

CHAPTER XXI.

HOW A FRENCHMAN SETTLES AN AFFAIR.

Whilst the duel was being discussed between the president and the captain--a terrible and savage duel in which each adversary became a man-hunter--Michel Ardan was resting after the fatigues of his triumph. Resting is evidently not the right expression, for American beds rival in hardness tables of marble or granite.

Ardan slept badly, turning over and over between the serviettes that served him for sheets, and he was thinking of installing a more comfortable bed in his projectile when a violent noise startled him from his slumbers. Thundering blows shook his door. They seemed to be administered with an iron instrument. Shouts were heard in this racket, rather too early to be agreeable.

"Open!" some one cried. "Open, for Heaven's sake!"

There was no reason why Ardan should acquiesce in so peremptory a demand. Still he rose and opened his door at the moment it was giving way under the efforts of the obstinate visitor.

The secretary of the Gun Club bounded into the room. A bomb would not have entered with less ceremony.

"Yesterday evening," exclaimed J.T. Maston ex abrupto, "our president was publicly insulted during the meeting! He has challenged his adversary, who is no other than Captain Nicholl! They are going to fight this morning in Skersnaw Wood! I learnt it all from Barbicane himself! If he is killed our project will be at an end! This duel must be prevented! Now one man only can have enough empire over Barbicane to stop it, and that man is Michel Ardan."

Whilst J.T. Maston was speaking thus, Michel Ardan, giving up interrupting him, jumped into his vast trousers, and in less than two minutes after the two friends were rushing as fast as they could go towards the suburbs of Tampa Town.

It was during this rapid course that Maston told Ardan the state of the case. He told him the real causes of the enmity between Barbicane and Nicholl, how that enmity was of old date, why until then, thanks to mutual friends, the president and the captain had never met; he added that it was solely a rivalry between iron-plate and bullet; and, lastly, that the scene of the meeting had only been an occasion long sought by Nicholl to satisfy an old grudge.

There is nothing more terrible than these private duels in America, during which the two adversaries seek each other across thickets, and hunt each other like wild animals. It is then that each must envy those marvellous qualities so natural to the Indians of the prairies, their

rapid intelligence, their ingenious ruse, their scent of the enemy. An error, a hesitation, a wrong step, may cause death. In these meetings the Yankees are often accompanied by their dogs, and both sportsmen and game go on for hours.

"What demons you are!" exclaimed Michel Ardan, when his companion had depicted the scene with much energy.

"We are what we are," answered J.T. Maston modestly; "but let us make haste."

In vain did Michel Ardan and he rush across the plain still wet with dew, jump the creeks, take the shortest cuts; they could not reach Skersnaw Wood before half-past five. Barbicane must have entered it half-an-hour before.

There an old bushman was tying up faggots his axe had cut.

Maston ran to him crying--

"Have you seen a man enter the wood armed with a rifle? Barbicane, the president--my best friend?"

The worthy secretary of the Gun Club thought naïvely that all the world must know his president. But the bushman did not seem to understand.

"A sportsman," then said Ardan.

"A sportsman? Yes," answered the bushman.

"Is it long since?"

"About an hour ago."

"Too late!" exclaimed Maston.

"Have you heard any firing?" asked Michel Ardan.

"No."

"Not one shot?"

"Not one. That sportsman does not seem to bag much game!"

"What shall we do?" said Maston.

"Enter the wood at the risk of catching a bullet not meant for us."

"Ah!" exclaimed Maston, with an unmistakable accent, "I would rather have ten bullets in my head than one in Barbicane's head."

"Go ahead, then!" said Ardan, pressing his companion's hand.

A few seconds after the two companions disappeared in a copse. It was a dense thicket made of huge cypresses, sycamores, tulip-trees, olives, tamarinds, oaks, and magnolias. The different trees intermingled their branches in inextricable confusion, and quite hid the view. Michel Ardan and Maston walked on side by side phasing silently through the tall grass, making a road for themselves through the vigorous creepers, looking in all the bushes or branches lost in the sombre shade of the foliage, and expecting to hear a shot at every step. As to the traces that Barbicane must have left of his passage through the wood, it was impossible for them to see them, and they marched blindly on in the hardly-formed paths in which an Indian would have followed his adversary step by step.

