

Chapter 58

HOW ST. MALINE ENTERED INTO THE TURRET, AND WHAT FOLLOWED.

Ernanton's first thought when he saw the door of the antechamber fly open was to blow out the light.

"M. de St. Maline," cried the hostess, "I warn you that the persons whom you are troubling are your friends."

"Well! all the more reason to present our compliments to them," cried Perducas de Pincornay, in a tipsy voice.

"And what friends are they? We will see!" cried St. Maline.

The good hostess, hoping to prevent a collision, glided among them, and whispered Ernanton's name in St. Maline's ear.

"Ernanton!" cried St. Maline, aloud, for whom this revelation was oil instead of water thrown on the fire, "that is not possible."--"And why so?"

"Oh! because Ernanton is a model of chastity and a melange of all the virtues. No, you must be wrong, Madame Fournichon; it cannot be Ernanton who is shut in there."

And he approached the second door, to treat it as he had done the first, when it was opened, and Ernanton appeared on the threshold, with a face which did not announce that patience was one of the virtues which, according to St. Maline, he possessed.

"By what right has M. de St. Maline broken down one door, and intends to break a second?" said he.

"Ah! it is he, really; it is Ernanton!" cried St. Maline. "I recognize his voice; but as to his person, devil take me if I can see it in this darkness."

"You do not reply to my question, monsieur," said Ernanton.

St. Maline began to laugh noisily, which reassured some of his comrades, who were thinking of retiring.

"I spoke; did you not hear me, M. de St. Maline?" said Ernanton.

"Yes, monsieur, perfectly."

"Then what have you to say?"

"We wished to know, my dear friend, if it was you up here."

"Well, monsieur, now you know it, leave me in peace."

"Cap de Bious! have you become a hermit?"

"As for that, monsieur, permit me to leave you in doubt."

"Ah! bah!" cried St. Maline, trying to enter, "are you really alone? you have no light."

"Gentlemen!" said Ernanton, "I know that you are half drunk, and I forgive you; but there is a limit even to the patience that one owes to men beside themselves; your joke is over, do me the favor to retire."

"Oh! oh! retire! how you speak!" said St. Maline.

"I speak so as you may not be deceived in my wishes, and I repeat, gentlemen, retire, I beg."

"Not before we have been admitted to the honor of saluting the person for whom you desert our company. M. de Montcrabeau," continued he, "go down and come back with a light."

"M. de Montcrabeau," cried Ernanton, "if you do that, remember it will be a personal offense to me."

Montcrabeau hesitated.

"Good," replied St. Maline, "we have our oath, and M. de Carmainges is so strict that he will not infringe discipline; we cannot draw our

swords against each other; therefore, a light, Montcrabeau, a light!"

Montcrabeau descended, and in five minutes returned with a light, which he offered to St. Maline.

"No, no," said he; "keep it; I may, perhaps, want both hands."

And he made a step forward.

"I take you all to witness," cried Ernanton, "that I am insulted without reason, and that in consequence"--and he drew his sword--"I will bury this sword in the breast of the first man who advances."

St. Maline, furious, was about to draw his sword also; but before he had time to do so, the point of Ernanton's was on his breast, and as he advanced a step, without Ernanton's moving his arm, St. Maline felt the iron on his flesh, and drew back furious, but Ernanton followed him, keeping the sword against his breast. St. Maline grew pale; if Ernanton had wished it, he could have pinned him to the wall, but he slowly withdrew his sword.

"You merit two deaths for your insolence," said he, "but the oath of which you spoke restrains me, and I will touch you no more; let me pass. Come, madame, I answer for your free passage."

Then appeared a woman, whose head was covered by a hood, and her face by

a mask, and who took Ernanton's arm, tremblingly. St. Maline stood by, stifling with rage at his merited punishment. He drew his dagger as Ernanton passed by him. Did he mean to strike Ernanton, or only to do what he did? No one knew, but as they passed, his dagger cut through the silken hood of the duchess and severed the string of her mask, which fell to the ground. This movement was so rapid that in the half light no one saw or could prevent it. The duchess uttered a cry; St. Maline picked up the mask and returned it to her, looking now full in her uncovered face.

