for no explanation, monsieur."

"Well, I had a mission to Amboise; when on the road I saw my enemy; you know the rest."--"Yes."

"Stopped by this wound, I must report to the duchesse the reason of my delay."

"Well?"

"Will you therefore put into her own hands the letter I am about to write?"

"I will seek for ink and paper."

"It is needless, my soldier will get my tablets."

He instructed the soldier to take them from his pocket, opened them by a spring, wrote some lines in pencil, and shut them again. It was impossible for any one who did not know the secret to open them without breaking them.

"Monsieur," said Ernanton, "in three days these tablets shall be delivered."

"Into her own hands?"

"Yes, monsieur."

The duke, exhausted by talking, and by the effort of writing the letter, sank back on his straw.

"Monsieur," said the soldier, in a tone little in harmony with his dress, "you bound me very tight, it is true, but I shall regard my chains as bonds of friendship, and will prove it to you some day."

And he held out a hand whose whiteness Ernanton had already remarked.

"So be it," said he, smiling; "it seems I have gained two friends."

"Do not despise them; one has never too many."

"That is true," said Ernanton; and he left them.