After a vain search of about an hour's length the two companions stopped. Their anxiety was redoubled.

"It must be all over," said Maston in despair. "A man like Barbicane would not lay traps or condescend to any manoeuvre! He is too frank, too courageous. He has gone straight into danger, and doubtless far enough from the bushman for the wind to carry off the noise of the shot!"

"But we should have heard it!" answered Michel Ardan.

"But what if we came too late?" exclaimed J.T. Maston in an accent of despair.

Michel Ardan did not find any answer to make. Maston and he resumed their interrupted walk. From time to time they shouted; they called either Barbicane or Nicholl; but neither of the two adversaries answered. Joyful flocks of birds, roused by the noise, disappeared amongst the branches, and some frightened deer fled through the copses.

They continued their search another hour. The greater part of the wood had been explored. Nothing revealed the presence of the combatants. They began to doubt the affirmation of the bushman, and Ardan was going to renounce the pursuit as useless, when all at once Maston stopped.

"Hush!" said he. "There is some one yonder!"

"Some one?" answered Michel Ardan.

"Yes! a man! He does not seem to move. His rifle is not in his hand. What can he be doing?"

"But do you recognise him?" asked Michel Ardan.

"Yes, yes! he is turning round," answered Maston.

"Who is it?"

"Captain Nicholl!"

"Nicholl!" cried Michel Ardan, whose heart almost stopped beating.

"Nicholl disarmed! Then he had nothing more to fear from his adversary?"

"Let us go to him," said Michel Ardan; "we shall know how it is."

But his companion and he had not gone fifty steps when they stopped to examine the captain more attentively. They imagined they should find a bloodthirsty and revengeful man. Upon seeing him they remained stupefied.

A net with fine meshes was hung between two gigantic tulip-trees, and in it a small bird, with its wings entangled, was struggling with plaintive cries. The bird-catcher who had hung the net was not a human being but a venomous spider, peculiar to the country, as large as a pigeon's egg, and furnished with enormous legs. The hideous insect, as he was rushing on his prey, was forced to turn back and take refuge in the high branches of a tulip-tree, for a formidable enemy threatened him in his turn.

In fact, Captain Nicholl, with his gun on the ground, forgetting the dangers of his situation, was occupied in delivering as delicately as possible the victim taken in the meshes of the monstrous spider. When he had finished he let the little bird fly away; it fluttered its wings joyfully and disappeared.

Nicholl, touched, was watching it fly through the copse when he heard these words uttered in a voice full of emotion:--

"You are a brave man, you are!"

He turned. Michel Ardan was in front of him, repeating in every tone--

"And a kind one!"

"Michel Ardan!" exclaimed the captain, "what have you come here for, sir?"

"To shake hands with you, Nicholl, and prevent you killing Barbicane or being killed by him."

"Barbicane!" cried the captain, "I have been looking for him these two hours without finding him! Where is he hiding himself?"

"Nicholl!" said Michel Ardan, "this is not polite! You must always respect your adversary; don't be uneasy; if Barbicane is alive we shall find him, and so much the more easily that if he has not amused himself with protecting birds he must be looking for you too. But when you have found him--and Michel Ardan tells you this--there will be no duel between you."

"Between President Barbicane and me," answered Nicholl gravely, "there is such rivalry that the death of one of us--"

"Come, come!" resumed Michel Ardan, "brave men like you may detest one another, but they respect one another too. You will not fight."

"I shall fight, sir."

"No you won't."

"Captain," then said J.T. Maston heartily, "I am the president's friend, his alter ego; if you must absolutely kill some one kill me; that will be exactly the same thing."

