

Many were the conjectures as to who would be the accepted suitor. But, as it occurred, the two had at last hit upon a scheme which should spare the woman the trouble of deciding between them. Parbleu! It was easy. The two would go into the forest, armed only with swords. They would fight to the end, and then the victor should return to the city with none to hinder his suit or to dispute his claim. It was an ingenious plan and might have succeeded, had not Fate intervened.

It was near the appointed hour when Damroche, mounted on a coal-black horse, dashed up to the great oak and dismounted. Scarcely had he tied his steed in the edge of the forest than D'Armand appeared.

"You are punctual, Count," said Damroche.

"In matters of this kind, yes," replied the other.

"Are you prepared to fulfill your engagement?" continued Damroche.

"That is why I'm here," said the count calmly; "and as this light may not last long, we had best begin."

In a few minutes both men, each bared to the waist, stood face to face in the road. There was little difference in height, but Count D'Armand was slightly the heavier.

"You are ready?" inquired Damroche.

"Yes," said the Count.

"On guard, then," and their swords crossed.

For the first few minutes there was naught but a few wary feints. Each seemed to be testing the strength of the other. Then Damroche, as though weary of such tactics, began to urge the fight. The Count, seeing this, became suddenly alert and active, standing wholly on the defense. But neither seemed able to gain the advantage. Thus far they were very evenly matched. After a time, however, D'Armand's weight began to tell upon him. His breath came in shorter gasps and his movements became more sluggish. It was plain that he was becoming exhausted by his efforts.

Suddenly Damroche made a pass at his opponent's arm. With a deft turn of the wrist the Count avoided the blow, but before he could recover his guard Damroche had struck again. He felt a stinging pain in his cheek and a moment later a drop of blood fell on the back of his hand. Instinctively he glanced down at it. That move was fatal. Damroche, all alertness, raised his