"Ah!" cried he, in an insolent tone, "it is the beautiful lady of the litter. Ernanton, you get on fast."

Ernanton stopped and half-drew his sword again; but the duchess drew him on, saying, "Come on, I beg you, M. Ernanton."

"We shall meet again, M. de St. Maline," said Ernanton, "and you shall pay for this, with the rest."

And he went on without meeting with any further opposition, and conducted the duchess to her litter, which was guarded by two servants. Arrived there and feeling herself in safety, she pressed Ernanton's hand, and said, "M. Ernanton, after what has just passed, after the insult which, in spite of your courage, you could not defend me from, and which might probably be renewed, we can come here no more; seek, I beg of you, some house in the neighborhood to sell or to let; before long you shall hear from me."

"Must I now take leave of you, madame?" said Ernanton, bowing in token of obedience to the flattering orders he had just received.

"Not yet, M. de Carmainges; follow my litter as far as the new bridge, lest that wretch who recognized in me the lady of the litter, but did not know me for what I am, should follow to find out my residence."

Ernanton obeyed, but no one watched them. When they arrived at the Pont Neuf, which then merited the name, as it was scarcely seven years since Ducerceau had built it, the duchess gave her hand to Ernanton, saying, "Now go, monsieur."

"May I dare to ask when I shall see you again, madame?"

"That depends on the length of time which you take in executing my commission, and your haste will be a proof to me of your desire to see me again."

"Oh, madame, I shall not be idle."

"Well, then, go, Ernanton."

"It is strange," thought the young man, as he retraced his steps; "I cannot doubt that she likes me, and yet she does not seem the least anxious as to whether or not I get killed by that brute of a St. Maline. But, poor woman, she was in great trouble, and the fear of being

compromised is, particularly with princesses, the strongest of all sentiments."

Ernanton, however, could not forget the insult he had received, and he returned straight to the hotel. He was naturally decided to infringe all orders and oaths, and to finish with St. Maline; he felt in the humor to fight ten men, if necessary. This resolution sparkled in his eyes when he reached the door of the "Brave Chevalier." Madame Fournichon, who expected his return with anxiety, was standing trembling in the doorway. At the sight of Ernanton she wiped her eyes, as if she had been crying, and throwing her arms round the young man's neck, begged for his pardon, in spite of her husband's representations that, as she had done no wrong, she had nothing to be pardoned for. Ernanton assured her that he did not blame her at all--that it was only her wine that was in fault.

While this passed at the door, all the rest were at table, where they were warmly discussing the previous quarrel. Many frankly blamed St. Maline; others abstained, seeing the frowning brow of their comrade. They did not attack with any less enthusiasm the supper of M. Fournichon, but they discussed as they ate.

"As for me," said Hector de Bizan, "I know that M. de St. Maline was wrong, and that had I been Ernanton de Carmainges, M. de St. Maline would be at this moment stretched on the ground instead of sitting here."

St. Maline looked at him furiously.

"Oh, I mean what I say," continued he; "and stay, there is some one at the door who appears to agree with me."

All turned at this, and saw Ernanton standing in the doorway, looking very pale. He descended from the step, as the statue of the commander from his pedestal, and walked straight up to St. Maline, firmly, but quietly.

At this sight, several voices cried, "Come here, Ernanton; come this side, Carmainges; there is room here."

"Thank you," replied the young man; "but it is near M. de St. Maline that I wish to sit." St. Maline rose, and all eyes were fixed on him. But as he rose, his face changed its expression.

"I will make room for you, monsieur," said he, gently; "and in doing so address to you my frank and sincere apologies for my stupid aggression just now; I was drunk; forgive me."

This declaration did not satisfy Ernanton; but the cries of joy that proceeded from all the rest decided him to say no more, although a glance at St. Maline showed him that he was not to be trusted. St. Maline's glass was full, and he filled Ernanton's.

"Peace! peace!" cried all the voices.

Carmainges profited by the noise, and leaning toward St. Maline, with a smile on his lips, so that no one might suspect the sense of what he was saying, whispered:

"M. de St. Maline, this is the second time that you have insulted me without giving me satisfaction; take care, for at the third offense I will kill you like a dog."

And the two mortal enemies touched glasses as though they had been the best friends.