"Sir," said Nicholl, convulsively seizing his rifle, "this joking--"

"Friend Maston is not joking," answered Michel Ardan, "and I understand his wanting to be killed for the man he loves; but neither he nor Barbicane will fall under Captain Nicholl's bullets, for I have so tempting a proposition to make to the two rivals that they will hasten to accept it."

"But what is it, pray?" asked Nicholl, with visible incredulity.

"Patience," answered Ardan; "I can only communicate it in Barbicane's presence."

"Let us look for him, then," cried the captain.

The three men immediately set out; the captain, having discharged his rifle, threw it on his shoulder and walked on in silence.

During another half-hour the search was in vain. Maston was seized with a sinister presentiment. He observed Captain Nicholl closely, asking himself if, once the captain's vengeance satisfied, the unfortunate Barbicane had not been left lying in some bloody thicket. Michel Ardan seemed to have the same thought, and they were both looking questioningly at Captain Nicholl when Maston suddenly stopped.

The motionless bust of a man leaning against a gigantic catalpa appeared twenty feet off half hidden in the grass.

"It is he!" said Maston.

Barbicane did not move. Ardan stared at the captain, but he did not wince. Ardan rushed forward, crying--

"Barbicane! Barbicane!"

No answer. Ardan was about to seize his arm; he stopped short, uttering a cry of surprise.

Barbicane, with a pencil in his hand, was tracing geometrical figures upon a memorandum-book, whilst his unloaded gun lay on the ground.

Absorbed in his work, the savant, forgetting in his turn his duel and his vengeance, had neither seen nor heard anything.

But when Michel Ardan placed his hand on that of the president, he got up and looked at him with astonishment.

"Ah!" cried he at last; "you here! I have found it, my friend, I have found it!"

"What?"

"The way to do it."

"The way to do what?"

"To counteract the effect of the shock at the departure of the projectile."

"Really?" said Michel, looking at the captain out of the corner of his eye.

"Yes, water! simply water, which will act as a spring. Ah, Maston!" cried Barbicane, "you too!"

"Himself," answered Michel Ardan; "and allow me to introduce at the same time the worthy Captain Nicholl."

"Nicholl!" cried Barbicane, up in a moment. "Excuse me, captain," said he; "I had forgotten. I am ready."

Michel Ardan interfered before the two enemies had time to recriminate.

"Faith," said he, "it is fortunate that brave fellows like you did not meet sooner. We should now have to mourn for one or other of you; but, thanks to God, who has prevented it, there is nothing more to fear. When one forgets his hatred to plunge into mechanical problems and the other to play tricks on spiders, their hatred cannot be dangerous to anybody."

And Michel Ardan related the captain's story to the president.

"I ask you now," said he as he concluded, "if two good beings like you were made to break each other's heads with gunshots?"

There was in this rather ridiculous situation something so unexpected, that Barbicane and Nicholl did not know how to look at one another.

Michel Ardan felt this, and resolved to try for a reconciliation.

"My brave friends," said he, smiling in his most fascinating manner, "it has all been a mistake between you, nothing more. Well, to prove that

all is ended between you, and as you are men who risk your lives, frankly accept the proposition that I am going to make to you."

"Speak," said Nicholl.

"Friend Barbicane believes that his projectile will go straight to the moon."

"Yes, certainly," replied the president.

"And friend Nicholl is persuaded that it will fall back on the earth."

"I am certain of it," cried the captain.

"Good," resumed Michel Ardan. "I do not pretend to make you agree; all I say to you is, 'Come with me, and see if we shall stop on the road.'"

"What?" said J.T. Maston, stupefied.

The two rivals at this sudden proposition had raised their eyes and looked at each other attentively. Barbicane waited for Captain Nicholl's answer; Nicholl awaited the president's reply.

"Well," said Michel in his most engaging tone, "as there is now no shock to fear----"

"Accepted!" cried Barbicane.

But although this word was uttered very quickly, Nicholl had finished it at the same time.

"Hurrah! bravo!" cried Michel Ardan, holding out his hands to the two adversaries. "And now that the affair is arranged, my friends, allow me to treat you French fashion. Allons déjeuner."