

THE
KING AND THE COUNTESS.

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A ROMANCE.

BY S. W. FULLOM.



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THE KING AND THE COUNTESS.

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What idle dream
Of long-past days hath melted me? It fades—
It vanishes—I am again a King!

TALFOURD.

BOOK THE FIRST. THE SOLDIER OF FORTUNE.

CHAPTER I.

—Hark! that heavysound breaks in once more,
As if the clouds its echo would repeat;
And nearer, clearer, deadlier than before!
Arm! arm!

Childe Harold.

EVENING was throwing her first shades over the castle of Mézières, in the north of France, as a cavalier, evidently, from the restraint his presence imposed on the sentinel, an officer of distinction, appeared on that part of the fortress called the platform of St. Lazarus. There was little in his plain military undress to attract attention; but the eagle glance of his dark piercing eye, the air of command that invested his forehead, and the resolution expressed in his looks, were unequivocal marks of a brave and experienced leader. His features were handsome, though weather-beaten, and presenting traces of recent privation. He was of the middle stature, possessing a slight but well-knit frame, which his movements showed to be long familiar with the exercise of arms. In a word, it was the Chevalier Bayard, the "*Sans Peur et Sans Reproche*" of French chivalry.

Screened from view by the parapet, he reconnoitred the surrounding country, occupied by the Imperial army, under the command of the Count of Nassau, who, as a first step in the invasion of France, had laid siege to Mézières. The once rich and fertile vicinity had been devastated at his approach, and was now torn up by parallels and trenches, protected by batteries, which kept up an almost uninterrupted cannonade on the beleaguered fortress. But though the garrison numbered only a thousand men, consisting chiefly of

foreign mercenaries, reduced to the verge of famine, every attack had hitherto been fruitless.

For a time the enemy's batteries had suspended fire; but Bayard knew too surely that this was but a prelude to more vigorous operations, and his practised eye, sweeping the hostile trenches, discovered that new works were in progress, which, if skilfully directed, would render his defences untenable. A loud uproar within the castle interrupted his observations; and immediately afterwards, a man-at-arms, serving as his orderly, stepped up to him.

The new-comer was young and agile, rather above the ordinary height, and clad in the steel suit of his grade. It required little discernment to perceive, from the *ensemble* of his frank and prepossessing countenance, that he was an Englishman; and, in truth, was one of those soldiers of fortune, whom Francis the First, the reigning monarch of France, had drawn from almost every nation into his service.

"Word has come from the breach, Sir, that the two companies of Italians have passed through it, and gone over in a body to the enemy," he said.

"It is what I expected," replied Bayard, composedly, "and I am glad we are rid of them, though the rascals have cheated us of at least two days' rations. But where is the Count de Montmorenci? Does he know what has occurred?"

"He is mustering a troop of gendarmes to pursue them, Sir, and awaits your orders."

"They are not worth pursuit. But pass this way. I will go to the Count myself."

The Englishman accompanied him to a covered passage, leading to the interior; and threading a suite of apartments, occupied by the Chevalier, they reached a guard-chamber, which, however, was deserted, and a second